

NBC Takes On Theatre Body

THE letter by a certain F Celento, carried in *The Namibian* of 19 July 2002, cannot go without a challenge. The writer availed herself of the opportunity to "hallelujah" developments at the NBC, and what she calls "the long overdue bold and decisive decision to change the structure at NBC."

The NBC as a public institution is accountable to the public and the taxpayers of which the writer is one. Of course the NBC is run with taxpayers' money through a subsidy from Government, and therefore accountability is paramount.

In other words every member of the public has the right to comment or criticise the NBC when things are not run properly to the expectations of the stakeholders and in accordance with the stipulations of the Broadcasting Act of 1991 and NBC's corporate Mission Statement. For that reason the NBC Management always welcomes and appreciates constructive criticism.

However the writer in her joy at the removal of "dead wood at NBC" targeted the Television Department in particular where she expects some dramatic changes to be brought about with regard to television and film production. The writer also claims that Television management was never committed to or had no creative insight or artistic ability to take decisions. It is evident that the writer as a representative of an artists' body, that claims to be more committed than others, lacks sound understanding of television as an industry and what it takes to put a programme on air. I would not challenge her artistic skills, which also tend to be questionable, but rather her understanding of the difference between television and theatre, which I believe she is more familiar with. It is true that theatre art or performance is applicable in television drama and film production. On the other hand theatre performance can be captured on film or video for broadcast. But in other respects such as technical requirements and production skills as well as other resources, they differ considerably.

Let me point out that the NBC as a public broadcaster is expected to cater for the needs and tastes of a diverse and complex society. You would not deny the fact that our society comprises of communities and individuals with varied cultural backgrounds and tastes and even at varying stages of develop-

ment. I assume you are based in Windhoek. Therefore, your cultural taste has been shaped by another cultural environment than, for example, a person in Opuwo whose "weltanschauung" is limited to the basics of the unspoiled culture and traditions of her/his people. Mind you, the NBC also has to cater for that person, possibly more so than for yourself, so that s/he finds his/her cultural expressions can take their rightful place on the national cultural stage. It goes without saying that the NBC also has an obligation to never do so at the expense of the ordinary Namibian who for years has been both politically and culturally colonised.

The liberation struggle appointees you claim are at the NBC, joined the struggle to bring about not only political change in this country but to revive African culture and restore its value among the people who for decades were suppressed and oppressed. It is therefore the duty of the NBC to localise/Namibianise and Africanise our content as much as possible. The NBC will strive to mentally and ideologically emancipate the people of Namibia, to revalue their cultures, and rediscover their dignity as a cultural people.

Given a lack of local resources, we cannot produce all the material screened on NBC and thus we are compelled to purchase foreign products. This will not deter us from pursuing a struggle against global cultural imperialism. Mind that Namibians are yearning to take their place as a cultural people in the world community. To do that we have to start at home by documenting and broadcasting programmes that reflect our unique culture(s) and needs. In this field the NBC stands head-and-shoulders above your acclaimed DSTV. I think the cliché "local is lekker" means something to you too?

Yes, as a member of the public and a taxpayer, it is your legitimate right to express your opinion on the affairs of and developments at the NBC. However any "right-minded" and concerned member of the public would do that in a considerate manner. The tone of your letter and your insinuations are uncalled for. Your hallelujah, which

wholeheartedly supports and rejoices the Government's long overdue, bold and decisive decision to change the structure at the NBC, is both callous and based on wrong perceptions. It is a figment of your imagination that the situation at the Corporation is mainly caused by what you call "self-centred and incompetent individuals" without the interest of the NBC at heart. In the same vein you say these are the liberation struggle compensatory appointees. All this is pure hogwash! Even though the NBC employs some people who were involved in the liberation struggle, they joined the broadcasting institution on the basis of their broadcasting and journalism experiences and expertise. Pity and shame on you if you were on the wrong side when these people were fighting for freedom, independence and human dignity. With that attitude I wonder whether Committed Artists of Namibia (CAN) does not exclude citizens from their membership merely because they were involved in the liberation struggle? If so, how unpatriotic and discriminatory is your organisation? Suffice it to ask about the composition of the CAN membership and leadership?

To give you (Celento and CAN) the benefit of the doubt, I may agree that you have some theatre background and that you may be involved in some theatre development activities. But what do you really produce that is worth mentioning? One would also like to know the kind of plays you write and perform that deserve to be regarded as artistic and done with creative insight. Some of the work of your Chairperson and professional colleague (that I am acquainted with) may call for some self-inspection and may not even come close to what you call "worst local and pathetic foreign movies" on NBC TV.

Regarding your statement about "right-minded filmmakers" applauding the envisaged change - this is another figment of your imagination. I would like to remind you and the readers that all-serious filmmakers in the country, especially upcoming ones, have a good co-operation with the NBC. It is NBC policy to promote and assist

the development of a vibrant film and video production industry in the country.

For your information the NBC appreciates the symbiotic relationship between the independent television and film/video industry, more than you think. We at the NBC know that without a developed film industry in the country our future is not bright. To address the situation the NBC Television Management initiated the introduction of the Commissioning concept. The prime aim is to outsource programme content by involving independent producers in the production process. Secondly, the NBC has already fulfilled, and will continue to fulfil in this objective, by means of co-productions with independent producers. Be informed that these initiatives were implemented and supported by the same NBC television management that you consider to not be committed and not having creative insight.

Mind that the NBC caters for everybody in the country. Not only those in the high LMS categories in our society, who in fact are a minority, and who are able to afford DSTV. Mind that the NBC is not operating on commercial principles, and with the resources at our disposal we provide for the majority who rate the NBC high as their source of infotainment and edutainment. Kindly also be informed that the market research conducted by a reputable South African company towards the end of last year, when DSTV was already available in Namibia, revealed that the NBC remains the popular television station/channel in the country. Do you know what makes the NBC popular? It is our local content that you consider so terrible. By the way you failed to indicate substantively against who else besides DSTV you are comparing the NBC. Are you aware that the NBC is rated one of the best television stations on the continent? Our so-called worst local programmes won prestigious international awards, and put Namibia on the map in the industry.

Further, and this might come as a surprise to you, it actually costs money, and lots of it, to produce a television

programme. Putting on air programmes such as *Talk of the Nation*, *Kalanami*, *Tutateni*, covering Independence Celebrations, the *Music Makers* Competitions, local and international sports event etc. do cost money and the NBC simply does not have enough of it. The Government subsidy is not enough, revenue from licence fees provides but a drop in the ocean and the ad-spend only stretches so far in a small country like Namibia.

Likewise, procuring foreign movies is expensive and paid for in US\$. For your information, buying one Hollywood film costs no less than US\$5 000 and that is more than N\$50 000 at the current exchange rate. And may I point out that we pay the bottom of the scale. We also do not only rely on Hollywood, but also buy programmes from Europe, Australia and as well as African countries. As stated earlier, NBC is not trying to be a Hollywood satellite, but strives to evolve into a true Namibian station with a genuine local content and objective.

You allege that the NBC never could seriously and properly provide for the basic entertainment needs of viewers, because of having been out of touch with the demands and realities of broadcasting. I believe you said this for mere self-appreciation, because as a matter of fact you know nothing about broadcasting and even film production. Neither do you appreciate our moral and cultural values. So be informed that the NBC, and its television management will never degrade itself to "Karoo vlaktes" content.

You are overjoyed about the envisaged restructuring at the NBC. For your information the restructuring at the corporation is not only because of non-performance of staff or mismanagement, but there are other major contributing factors such as budgetary constraints, the depreciation of our currency etc. I am tempted to make a reference to publicity about the CAN leadership and that is the letter by Dr. Phillip Talavera published in *The Namibian* of June 14th. I hope this does not refer to the public behaviour of your boss? I hope that kind of behaviour and the *Karoo vlaktes* are not what you hope will take over the NBC and make its way onto our schedules. No way!

Aune Shipanga
Controller: Television, NBC