

# Lysistrata Illustrates Problems Facing Local Performers

THE theatre production, *Lysistrata*, performed at the National Theatre, recently stirred some interesting debate among the local performing arts fraternity. It immediately reminds me of the lengthy letter the Prime Minister wrote to the press about the lack of organisation and focus in the industry, and my equally long and illustrious letter about the realities facing the local artists, especially the performing arts industry, then and now.

Two things make this production interesting, namely, what the majority of the artists felt they have gained from working on this production (financially and artistically) and the play's artistic aesthetics and its relevance in general. This, as an artist, is my view.

I find what the artists involved in this play experienced not surprising. Isn't it what local, especially black artists are used to? You don't agree with me? Fine. Here we go. Remember most of those adverts on television that feature local artists? Do you know their budgets? Probably not. I will tell you. It is a costly exercise, being it a voice-over, jingle or a five minute yarn about (mostly) black men not taking responsibility over their kids, the costs of these productions run into thousands of dollars in budgets.

And how much do the artists get out of these productions that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to produce? You guys out there who produce these programmes and who have ever paid local artists more than two thousand dollars per artist, give me a call and I will clear you name through this medium.

What the famous faces you see walking to and from Katutura, or who ask you for N\$5 to pay the taxi fare, get out of these exercises, is a big thank you and a promise that after people see you on TV or hear your voice on the radio, money will start flowing into your hands.

What, according to the psyche of these companies, sells their products well? Foreign faces and voices. Yes, and they are prepared to part with some handsome amounts too. Even the national leadership makes itself guilty of this blatant undermining and disregard of local talent. Am I the only one who had to listen and watch Sello Maake Ncube, Archie of the *Generations* fame, telling me about the importance of being counted in my national census? Taking into account the time Archie spent on my screen, he must have gotten quite a lot of local taxpayers' money. Hmm ... I wonder how much could have been saved had they used me ... okay, or anybody else here?

Back to theatre. There is a sad belief among some local producers and directors that for a production to draw audiences, a foreign touch has to be added to it. Maybe right, maybe wrong, except that this is mostly done at the expense of the local artists, the very same people without whom the production would not materialise.

*Lysistrata* has once again proven it.

If shows like *Mogomotsiemang* (despite the controversy about, once again, payment and artistic contributions), *The Curse of the Black Fish* and other local productions that went on to be performed to appreciative audiences could work without much foreign involvement, then why should the others be perceived not to work without the involvement of foreigners? What good choreography can any foreign choreographers do that people like Banana Shekupe, Dominique Lunenge and Angelika Schroeder cannot do? What instrumentation arrangement can any foreign musician produce that talented musicians and percussionists such as Ricardo Mosiane, Vincent Mwemba and Jackson Kaujeua cannot produce?

Some of us really do not want to learn or we are, as the artists call some of us, 'too plainly arrogant to consider anything local as inferior'.

*Lysistrata* is not the first example. Over two years ago it was the musical theatre production called 'Hair'. What did the artists get out of this production where it is rumoured that the producers and some selected artists were even flown to a local lodge for an afternoon outing? A big thank you and a T-shirt each. And that, once again, after about four months of sweating it out on stage.

Isn't it a pity how, through history, Africans have always been subjugated into exploitation on the pretext that better things will come?

Perhaps we as artists are equally to blame, after all there are two sides to my coin in looking at this. Firstly, maybe we should flatly refuse to work before we see and sign for a figure that earns us a living wage? Maybe we should kick our artists' union to wake them up to the raw deal we get from these unscrupulous directors and producers? How do we really expect these producers to change if we don't even bother to negotiate better deals? What the likes of Frieda Karipi, David Nanub, Boetitie Kavandje and the others did in accepting the conditions of work in *Lysistrata* is not helping build the industry, but dashing the hopes of the younger ones who are busy joining the industry of ever making a living. Come on guys! And that in a play whose relevance to our society most of you were not even sure of? Was it really artistically fulfilling to run about on stage, fondling wire penises, just because this ancient play deals with women's sexual powers to stop wars? In Europe maybe, but in Africa...

That all said and done, I am not against anybody with genuine concern in this small industry of ours. No one can also dispute the contributions that the directors of *Lysistrata* and other directors have and are making to the industry. But when things are not well at home, these things should be addressed.

Vickson Hangula, KATUTURA

Note: This letter has been shortened - Ed