

SPEECH AND DRAMA ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

SEVENTIETH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

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EDEN COLLEGE

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

"Everything changes. You can make
A fresh start with your final breath..."

So begins one of Bertolt Brecht's poems; well, we have reached the venerable age of seventy and are not prepared to expire. We humans are biblically allotted three score years and ten, and as that number approaches, one finds that half the items in our shopping trolley are rightly labelled 'for fast relief' and appliances really do come with 'a lifetime guarantee'.

I think that Brecht's idea is important for us to think about this evening, as I present, with great pleasure, the annual report of the Speech and Drama Association at this, its seventieth Annual General Meeting.

As Brecht suggests – and many others have said it, too - if there is one thing that is constant in life, it is change. And because of change, it is necessary to reflect on the past, know how that past has impacted on the present, and try to sense what that means for the future. Well then, let us review the past year; firstly, from a wider perspective, and then from our own.

Analysts describe 2012 as a "massive threshold of change", because of the political, social and economic upheavals that occurred, and have identified a number of trends that will affect us in this year and in the years to come*.

2012 has been called "the year of elections": twenty countries, including the USA, France and the Ukraine, held elections, while fifty-nine countries experienced a shift in leadership, affecting more than fifty percent of the world population. The effects of the changes in administration and policy will soon be widespread.

In every sphere of life, a different way of communicating has and continues to evolve, as seen in the way the global elections were 'read' and monitored. The so-called 'broadcast' mentality, by which people are informed what they must do, is gone.

Through the technology of “clicktivism”, power is returning to the hands of people, even over traditional templates of business. The retail and advertising industries have had to change the way they conduct business: “In advertising,” says analyst Dion Chang, “tiny digital agencies, working in that digital space and in social media, are springing up. Gone are the days of huge law firms or agencies demanding a large retainer and telling us: ‘We will tell you what is best.’” People, more and more, are deciding for themselves. The instant nature of Facebook is becoming a far cheaper and more viable way to publicize a production than posters or press publicity.

The civil voice – the power of the people – will continue to grow, and change business and political models. There is a growing feeling of resistance, seen in our country in relation to Nkandla and e-tolling. A much more vocal South African public is emerging, as part of the global shift to electorates voicing dissatisfaction with their leadership, with ethical and moral questions entering the arena, especially after the massacre at Marikana on 16th August. Six years ago, many were dissatisfied with the name changes to roads proposed by the local municipality, some added their names to petitions, and even so, the changes went ahead; this weekend, however, the residents of Umlazi showed their disapproval to a road name change by demonstrating their disapproval.

In the past, people were encouraged – even trapped – into ownership of material things; with the new generation with a different value system, the shift will be to transience and experience. Globally, car sales among young people are falling; instead of a twenty-five year bond, they prefer to rent, lease, hire. Consumerism will be on our smartphones. More and more, people will communicate in other ways: “The use of words in social media will decrease as we communicate more by pictures. People will package everything they do for consumption on social media platforms... Expect to see a whole lot of new photo-sharing sites emerging,” predicts Chang. As you know, images of brutal action by the police will go ‘viral’ and be seen by hundreds of thousands within hours.

The music industry is and has had to change rapidly, too. I was recently assessing a dissertation by a Masters student who was both researching and himself involved in composing music on the internet; that is, he and many others were creating art without the presence of the other musicians and composers. As Ian Taylor writes, “In an age when everybody’s connected all of the time, we communicate more with our fingertips than our vocal chords.” An extension of all of this, predicts Chang, will be “a culture of ‘On and Off, not On or Off’, signifying that the distinction between our online and offline lives will cease to exist”.

And then, after writing the last-mentioned trend, on one day last week, a number of events made me reconsider.

I was watching the morning news and they were televising the hearings on the Marikana massacre. A spokesperson for the police was saying that the police had acted responsibly, and as she said this, a woman attending the hearings let out a sound, a raw howl of emotion from the very depths of her being, a cry of grief so affecting that the proceedings stopped...

A few hours later, in a lecture, I was saying that, even if we despised what a character in a play had done, it was more important to place ourselves in his situation and understand why he had acted in that way, and at that moment I caught the eye of a student who was nodding in agreement...

That same evening I attended a dance production in which the performers were accompanied by and responding to a poet delivering his thoughts aloud, using only their bodies, glistening with sweat, moving in unison... And I realized again, very strongly, that nothing can change the power to communicate emotion, to reach another's thoughts, to respond to ideas and feelings, to interact with others, to empathise with the plight of another human being, to how our vocal chords and our whole bodies, not just our fingertips, convey and connect the reality of our minds, our hearts our souls.

These events reaffirmed my belief that all people, no matter what race or gender or age or place of birth, have an abiding need for meaning, meaning that is derived from connecting time and space, experience and event, body and spirit, intellect and emotion.

People create art to make these connections, and thereby make meaning of existence. By doing so, the arts become one of humanity's most profound and necessary means of continuity.

They connect each new generation to those who have gone before, assisting the new generation on their own journey to find answers to the abiding questions: Who am I? What must I do? Where am I going?

At the same time, the arts are often a very important impetus for change, challenging old perspectives from fresh viewpoints, or offering original interpretations of familiar ideas.

The arts have been a preoccupation of every generation and every society precisely because they bring us face to face with ourselves, and with what we sense lies beyond ourselves. We need that as much as we need the arts as a unique source of enjoyment and pleasure.

For all these reasons, the arts have been an inseparable part of the human journey. And because we value them as a part of ourselves, we believe that knowing and practicing them is fundamental to the healthy development of our young people's minds and spirits. That is why, in any society, the arts are inseparable from the very meaning of the

word 'education'. No one can claim to be truly educated who lacks some knowledge and skills in the arts.

To quote Nelson Mandela: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." If our country is to grow, to be both dynamic and nurturing in its journey forward, its success will ultimately depend on how well we foster the capacities of our young people, not simply to earn a living in a vastly complex and rapidly changing world, but to have a life rich in meaning.

You will understand, then, why I say that the ongoing mission of the Speech and Drama Association has not and must not change. Implicit within that mission, from our inception in 1943, is the belief of our Founder, Professor Elizabeth Sneddon, that speech is the integration of audible and visible movement to externalise what one thinks and feels, and that the physical control of one's power to communicate is vital to life in terms of health, in terms of creativity and in terms of the acquisition of knowledge. In what we do, then, we do not teach young people to speak, but to think, to feel and to live.

Over the seventy years of our existence, every young person who presented an item, every teacher who taught and every parent who encouraged that entrant, every adjudicator who assessed the item, every principal who supported the festival, every school and studio who participated, and every committee member who gave freely of their time and expertise to the Association, the secretaries and festival convenors and, more recently our Festival Director – all have, symbolically, added to the foundation laid by Professor Elizabeth Sneddon in 1943, and in doing so they connected their present with the future, helping to build the Speech and Drama Association. And, by extension, each one was building on the foundation for the protection and continuation of the arts in our country.

One hundred and sixteen Festivals were held between March and November 2012: eighty-eight in primary schools, eleven in high schools, with twelve colleges and five studios participating. Twenty-five adjudicators were involved in the festivals and in the nine workshops for teachers. Thank you to every one of you, and a very warm welcome to our new adjudicators: Felicity Auld, Faca Kulu, Margie Marnewick, and Hugh Thompson.

During the past year, then, we are as grateful that so many schools continue to support us, and we can take pride in the fact that the Bluff Christian Academy, Hillview Secondary School, the John Thomas Education Centre, Umhlanga Jewish Day School, and the Amojee Academy joined the association. And, as importantly, that the benefits of what we are do are extending beyond our region: the Buccleuch Montessori School in Johannesburg, St Dominic's Priory in Port Elizabeth and Sterland Studio in Mossel Bay are also new members.

I can but dream, but imagine if we had the resources to mount festivals in every school in the country, and that every pupil not only participated, but also was sponsored to enter by financial corporations, because they recognise that investing in funds for the arts is imperative.

We were grateful and fortunate to receive R162 468 as the final tranche from the National Lotteries Distribution Trust Fund. This amount was used for subsidies, bursaries, the printing of festival stationery. Even so, that is not enough to assist all those who need sponsorship to enter the Festival. Sixteen schools received subsidies from the Association, to the value of R10 065; three hundred and eighty-three free entries were given to candidates entering three or more individual items, at a cost of R5 592, and twenty-five bursaries were awarded for a total amount of R14 000, with fifteen schools donating R11 000 to the bursary fund, and R3 000 paid for by the Association.

That grant also covered the costs of other important events that reach our members and extend our vision of the arts: firstly, the Convenors' Get-together and entertainment by Platform Jazz, held after the last Annual General Meeting on 5 March at the Rhumbelow Theatre, and secondly, the Bruce Piper Award Monologue Competition. This was held on 3 November 2012 with fourteen contestants from five high schools: Grosvenor Girls' High School, Kingsway High School, Northlands Girls' High School, St Anne's College and Port Shepstone High School. The winner was Phumelele Nbongo from Port Shepstone High School.

It is as important to continue the legacy begun by people like Bruce, as it is to remember those who have supported us so strongly, people like Bronwyn Fischer, principal at Sherwood Primary School, who died recently. She was a firm believer in the value of the Association, so much so that the school held a week long festival with two adjudicators.

I have said this before, and must say it again: this country needs a society that is literate *and* imaginative, skilled *and* creative. Without the arts to foster the insights, empathy and communicative abilities of young people, they are likely to become culturally and socially disabled adults, as ignorant of the suffering of their fellow human beings as they are of the necessity for protecting orchestras and dance companies and galleries and theatres.

Another way in which we connect and interact with schools and fellow artists, and publicise our and their events, is through the continuing quality and value of *The Platform*, now, thanks entirely to Vyvienne, in its fourteenth year of publication. *The Platform* can now be read on our own website, membership forms can be downloaded, besides lists of members, and forthcoming events.

No mission can be realised in concrete terms without people to implement it, and no vision can be sustained without people to support it. Some of those people are here tonight, and I pay tribute to my colleagues on the Executive Committee for their unstinted service to the cause we believe in: Eleanor Stewart, our Vice-Chairman, and alphabetically by surname, Roslyn Glen, Rosanne Hurly-Coyne, Helana Olivier, Loshani Puymann, David Spiteri, Dean Unger, Jean van Elden, and Charli Wiggill, thank you so much for your valued support, for your belief in what we do, and for your continuing commitment. To Andrea Nel, who moved to the North West Province at the end of 2012, we extend both our gratitude and our best wishes. Martie Hildyard, who resigned in March, must be especially thanked for handling our finances so meticulously, for her sensible and sincere care and advice, always dispensed with a smile, during the ten years service she gave to the Association.

There is one person who does more than all of us to uphold everything that I have said of the necessity to preserve our mission. Vyvienne, you are our example, you know when change can bring opportunity, you know what can and should be changed for the good of the Association, and as importantly, what must not change, because not all change is growth. And we know that your grace and your warmth, your tact and your loyalty, your care and your efficiency, the qualities so evident in whatever you do for us, these will never change. And so, every one present, and on behalf of every person who, through your planning, your publicising, your liaison work, entered the Festival and benefited from our seventy year old mission, we thank you deeply. It is a privilege to know you and work with you.

And thank you all, too, for your kind attendance and attention.

Professor Mervyn McMurtry
18 March 2013

* Quotations and data by Dion Chang and Daniel Silke, are derived from "On the path to people power", published in the *Sunday Tribune*, 30 December 2012.