

SPEECH AND DRAMA ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

EIGHTY-FIRST ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

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THE SHARKS BUSINESS CENTRE

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

It gives me considerable pleasure to present my annual report for the Speech and Drama Association of South Africa for the year 2023-2024.

There is a form of theatre in Japan known as Kabuki, centuries old, with very specific conventions, handed on from generation to generation. You would learn the techniques for many years from a Kabuki master-teacher. If you were to ask a Kabuki master about his teaching methods, he would say: "I can teach a performer the movement of how to point to the moon. But from the finger-tip to the moon is the performer's responsibility."

I used that image often in my teaching, as it acknowledges the difference between technique – which can be taught – and something from within that brings the technique to life, and between being shown the way and having to go on the journey oneself.

For every Annual Report, I use a theme around which to present our achievements during the past year. For this report, I have chosen two suggestions, one from David Spiteri and one from Rosanne Hurly-Coyne, interspersed with details of what SADASA accomplished in 2023.

David said my talk at the Bruce Piper Monologue competition should be circulated (and the Kabuki image was the opening image to my report back at that event, too.) For the first time, the competition was held at Cowan House in Hilton on Saturday, 21 October, adjudicated by David and myself. The winner was Kyra Kalu from Port Shepstone High, and again, for the first time, we chose a runner-up, Jack Stephens also from Port Shepstone. There were a record number of participants, 15 from 6 schools throughout our province, and we found the standard to be gratifyingly high. We extend our thanks to Mrs Julie Meiklejohn, the Head of Department, and the Principal, Mr Derek Braans.

Secondly, at the first meeting of the committee this year, Rosanne put forward the idea for a marketing campaign to promote SADASA and attract more schools to participate in the festival. One new member entered the festival in 2023: Northland Private School, in St Lucia, Mtubatuba, and Carlyle College, in Nottingham Road, joined for 2024. With reference to marketing, we must thank Fenella Rivalland, and her company, Loud Crowd Media, for assisting in making our SADASA website so informative and user-friendly.

Before the Covid pandemic, we held up to 120 festivals annually, and the number dropped drastically in 2020, but each year since the numbers have increased. In 2023, we held 80 festivals, 17 more than 2022: 5 in high schools, 4 in combined schools, 69 in primary schools, and 2 studio festivals, with no virtual festivals, a number that has decreased every year since the pandemic.

We 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. If only there were more funders, like the Concord Trust, to whom we are as ever deeply grateful for the R300 000 granted in April 2023. In the same year, 3 schools received subsidies: Berg Street Primary, Rosehill Primary and Melmoth Primary, amounting to R6 370,00.

This report, then, will focus on my own experience in marketing Speech and Drama, with some answers I have had to give to negative responses to the subject, at high schools and at the university level.

During its more than two thousand years of life, the theatre, more than any other of the arts, has attracted 'slings and arrows': from Roman times until Shakespeare's day, actors were fed to the lions, excommunicated by the church, whipped, imprisoned, or put to death without church burial. And why? Because acting was not regarded as a profession, but 'playing', and therefore not a proper trade. People without a trade could only be beggars and thieves. Theatres were frequently closed for being breeding-ground of plagues and various sins, including obscenity, idolatry, villainy, and prostitution.

Regrettably, those words that we use when we speak of drama, like 'play' and 'act', the very activities that are fundamental to personal growth in one's formative years, become suspect with age. When I left teaching to lecture in what was then Speech and Drama at Natal University, a parent looked at me pityingly, and asked me whether I knew that actors are schizophrenics. The moral implications of theatre were a matter of concern even in the home of theatre in the western world, in Greece. Philosophers asked whether it was right for an actor to represent an evil man? Or for someone to pretend to be something which he was not? The Greek word for an actor, *hupocrites*, has now become the pejorative word 'hypocrite', a pretender, a deceiver.

There is an element of truth about that; after all, it's been said that acting is all about honesty, and if you can fake that, you've made it.

The majority of festivals, events, bursary donations and awards are held in or from primary schools. In 2023, 3 staff workshops were conducted, at Gordon Road Girls' School (with 3 staff attending), at Chelsea Drive Preparatory School (for 30 staff), and Monument Primary School (for 35 staff), facilitated, respectively and with our gratitude for their expertise, by Philippa Savage, Lesley Coull, and Cathie Brooks-Neill.

Bursary donations were received from 2 schools, also at the primary level: R3 000 from Durban Preparatory High School, awarded to Zamir Patel, and R2 000 from Westville Senior Primary, with R500 each awarded to Emma Mumford, Ava Morrow, Ashton Singh, and Yuvna Panday. The 2023 SADASA Bursaries were awarded as follows: to Mpiloyethu Mncube, from Berg Street Primary, the Hazel Meyer Bursary (R1 000), Ria Narainsamy and Kellan Kusel from Hillcrest Primary, who shared the Jilian Hurst Bursary (R500 each), and Anotha Mtshali, from New Germany Primary, the Elizabeth Sneddon Bursary (R1 000).

Persuading more schools to enter would necessitate more adjudicators: in addition to our dedicated panel of 16 who assisted the Association in 2023, we welcome our 3 new adjudicators and hope their time with us will continue to be rewarding and fulfilling: Genesis Cele, Tracy Deeb and Lesley Coull.

I suggest that a focus of our marketing campaign would be to target more high schools. That task has, however, challenges that differ from primary schools. As part of a project to recruit more students into studying Drama as a subject at university, I spoke at one of the biggest boys' high school in Pietermaritzburg. At the time, this school had the largest number of Grade 12 pupils studying Speech and Drama in the country. Of those 50 boys, only 2 were going to continue their studies in drama, one at a university in the Cape, the other in London, where he said, there was the best theatre in the world. I abandoned my prepared talk, and asked one of the pupils to come forward and assist me by writing down on the board the reasons they had for not pursuing their study of drama.

So what did I say to those Grade 12 pupils? And what did I say when, every year, I addressed the new intake of law students at the university about why they should study drama, or when I was asked to speak at a subject choice meeting for Grade 10 pupils many, many times over the years? I am grateful to those Grade 12 pupils, because they provided me with the answers I needed to the questions and doubts that are always raised. Their reasons, I realized, were learnt, not innate; but I have enough optimism to believe that eventually things can be untaught, I mean, after all, pupils were once taught that the earth was flat.

In the same year, a newspaper careers supplement for those interested in studying after school contained an article with this headline: "Forget *Shakespeare* and study *shareholder value*, ditch *classical literature* and concentrate on *corporate culture*." In other words, much of

what those young people had learned so far has no place in the 'culture' that exists in the *real*, grown-up world.

These are the main reasons. Notice my use of the present tense in listing them: there are no career opportunities in theatre; they've 'done it' at school; drama is no use to a career as an accountant or a lawyer or an engineer; their parents (and as sadly, their guidance counsellors) advised them against it – for the reasons given above; and that theatre is not important.

Those beliefs arise from a lack of understanding of the difference between theatre and drama, between preparing for one career and a preparation for life. Why? Because theatre is a form of communication between performers and an audience, whereas drama – the subject – is concerned with action, the experience undergone by the participants, whether there are spectators present or not. Drama is, in other words, about process, theatre is a product. A course in drama will include performance as one of its many components, but a drama course is not about how to act on the stage. Drama is not learning to be in the school play, drama is learning life skills.

These attitudes have never been confined to learners and their parents only.

As you know from my last annual report, largely through Professor Elizabeth Sneddon's endeavours, it took 37 years for Speech and Drama to be granted official recognition by the Joint Matriculation Board as a matriculation subject on the Standard and Higher Grades. She had to convince the Board that a misguided emphasis only on the acquisition of knowledge, ignored the integrated development of the whole being, and that every other subject is a by-product of speech.

Similarly, at university, Speech and Drama was regarded by many academics as a course in actor training, and I was asked why there should be a practical course at an academic institution when there was a department to train actors at the Technikon. The attitude is not restricted to this country; the most prestigious universities, world-wide, do not offer courses in drama. Again, due to Professor Sneddon's determination and persistence, the Department of Speech and Drama at the University of Natal opened in 1951 with 7 students and one small room, the first tertiary institution in South Africa, indeed the whole of Africa, to recognize drama as an academic discipline.

Universities are ranked by their research output, not simply by the number of graduates, and receive accreditation and research funding for the number of publications produced annually. The word 'research' is derived from Old French: its original meaning was "to seek again", "to examine anew". By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the term became associated with facts and data, with the objectivity of scientific methodology and analysis. But producing accredited research in a discipline that can never be simply

result-based is a challenge. How does one accurately quantify creativity and imagination, or the effects of a drama lesson where the process is more important than any product?

Practice as research in itself took many years to be accepted as an academic endeavour, and even then, had to have a written research component. Theatre, we know, exists only in the moment, is transitory and ever-changing in the present, so analysing a theatre performance is like conducting an autopsy on something that no longer exists. I had to argue that drama is engaged, rather, with the original meaning of research. Every production requires research, into its context in an historical period, into social customs, norms and attitudes, and every character needs to be researched within the context of the play. And every production of a play written in the past needs to be re-searched, to be examined again, to find a new approach.

Also, like all the other academic courses, I would argue that drama is engaged with theory. So, when asked, "But what theory are you going to use for the research?", I would answer that the words theory and theatre actually have the same etymological origin: "to see", from the Greek, *theorin*.

We see the value in what we do, we know the changes it can make in the lives of young people, we don't need to measure the significant benefits in social and emotional development and academic progress from participating in dramatic activities.

I had to argue that the Speech and Drama Department at university could hardly claim to be an actor training course, when the contact time for courses was a maximum of 8 periods a week. Students had to voluntarily audition and rehearse for productions after hours. It is nevertheless true that very few people who contemplate a career in the theatre actually succeed. This is the case worldwide. In the United States of America, three-quarters of those who study theatre are interested in becoming actors; only 6% succeed. But then, 76% of those who have law degrees in this country do not finally practice law.

There is still debate as to whether formal training or a degree is necessary or even important. Many well-known actors have succeeded without any training. Mind you, in this country, you do not have to have completed primary school to become a president. As the Kabuki teacher says; a student can be shown the way, but they have to go on the journey themselves. But I am as proud of those students who have made a significant impact on the local theatre, film and television industries, and those who have and are still touring internationally in West End and Broadway productions, as I am of the fact that a former student could write:

"I came from a community that taught me to be demure and non-assertive, and then I studied drama: I learned how to be confident, assertive and creative, and acquired skills that have impacted on whatever job I have done, from Cairo to Katmandu."

As part of a marketing campaign, both to attract students and to prove the value of studying drama, we asked graduates of the department to describe how the subject had benefited them, and we received responses (including the one above) from former students in careers in a variety of fields, in public relations, law, teaching, arts administration, media management, community work, health care, social work, advertising, tourism, the ministry, besides directing, dance, design – and acting - in film, television, radio and theatre.

To counter the misconceptions about drama when I speak to learners, parents, teachers, and academics, I say drama does not prepare you for any thing, drama prepares you for everything.

The Creative Director of an International Concept Organization testified to what I have just said:

“Everything I do in advertising involves drama: I present, and I sell. I communicate, and I convince. I direct, and I reinterpret what you see. This is the essence of drama. For its lifetime benefits, I thank the Durban Drama Department.”

Why and how does drama prepare you for everything? Because drama is both a subject *and* a methodology. As a subject, a discipline in its own right, it includes the study of different forms of performance, theatre history, dramatic literature, the mechanics of breathing and voice, and so on. Drama is often, but should never be, regarded as a frivolous pastime, divorced from reality. Drama is praxis, the dialectical interrelationship of theory and practice, a way to demonstrate ideas *in* action, of exploring human behaviour and the human condition *through* action.

Because the word drama means – from Greek – “to do”, “action”, then we can all be actors, in our careers, in our daily lives. Drama is for everyone, not just those with a talent in performance. Studying drama empowers us with the skills to “do” and “act”, in the fullest sense of the words, to speak, yes, but also to think, to feel and to live.

Drama is one of the very few subjects which draws on the whole, living being – when we read a novel, draw up a trial balance, write a history essay, we become deaf in a sense. When we listen to music, we close our eyes, we only have ears. But dramatic activities fuse our appreciation and our understanding, holistically fusing the physical, the intellectual, the emotional.

That is why I thank Jean van Elden for the suggestion that, to celebrate our eightieth year of existence, we hold a Poetry Competition, and that the best entries be included in our new syllabus. We were providing a platform for poets to know that their writing can be seen in action, for words in print to be brought alive through speech. After a thorough process, involving the whole committee, the winners in the 4 categories were: Georgia Muller (from Umhlali Preparatory) in the Junior Primary category; Saheli Bhayroo (from Durban Girls’ College) in the Senior Primary; Jose Dos santos (Brettonwood High) in the High School; and

Nirvashnee Naidu in the Adult category. Because of the standard, the following entrants deserved special mentions, and inclusion in the syllabus: Uminathi Zuma (Hamilton College, Ladysmith), Jake Savage (Clifton College), Mandisa Mbambo (Eshowe High), Zahra Dawood (Durban Girls' College), and Pam Couperthwaite and Andrea Cropper in the Adult category. I extend my thanks to Rosanne Hurly-Coyne and the committee who spent so much of their time typing, selecting and editing the new syllabus.

To return to part of my talk to the entrants at the Bruce Piper Monologue competition. I reminded them that

“Acting is technique and feeling. Technique is largely the control of feeling. You can be taught technique by a teacher, like the Kabuki master, and you can develop your technique, but there has to be something else from within you that makes you feel and act for someone else, someone who isn't you, something that needs your head and your heart. I'm talking about empathy.

Young people who can empathise do better in school, in social situations, and in their adult careers. Young people like you. You've shown us that you have something within you that can reach out to others, and understand difference. You can also make a difference in the future, in your lives, in the lives of others, in our country.”

A former student, then an SABC television presenter, testified to the importance of this:

“Drama is about humanity, about self-realisation, about understanding others: the Drama Department is playing a pivotal role in transforming South African society.”

It is empathy that makes drama an invaluable means in every vocation, from defending a client in a legal case to grief counselling; a graduate working as a researcher and counsellor in a \$25 million project on the AIDS epidemic has this to say:

“For the social and cultural aspects of my research and fieldwork, it is to drama that I owe my greatest intellectual debt. I would be lost without the schooling I received in the power of the aesthetic, the authority of action and the primary relationship that is at the heart of drama.”

Drama is never prescriptive, a set of rules or ideas passively received by the learners. That's why drama is dangerous – the learner is never passive. A former student expressed it this way:

“Drama is the only course that gave value to self-reflection and self-evaluation. With the freedom to question creatively, I wasn't taught what to think, but how to think.”

As a methodology, Drama is a way of learning and understanding that can be applied to all life situations. The subject encourages the development of personal characteristics such as confidence, creativity, and the ability to communicate effectively. Surveys repeatedly indicate that employers give priority to applicants with good communication skills. These

skills are as essential for accountants as they are for every individual. As a senior practitioner lawyer at an international firm testified:

“Everyone needs to communicate well, and if they want to communicate well, they need to understand the power of language, both the spoken and the physical. Studying drama taught me to have presence, so that when I speak, people listen.”

Drama is also a collaborative activity – one that depends on the participation of every individual, encourages participants to cross social and cultural barriers, to lead and to organize, and to develop skills in mediation and facilitation, all essential life-skills that are vital to everyone in this country. Engineers aren’t the only people who can build bridges.

As Professor Elizabeth Sneddon, the founder of the Speech and Drama Association, put it so succinctly and accurately: “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.” Professor Sneddon showed us the way; we must continue the journey she began in 1943 with the same indefatigable energy and relentless persistence. That value will never age, in fact, it is even more necessary now than ever before. The same is true of all the other performing, visual and literary arts. 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. 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.

Which is why I said to the 15 entrants at last year’s Bruce Piper Monologue Competition:

“Politicians don’t bring people together, artists do. And you are artists. You are political artists, because you can make us see things from a different perspective, you can make us aware through tears and through laughter. You have shown us that, yes, the world can beat us down and crush our souls, but drama, like all the arts, reminds us that we have one. We need you to remind us of that as much as we need and enjoy drama and theatre – all the arts - as unique sources of entertainment and pleasure.”

As Chairman, I have always been most fortunate to have an incredibly supportive Executive Committee: Margie Marnewick, who, fortunately returned as Vice-Chairman, and who has been forever willing to assist and offer her support and guidance, and, alphabetically by surname, Brett Beiles, Genesis Cele, Lesley Coull, Mbali Nguse, Philippa Savage, David Spiteri, and Jean van Elden. My sincerest gratitude for all that you ‘do’ to support the Association through your commitment, your invaluable input at meetings, the sacrifice of your time, your loyalty, and your belief in everything we ‘do’.

We, the committee, adjudicators, convenors, and every entrant must extend especial thanks to Rosanne Hurly-Coyne. Personally, I would have been intimidated by taking on the

position of Festival Director, given what it demands, professionally and personally. But you embraced everything the position demands with admirable enthusiasm, initiative and dedication. We owe the success of our performance in the last year to you in particular, despite the many challenges you have had to face by virtue of the range of tasks and issues that arise every day, and we all warmly applaud you for that.

And thank you, too, to you for your very kind attention. Your presence here today shows that there are people who care, people who can show the way. May we, through the Association, continue to 'act' so that others can experience all the benefits of being able to 'say' and 'do'.

To return to my opening image: the Kabuki master says it doesn't matter whether the gesture that is taught is beautiful. There is only one question: Did the audience see the moon?

I wish you every success in making others see the moon.

Dr Mervyn McMurtry  
18 March 2024