

# Zimbabwe's theatre for young people: a documentation of personal development and social responsibility

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## Introduction

The Zimbabwe nation started its life as a British colony with a large settler population. Its tradition of political turbulence was premiered when the settler-based government, headed by Ian Smith forcibly declared itself independent from British rule in 1965. This action was followed by serious problems which still bedevil the country till now. In April 1980, the former British colony of Southern Rhodesia became internationally recognized as the independent state of Zimbabwe.

However, Zimbabwe still remained in the throes of her old problems. The racial inequalities institutionalized by apartheid persisted. For example, there is a marked disparity between black and white incomes and black Zimbabweans began to agitate for a fair share of the prime farming territory hitherto preserved for white ownership by settlers since the 1890s. When Robert Mugabe became the first Prime Minister of Zimbabwe he pledged to redress racial and class injustices, redistribute land and promote economic development. He however failed to reckon with the fact that Zimbabwe was virtually bankrupt after the long war for independence and the economy was further weakened by the mass emigration of Europeans and a severe drought in the early 1980s. These problems snowballed into 'chronic food and fuel shortages, inflation, unemployment, corruption. Government inertia and the stalled program of land resettlement also sparked widespread discontent' (*Time*, May 4, 1992 <zi050492.html>). To worsen the situation, Mugabe obtained parliamentary approval for the power to confiscate white-owned farms. This has 'triggered diplomatic alarms and international condemnation' (*Time*, Apr. 17, 2000 /europe/magazine/2000/0417/zimbabwe.html>).

The state of the nation has however given birth to a theatre that is committed to the idea of nation building and presenting a forum for improving the quality of human life. Susan Hains describes Zimbabwean theatre as *Bira*:

*Bira* pronounced Bee - Ru (as in ru-n), is a Shona word meaning celebration, with overtones of gathering lots of people together to share food, drink, music, song and dance, laughter, sadness and stories. Much of Zimbabwe's Theatre is just that, a celebration in overcoming tremendous odds. (*Bira*: April 1996)

Some of these odds include the social and political problems inherent in the Zimbabwean society, partially arising from attempts to moderate the damaging effects of years of apartheid.

Generally, Zimbabwean theatre is still divided along racial, ideological and ethnic lines, and this fact introduces its own peculiar tensions. Patrick Fillion, the director of Alliance Française in Harare describes the Zimbabwean theatre as existing on four distinct levels. Firstly, 'Zimbabwe still has a sizeable British colony, which has maintained its own theatrical tradition'. Their theatrical fare includes imported products such as English plays and musical comedies. The plays are performed in the wealthy districts by, and for, the European population. This theatre obtains private patronage and has good places to perform. However, a measure of 'crossover' is being achieved in that opportunities are gradually arising for non-white groups to perform in the highbrow theatres. According to *The Latest*, CHIPAWO's monthly newsletter, 'for many years, the Reps Theatre has been the preserve of the white minority. In the years before independence no blacks were allowed in'. But in November 2002, the CHIPAWO group had an opportunity to perform at the Reps Theatre. This has been described as 'history in the making. Plays of a high theatrical standard based in the lives and experiences of the Zimbabwean majority - at Reps! History indeed' (*The Latest*: November 2002 Edition). This of course is a happy scenario for the theatre in Zimbabwe.

On the second level, the Ministry of Culture, despite paucity of funds, encourages theatrical creativity, which incorporates the multicultural nature of Zimbabwe. Thirdly, some private theatre companies also give the 'grassroots' the opportunity to be represented theatrically. Traditional theatre in its original form is a blend of game, dance and song. These theatre companies, who resourcefully introduce creativity into their writings and performances, thereby 'avoiding the backwards-looking trap of "folklore" theatre, keep this traditional theatre alive. On the fourth level, some social organizations have commenced theatrical work with the "street kids" population with the intent of

using the 'theatre as a way of retrieving a form of social dignity' (Patrick Fillion). This is a form of community theatre or theatre for development which has been gaining increasing popularity in Africa with the intent of personal and community development. This study shall concentrate on the use of the theatre in Zimbabwe to achieve child-centred development- helping the children in acquisition of specific life skills and understanding of various issues that affect the process of life and living (e.g., HIV/AIDS). It is encouraging to note that young people are not left alone to drift and get into trouble. On the contrary, a lot of community-based theatrical activities that target young people abound in the country. We shall examine such activities with the intent of documenting how the Zimbabwean theatre attempts to mitigate the impact of the socio-political turbulence in the lives of children and youths with a view to providing them with coping strategies and fostering a sense of nationhood in them.

Activities of the Zimbabwean theatre are overseen by the Ministry of Sports, Recreation and Culture. There are various theatrical organizations, which include National Theatre Organisation (NTO), the Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre (ZACT) and the Zimbabwe Association of Theatre for Children & Young People (ZATCYP). These groups provide a 'feel' of the 'temperature' of the theatre in Zimbabwe. The community theatre works in the various communities to achieve specific objectives. A case in point is the prevalence of many theatrical activities to combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic, as we shall discuss later. Theatrical activities also place a premium on the recognition of children and youth as important actors in the drama of life, hence the existence of the ZATCYP. Theatre for young people has the potential for highlighting important issues that concern them at their own level. It is the contention of some development workers that if children and youths are regarded as capable and mature enough to accomplish certain things such as selling wares, fetching firewood and water, running errands, minding siblings and livestock and working for waged labour, then they should be able to have a voice in decisions which affect their development ("PRA with Children", cited in Salami 1999:57). Role playing and observational learning through theatrical activities go a long way in preparing young people for decision making which they would have to be involved in at every stage of their lives. Such decisions might be as minor as what things to eat, what cloths to wear, or they might be as major as to be or not to become sexually active, to start abusing drugs or not, what political ideology to adopt, etc. the theatre becomes a veritable 'school' where the child learns what may not be on the curriculum in school, or what may be advertently or inadvertently omitted in her/his teaching at home.

## **Theoretical focus: young people's theatre as TFD**

Eckhard Breitinger submits that theatre and cultural activities in general have a morally uplifting or ethically formative effect on the spectators (cited in Frank 1995:58). This is the reason why theatre for development (TFD) has become very popular in developing countries. TFD has, more often than not, become the preserve of ideologically motivated, politically committed, humanitarian oriented groups and individuals from government ministries and non-governmental organizations (Breitinger, cited in Frank 1995:58). Such theatres are usually not commercially oriented; they fall into the type of theatre categorized by Sandra Richards as populist theatre. She describes this type of theatre as one that possesses mass appeal and builds upon the aesthetic forms or structural patterns that a mass audience values (Cited in Frank 1995:11). Ross Kid defines TFD as:

... means of expression which has traditionally been used to educate the young, unify the community, and articulate the commonly felt concerns and aspirations of the people... popular theatre builds on an educational approach and means of communication which is already familiar to and accepted by the community. It is their spontaneous means of education and grassroots communication (cited in Frank 1995:12).

This is basically what the theatre for young people in Zimbabwe attempts to do, reaching out to the young people in idioms they can relate to and benefit from. S. C. Evernden corroborates this position by stating that 'in areas and schools where drama has had a fair trial, the subject has helped children to become articulate and self-reliant, more at peace with themselves and better adjusted to society.' Laura Chapman (1978:v) also states that

No single approach to art can adequately represent to children the diversity inherent in 'art ... art programmes should be eclectic; they should reflect major traditions of artistic thought and practice ... as well as cross-cultural insights ... Children's art experiences must extend beyond the traditional confines of "school" art..

Indeed, the theatre for young people in the Zimbabwean experience transcends 'school art'. It is also as eclectic as one might desire, utilizing different arts of the theatre- acting, speech, music etc. in a multi-cultural mix, to achieve its purposes.

## Activities of the Zimbabwean theatre for young people: case studies

In many African societies, children are not directly focused when designing developmental objectives. It is usually assumed that the benefit of interventions will naturally trickle down to the children from the household, family, or parents (Salami 1999:57). This erroneous impression leads to the exclusion of vital inputs that should form the bedrock of a child's education. However, with children's theatre and theatre for children, young people are opportune to familiarize themselves with ideas and notions dealing with diverse aspects of life that present sundry learning environments in a practical fashion through which the child becomes familiar with different concepts of life and living. This is what the Zimbabwean children's theatre strive to achieve through CHIPAWO and others in the same tradition.

### Case study 1: Chipawo

CHIPAWO refers to its work as 'Arts Education for Development and Employment'. As stated on the group's website, the word

CHIPAWO is Shona and it means, "please give" or "give also". CHIPAWO is therefore all about sharing what you've got. It also stands for Children's Performing Arts Workshop. Children from age 3 and youth up to age 18 learn to sing, dance, play music and act and to work together, communicate, be confident, build through criticism and so much more - in short, arts education for development and employment. (CHIPAWO web site)

Indeed, 'development and employment' as used in the above quote are operative words. Much of the problem of youths in Africa, and indeed in the whole world lies in the fact that the youths have been left to themselves much too often in the adult's rat race to keep body and soul together. The youths then end up underdeveloped and consequently unemployable and unemployed. They become idle with their minds turning into a veritable 'devil's workshop'. CHIPAWO seeks to change this grim story.

CHIPAWO is an educational, non-profit-making theatre established in 1989 in Harare, Zimbabwe. It is affiliated to the Zimbabwe Association of Theatre for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ/IATA). It was founded by Stephen Chifunyise, playwright and civil servant, Farai Gezi, music educationist and musician, Julie Frederikse, well-known author, Robert McLaren, academic, writer and theatre practitioner.

The stated objectives for founding CHIPAWO are to foster a deep knowledge and appreciation of natal culture (Zimbabwean, Southern African, African) in children at a very early age so that they do not grow up as aliens in their own homeland, and also, that the children through such arts and culture, would develop and grow up as balanced, harmonious, whole human beings who in turn help to make a balanced, harmonious, whole society. It is also hoped that the CHIPAWO exercise would aid the enrichment and improvement of Zimbabwean performing arts and also lead some of the children into a fulfilling career in the performing arts and related fields.

The *modus operandi* of CHIPAWO comprises of training and performance. The training commences at a very early age and the child could remain within the CHIPAWO fold until after age eighteen. Training activities comprise integrated music, dance and drama, radio, film and television workshops with children of all backgrounds. There are up to thirty CHIPAWO centers located all over the country. Such centers range from those in schools and crèches where members train during the week, to selected centers utilized during weekends. Some of the centers are fee-paying centers while others are referred to as bursary centers which cater for children who cannot afford to pay the fees.

The slogan for CHIPAWO is *Mwana Anokosha* (The child is precious). According to the organizers, CHIPAWO tries to make its arts education activities accessible to all children - the poor and disadvantaged, handicapped, rural, outside the capital city etc. ... The bulk of this programme is supported by Swedish International Development Aid (SIDA)... CHIPAWO tries to ensure that children and their needs really are at the centre of its activities. CHIPAWO tries to pay attention to its children's needs outside of CHIPAWO as well. For this the Fund of the Trustees was established to help needy children in CHIPAWO. In order to empower CHIPAWO children the Children's Council was formed, to which all CHIPAWO centres elect representatives. Workshops and festivals on children's rights and HIV/AIDS are also held (CHIPAWO web site).

The activities listed above give the children something constructive to occupy their time with. It also gives them a consciousness that they are an important part of a larger society towards which they have a responsibility. With this kind of participation and encouragement, the children are not likely to grow up thinking only of what they can gain from their country, rather, they will also be interested in what they can do for their country.

CHIPAWO strives to educate the children in a holistic manner. Instructors attempt to

remove insularity from the children by exposing them to, and educating them about things happening around them and outside their immediate vicinity. For example from 5th-10th May 2002, CHIPAWO participated at the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children in New York. There, an eleven-year-old member of CHIPAWO and CHIPAWO's child of the year, Tinevimbo Chimbetete, presented a playlet titled "A Zimbabwean Story", which portrays the plight of AIDS orphans in Zimbabwe. From 20th-25th May 2002, the World Culture Week was marked. From June 10 to 16, the days of The African Child and the Soweto Uprising of 1976 were marked with programmes as part of the cultural education of its children. These programmes have the advantage of being able to educate the children about happenings beyond their immediate locale. They also become familiar with historical occurrences such as the Soweto Uprising and countless others which form the thematic bedrock of some of their plays.

CHIPAWO also serves as a forum for inculcating gender equity. As stated in the paper presented by CHIPAWO Programme Assistant, Tendai Majuta, at the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children, New York, May, 2002, CHIPAWO 'takes the initiative to counteract all forms of discrimination against girls and negative stereotyping', it also stresses the benefits in self-confidence and self-esteem that accrue as a result of the positive and dynamic participation of girls. This helps in the socialization process. Every child, both male and female, who is involved in such performances grow up to appreciate the worth of both genders as equally important. The members of the audience, both adults and children also receive the same message.

Another area of operation in CHIPAWO is in its performance of an agenda-setting function. It brings issues to the attention of its members and their audience for dissection, discussion and understanding so that specific recommendations can be offered and adopted. No issue is too important to be brought to the level of the child. A case in point is the "Children Against Aids Festival". The AIDS pandemic is a life-threatening reality in Zimbabwe. 'The pandemic has ruined the childhood of the child - the child has lost parents, the child has assumed the role of the parent, the child cannot go to school' so, AIDS needs to be understood and combated. Tendai Majuta states that 'the festival is a contribution to the promotion of the child's understanding of primary health care, of speaking out, of solidarity with other children affected by the pandemic'. Children who participate in this festival will be acquainted with the reality of AIDS and how it can be combated. They will definitely be better equipped to relate with people living with AIDS and know how to steer clear of the HIV virus.

CHIPAWO's importance and relevance on the national scene has been further underlined by its current participation in a policy formulation project. This is the 'Wills and Inheritance Laws Project' being organized by the Ministry of Justice and which is being supported by the British organisation, DFID. The purpose of the project is to identify problems encountered by women and children in the area of inheritance after the demise of their breadwinners. To this end, three plays have been written to generate discussion of related issues with members of the audience. The plays are "Guarding the Guardian", a play about misappropriation of funds left for the children of deceased parents. "Tsika Dzemandorokwati", which portrays 'the authentic Shona traditions relating to inheritance'. "A Woman's Will" presents the problems faced by women who seek 'to claim their rights under the legislation'. CHIPAWO was commissioned by a local consultancy, RSC Zimbabwe, to perform theatre communications sessions in schools. 'At each session, the children perform a play that deals directly with problems encountered by children with regard to inheritance'. After the performance, 'a paralegal expert from the Ministry of Justice invites questions and testimonies from the audience. These are recorded and will be passed on to the Ministry of Justice and may become in future the basis of Law Reform'. This project gives CHIPAWO a golden opportunity of participating in the policy making process in Zimbabwe.

In Zimbabwe, the expertise of CHIPAWO's staff is highly regarded. Special workshops are arranged for training and upgrading its own staff and it also offers professional training services in the area of arts education for development to other organizations. A testimony of the organization's success is reflected in the high standard of expertise and originality in its performances. CHIPAWO performance groups are invited for performances by a wide range of organizations- international, governmental, non-governmental and private, on a variety of occasions. CHIPAWO children have also won laurels at international festivals and toured both nationally and internationally with great success.

The typical CHIPAWO year ends with the annual end-of-year concert.

After being involved in multifarious activities during the course of the year, all the groups congregate at the end of the year for 'a series of Minifestivals at which CHIPAWO children perform for each other what they have been learning all year'. This event is "a two-day event in which all CHIPAWO children have an opportunity to show each other, their parents, families and friends what they can do. Nearly two thousand children perform the full range of CHIPAWO performances - plays, dances, music and songs". Apart from the mini festival, there is also the CHIPAWO Christmas show.

Since 1995 CHIPAWO has staged a show for Zimbabwean children at Christmas time.



According to *The Latest* of November 2002,

Almost all the Christmas entertainment and the images of Christmas that Zimbabwean children were consuming were those of the Northern experience - snow, Father Christmas in the North Pole, the standard English Christmas carols. CHIPAWO set out to try and provide the Zimbabwean family an entertaining and enjoyable Christmas experience but to do this by presenting the Christmas material with a difference - a Zimbabwean difference. Christmas and its stories were to be presented in an African and Zimbabwean idiom. For CHIPAWO this is a very important responsibility - to ensure that Zimbabwean children do not accustom themselves to always looking up to foreign models and idioms but instead relate to international and national events like Christmas in their own languages and in the context of their own lives. Since its inception that is what the show has done.

The television show for 2002 was filmed in August at varied places, which reflected the Zimbabwean spirit. Locations included the Botanic Gardens, Marlborough, Highfield and Domboshawa. This showcased plays for children with the themes of Christmas given 'a special African significance and flavour'.

## **Case study 2: the national arts council of Zimbabwe**

The National Arts Council of Zimbabwe is a parastatal organisation established by statute in 1985 to spearhead, coordinate and facilitate the development and promotion of arts and cultural activities in the country ([natprogramme.htm](#)). The council's terms of reference is encapsulated in the following statement:

The arts are diverse and widespread throughout the country, they include music, drama, dance, poetry, folk art, literature, visual arts, installations, photography, filming, sculpture, crafts, graphics, basketry, beadwork, tie and dye, batik, screen painting among others. Arts are a form of language through which self-expression is achieved. It is through arts that people communicate their impressions, hopes and aspirations as well as social, economic and political experiences. They play a crucial role in society, nurturing national identity and pride. The arts function as an economic asset, as a form of entertainment, as a means of communication and as a reflection of the aesthetic values of any given community ([natprogramme.htm](#)).

National programmes designed by the council are very diverse. They include publication of an arts directory and an arts magazine, provision of information on Zimbabwean

arts and cultural programmes such as festivals, seminars, *biras* and conferences. These include The National Arts Merit Awards (NAMA), Culture Week, organised to celebrate World Culture Day and Africa Day and the Jikinya Schools Dance Competition, which fits into our area of focus in this study. Also of interest to us is the Arts Development Fund (ADF)/Scholarship Fund.

The Jikinya Schools Dance Competition is a traditional dance programme for primary school children. It is an annual programme funded by a corporate sponsor. The traditional dance competitions are staged at three levels i.e. the district, provincial and national levels. The Council, through these competitions aims to encourage children to perform and appreciate Zimbabwean cultural heritage through dance. With such a competition going on at this elementary level, the children become aware of their culture at a very impressionable age and they develop a love for it, which has a high possibility of enduring into adulthood. The competition will be a cultural bastion to defend the child against the multicultural influx readily available through television and film. As an additional development, the National Arts Council of Zimbabwe provides funding for further studies in the arts for interested youths. This is done through The Arts Development Fund (ADF)/Scholarship Fund. The fund was established in May 2000 'primarily to provide soft loans to artists for the promotion and development of "small" projects in the arts and cultural sector'. Funding for this project is sourced from the corporate sector, the government, individuals, the donor community and fundraising activities by the NACZ itself. Part of the component of the project is the Scholarship fund. This fund is meant for Zimbabwean students who are interested in pursuing arts and culture related studies in theatre, music and dance, film and literary arts in an arts or cultural institution in Zimbabwe. With these activities, Zimbabwe is certainly building a crop of people who would be the mainstay and ambassadors of its tradition and culture in the foreseeable future.

### **Case study 3: the national theatre organisation**

Apart from CHIPAWO and The National Arts Council of Zimbabwe, The National Theatre Organisation also organizes annual National High Schools' Theatre Festivals. The National Theatre Organization is the coordinating body for many theatrical organizations in Zimbabwe. NTO is still white dominated and the most privileged as regards facilities. The festival starts with provincial competitions, which culminates in the national finals in Harare. In 1997, the finals took place from 2nd - 6th August. The nine plays with the highest marks were performed at the Prince Edward High Schools' Beit Hall, with a Gala Awards Evening on 6th August. Other festivals are also documented by Hains thus,

In August, 1 - 3, we have The Zimbabwe Childrens' Arts Festival in Harare Gardens. This festival comprises all the visual and performing arts by and for children. On the same dates in Mutare, the Zimbabwe Association of Theatre for Children and Young People holds its annual festival with 5 children's groups visiting from Europe and 3 from South Africa. To say nothing of all the local groups who perform children for children or adult for children's theatre in Zimbabwe (*Bira*: 1997).

This interaction with children from other cultural backgrounds is very healthy. It is a learning experience in itself. The outside world becomes real for the children and they become empowered at a certain level- this interaction enables them, among other things, to know what happens in other places, and with the right kind of leaders, they will be able to query things that are wrong, know their rights, and also know the right way to ask for these rights.

Also, Hains described a typical school production in Harare. According to her, March was a very active month theatrically. The highlight of which had to be "no greater love" a Passion Play produced to celebrate both Holy Week and the Centenary of Harare's St. George's College, a boy's secondary school run by Jesuits. It was a monumental production along the lines of the famed "Oberammagau Passion Play". Performed in the College grounds with a cast of 250, plus goats, donkeys, horses and even 'camels' which came up specially from Krugersdorp in South Africa. The final performance was on the evening of 1st April, by which time over 10,000 people had seen it and the play had raised over Z\$100,000 for the College's Drama Fund to build a new performance space (*Bira*: April 1996).

These kinds of performances mentioned above are of utmost benefit to the formal educational system. From this early age, the love for the classics would have been instilled in the children. Plays that seem ponderous and boring in class would come alive for them on stage and become interesting, parading before them historical, social and other facts of ages long gone by. Also, the fact that money is raised to build a new performance space gives the young people a sense of accomplishment, and leaves them with a firm conviction that it is a good thing to engage in fruitful work and become financially empowered.

## **Case study 4: Amakhosi**

Amakhosi is an established Zimbabwean community theatre company. Amakhosi is a Bulawayo set up and Ndebele-based. The group is also very critical of the ZANU government. Most of the members of Amakhosi are young adults, invariably under the age of 25. The group initiated a project targeted at working with young people in rural

drama groups in Zimbabwe to build their knowledge and skills with a view to advocating HIV prevention through theatre. According to the Canadian International development Agency (CIDA) newsletter (August 2001), Amakhosi and its partners are using their talent and tradition, the song and dance, to share some life-saving advice with their communities. To achieve their goals, they are utilizing Zimbabwe's long and strongly supported tradition of improvisational theatre and enthusiastic audience participation. CIDA asserts that eighty percent of Zimbabwe's population is rural and in dire need of health education. Various enthusiastic youth drama groups exist in the country, burning with the desire to use their art to meet this need,

They are all interested in using their talent for performance to do something constructive like educating their peers and their communities—they see people around them getting sick and dying and want to do something about it. Recent estimates suggest that between 20 to 30 % of the sexually active population in Zimbabwe is HIV positive (CIDA Website).

This is the hub of development theatre - instilling in the youths a sense of social responsibility, love for their fellow men and a determination to do something constructive.

Through the activities of Amakhosi, some of these young Zimbabwean actors are brought together to participate in a series of workshops. The main targets of these workshops are 'to produce a generic script about HIV prevention and learn some theatre production and management skills'. Each group then adapts the script to suit their own style and creativity, based on a deep knowledge of their primary audiences. They are able to use examples from their villages to make their performances very effective. The actors adopt a multi-disciplinary approach to the performance. After the production, performers assume the role of peer educators and 'behavior-change scientists', initiating discussion about issues addressed in the play. 'These post-performance discussions produce community action groups that continue the work on HIV prevention begun by the youth drama groups'. The Youth Action Division at CIDA is sponsoring Amakhosi with thirty thousand dollars as part of efforts to focus on the specific challenges of youth and HIV/AIDS programming.

## **Case study 5: Plan**

Apart from CIDA, other international agencies also work with Zimbabwean children to ensure that children's theatre is not just 'all play and no learning'. One of such organizations is PLAN. PLAN's main aim is to raise awareness 'of sensitive or complicated

issues such as HIV/AIDS, child abuse, teenage pregnancy, and child labour'. To facilitate this, various performance art techniques are used to educate the children and empower them to protect themselves from the problems of HIV/AIDS. PLAN endeavours to design 'programmes that will convey the HIV/AIDS message in language that will be easily understood by children'.

An example of PLAN's activities is seen in Bulawayo. Here, PLAN partnered with a local non-governmental organization to acquaint children with specific issues that affect the life of the child, using the vehicle of drama, song and poetry. "Three schools were chosen to pilot this, with the intention of spreading the programme to other areas if successful" (PLAN Website). The project was inaugurated in July 2001. PLAN trained a teacher at the School in promoting children's rights and issues through performance art. The school was also provided with musical instruments such as marimba (a wooden xylophone-type instrument) and drums. This teacher/ facilitator leads the children in creating plays and songs with socially relevant themes. Issues discussed include 'child abuse, teenage pregnancy, child labour, HIV/AIDS and child participation in projects and decision making in issues that affect them.' The following is an account by a PLAN official, Henry Mpofo, Programme Communications Coordinator from PLAN Bulawayo:

I visited one of the schools participating, Bubude Primary School, to measure progress,' Henry Mpofo, Programme Communications Coordinator from Plan Bulawayo told us, 'I spoke to four girls, Gracious, Lazo, Anolia and Siyabonga whose ages vary from 10 to 12 years. Lazo performs modern and traditional dance. Anolia and Gracious play percussion instruments. Siyabonga plays the marimba and she also performs traditional dance. They informed me that their group has 22 members made up of 10 girls and 12 boys. They will be performing for neighbouring schools and for the community within their area. At the moment, the group has been entertaining their fellow students with traditional and modern dance routines during the sports time sessions held once a week in the afternoons. When I visited the school, I had the pleasure of watching these very young and energetic children at work. I asked them about their experiences of being part of the Arts group and they said they are having fun in playing the musical instruments, dancing, and now have freedom to express themselves. But above all, they have now increased their knowledge on HIV/AIDS. They will be happy if the message they are trying to put across to their community will result in an attitude change (for the better) towards issues like AIDS and teenage pregnancy (PLAN Website).

The project expects to disseminate their messages through performances at school gatherings, which would provide larger heterogeneous audiences consisting of students, teachers and parents. Other children are also becoming interested in the group's

activities. The holistic aim of PLAN is to “develop a confident child with a strong and individual personality, who is sure of his or her identity and can communicate, work with others and above all share with others”. With this game plan, it is hoped that children passing through this programme will grow up to be better citizens than their parents.

## Case study 6: March

“Modeling And Reinforcement To Combat HIV” (MARCH) projects have begun in Ethiopia, Botswana and Zimbabwe since 2001. Their focus is on the promotion of certain health and social issues. According to Galavotti, the programme director, effort is also being made to get people to re-think their lives and generate their own solutions for reaching those 'healthy' goals. Galavotti and the MARCH team want the target audience to be actively involved in their futures and not just adopt the behaviors they are told will be good for them (*Amherst Magazine*: 2001). A major part of the instrument of achieving these goals is social change-oriented drama. Galavotti, one of the project officials explains that the youths will be the primary writers, as scriptwriting is not a full-time job and kids have more available time. This is in recognition of the fact that youths are a very important segment of the society. If they are not invited or encouraged to be part of the solutions to society's problems, they will turn out to be part of the problem. The drama series, Makgabenang epitomizes the work being done by MARCH in Southern Africa,

In August 2001, MARCH and the Botswanan production team launched Makgabenang, to air twice a week for two years. The drama's name means "A Stony Place," but Galavotti writes that the title conveys ideas of "oases and life amid barrenness." Galavotti hopes fervently to nurture life where there has been unimaginable devastation (*Amherst Magazine*: 2001).

This is a 'theatre of hope'. Galavotti disagrees with critics who describe such dramas with such denigrative appellations as "masked" education and "good propaganda". She contends, "such easy labels downgrade the vital importance that stories have in people's social and personal lives and the manner in which they are shared." According to her,

... the process of identifying with characters can be both an emotional and cognitive one. We recognize ourselves in characters—they are like us, or they face problems similar to ours, or, perhaps most importantly, they show us what we might be.

Crucially, the messages promoting behavior change are not didactic or prescriptive. Technically the dramas are "propaganda," according to the rhetorician's definition of "using information strategically. (*Amherst Magazine*: 2001)

## **Conclusion: Zimbabwean young people's theatre in the face of sanctions**

Certainly, children's theatre and theatre for young people in Zimbabwe is aimed at affecting the 'total man', touching the spirit, the soul and the body. According to Udosen (1983:20-21), what the child gains during rehearsal and performance is enormous. Through the use of speech, song and body movement she/he learns how to be expressive. Through observation and participation in the design and construction of sets and costumes, she/he becomes conversant with the skills of joinery, carpentry, fashion designing, and also gains the knowledge of translation of designer's scale drawings into actual size structures. Zimbabwe certainly has a lot to gain because it invests a lot into the lives of its children through theatrical activities. We see a confirmation of this from Stephen J. Chifunyise's submission on 27th March 1997 that as at that date,

...the only international theatre federation that has an active branch in Zimbabwe is the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People. The Zimbabwean branch of the Association....was last year appointed regional coordinator and membership facilitator for Southern Africa (*The Herald*: 1997).

This attests to the strong presence of children's theatre in Zimbabwe. The roll call of international partners working with Zimbabwean children and youths is quite long. For example, YAMBIRO Theatre Production is popular in Harare's First Street through its regular performances. In July 2001, *The Daily News* on its entertainment page informed its readers that YAMBIRO was preparing for a tour of Malawi in August. The tour was organized by John Vah Kleck from Denmark and is aimed at promoting young artists. Other international partners include MARCH, CIDA, PLAN and a host of others. Individuals like John Vah Kleck also abound. According to Hungwe Kedmon,

The 1990s have witnessed the rapid rise of NGOs in Zimbabwe as donor funded agents of change and development. Western donors have become increasingly disenchanted with the role of the state as partner in development. In a recent influential report, the Government of Zimbabwe has been described as "weakened by a combination of weak macro-economic management, the state's incapacity to respond to pressure for more

transparency in governance and the growing impact of globalisation on state control of policymaking" (Hungwe Kedmon).

It is now pertinent to ask, what will happen to the Zimbabwean theatre for young people with the sanctions from the Commonwealth and European Union against the country? It is true that no country should be over dependent on foreign aid, but the situation of rabid corruption in most countries in Africa, especially by the ruling class has made the African economy aid-dependent. Apart from foreign aid, it is important for the Zimbabwean government to fund the arts in a more committed way. In 1997, Hains wrote,

The National Arts Council of Zimbabwe (NACZ) continues to be under-funded and not particularly well administered. There is now a new Acting Director in the person of Mr. Albert Nyathi, who is trying very hard to make things better, but he's not helped by the fact that the Board hasn't met for several months owing to the serious illness of the Board Chairman, Dr. Solomon Mutswairo. So little decision-making has taken place to the detriment of many arts organizations. NTO is still waiting for its grant-in-aid, which it hasn't received for three years now! ZACT and ZATCYP are in a similar position (*Bira*: No 3 - March / April 1997).

There is absolutely no way in which the arts can function in the arid land of zero-funding by the government. The Zimbabwean theatre like its counterparts the world over, has its own peculiar problems. On the 27th of March 1996, while celebrating UNESCO's/International Theatre Institute's (ITI) World Theatre Day, different insights were provided into the problems being encountered:

The first paper on "The Development of Theatre in Zimbabwe" was presented by Ngugi wa Mirii, the Co-ordinator of ZACT, and he addressed some of the many problems which confront theatre artists in this country. Included were the lack of training facilities, government and bureaucratic disrespect for the artist and inefficiency and the evergreen problem of funding theatre (*Bira*: April 1996).

The Zimbabwean theatre has for a very long time been short of funds. Susan Hains, editor of *Bira*, the newsletter of Zimbabwe's National Theatre Organization wrote variously in 1997 of the vicissitudes of the Zimbabwean theatre and the contributions of foreign donor agencies on the scene,

- July/August also saw the re-emergence of the National Theatre Organisation's (NTO) National High Schools' Theatre Festival thanks to generous sponsorship from the Swedish Independent Development Authority (SIDA) and Monte Carlo Theatres (Pvt) Ltd. (A cinema chain!) (*Bira*: No 3 - March / April 1997)



- Sadly, the S.A.D.C. Theatre Festival, scheduled for 1-7 October in Maputo, Mozambique failed due to lack of funds. This festival is now scheduled for 2-8 March 1997 (at time of writing, I've received no confirmation of this and I rather think it will fail once again, for the same reason). Pity. (*Bira*: No 3 - March / April 1997)
- The University of Zimbabwe's Theatre Arts Dept has dwindled somewhat, owing, in part, to lack of finance. The 4th year Honours in Theatre Arts programme instituted in 1995 looks like it won't happen this year. So Theatre Arts will probably return to being just a part of the B.A. General Degree. A great pity. (*Bira*: No 3 - March / April 1997)
- The theatre venue situation in Harare continues to be critical. But the good news is that a new venue in a night- club "The Tube" has opened its upstairs clubroom doors to experimental theatre... (*Bira*: No 4 - May / June 1997)

The above quotes do not present a happy prognosis for the future of a virile Zimbabwean theatre. Apart from the fact that donor agencies are partly the mainstay of Zimbabwean theatre, they also maintain a very strong presence in the life of the nation itself. If things are not right between the government and the donors, the theatre will definitely feel the pinch. On World Theatre Day, 27th March 1997, Stephen J. Chifunye, who was the Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Sport, Recreation and Culture and a theatre practitioner and playwright of note, wrote an article in the Zimbabwean newspaper, *The Herald*. He titled his article "World should listen to actors not politicians." He quoted Ok Kim, who was the president of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) and a Korean theatre Director who had declared in his international message for the day that

...when it comes to promoting the spirit of open-mindedness and understanding, the world should listen `closely to the words of actors in the theatre rather than to speeches made by politicians and scholarly theoreticians.'... theatre artists should contribute to creating a `world of understanding and harmony so that the world may reach its fulfillment without division and discord.'*(Bira*: No 4 - May / June 1997)

This is indeed what should happen where Zimbabwe is concerned. The voice of the theatre should be strident in defense of the interests of the society. CHIPAWO states, "the principles and goals of The United Nations Convention on The Rights of The Child are the principles and goals of CHIPAWO" (CHIPAWO Website). The entire world is "Saying Yes" to children in response to campaigns by UNICEF, WHO and diverse other national and international agencies. At a performance by the children of Emerald Hill School for the Deaf, in April 2002 a deaf child, Tafadzwa Magaisa read in sign lan-

guage the message from his school to the United Nations General Assembly:

We as children want peace not only in our country but world wide. The adults must stop destroying and polluting our beautiful heritage.

It is our hope that Zimbabwe will not shut the doors of life, hope and opportunity in the faces of her children. Children's theatre is capable of making a positive difference in the lives of Zimbabwean children in ensuring a better tomorrow for the society.

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