

REPORT TO NORTHERN ARTS

INTERNATIONAL WRITERS' EXCHANGE AWARD

ZIMBABWE: NOV. 4, 1989 to FEB. 25, 1990

The 3 months and 3 weeks I spent in Zimbabwe were packed so full of activity it will be hard to keep this report brief. Please bear with me!

As I am primarily a playwright, I wanted to see as much theatre as possible, and hoped that I might be useful to drama practitioners. The Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre and their work on HIV-AIDS was of particular interest to me. However, for a number of reasons a consistent connection with ZACT was not possible and I had numerous requests for workshops which were not specifically geared to playwriting. I did see the ZACT play 'Manyanya' at a Women and HIV-AIDS Conference and at a public performance on World Aids Day, as well as several other performances by member companies of the Association. I spent six afternoons with a new ZACT group, Dynamic Theatre Productions, who are based in Kambuzuma, a high-density area in Harare. They showed me the plays they had been making, and I offered advice. Then, in a series of practical workshops, I tried to help them make use of their undoubted physical expressiveness and move away from living room dramas. They enjoyed the exercises, as did the 50 to a 100 children who crowded into the bare hall to watch us work every day!

My nine year old daughter Rose attended the regular Saturday morning Children's Performing Arts Workshop (Chipawo) at Blakiston School. Through Chipawo I met Julie Frederickse, who invited me to lead several creative writing workshops at the Dan Hiko School Writing Club. Dan Hiko is an adult education and training centre for

the disabled, many of them ex-combatants and refugees.

Feraï Gezi, who taught music to the children at Chipawo, was also keen to have me at the Mount Hampden Training Centre. I did an introductory creative writing session with his music students, and followed that up with more specialised work on song-writing and playmaking. The students played for me and I was able to sit in on a lecture by Keith Goddard on Zimbabwean music and its history.

Robert McLaren, the Chipawo drama tutor, asked me to give a talk about my research into workers' theatre in the past and my own practice to his group Zambuko/Izibuko. In the final week of my stay I returned to conduct an acting workshop, and to watch rehearsals of their new play 'Mandela' and give feedback.

As far as Chipawo itself was concerned, besides attending the excellent end-of-term show at Blakiston, I also accompanied them to Mufakose where we watched a magnificent troupe of local traditional dancers who then shared their skills with the Chipawo children.

In late November I had an exploratory talk with Flora Wilde, who writes literary criticism. With the help of the secretary of the Zimbabwe German Society, we initiated a Women's Writing Weekend which took place at the end of January. Organised by an ad hoc committee of writers, publishers and journalists, we had the backing of the ZGS, the British Council and Alliance Française. About 70 women from Harare, Bulawayo, and Mutare descended on the University for practical workshops on poetry, fiction, playwriting, radio drama, children's writing, and presentation of manuscripts. It was a great success. Steering groups were set up in Harare and Bulawayo to promote women's writing, and the skills groups have agreed to continue meeting. The Harare contingent in my playwriting workshop was so enthusiastic that we met the following Tuesday, and they agreed to begin work on a play about women, mental

illness and suicide.

Having met Bob Neilson, the British Council's English Language Officer, at a reception early in my stay, I was delighted to pay a visit with him to the Mutiunokura Primary School in Mufakose where we were treated to a tour of the school, a smashing performance of dance, drama and music by the children, and a buffet lunch. I was asked to speak to the staff about the teaching of writing and drama in schools, and although this was unexpected, the welcome was so warm that I was inspired to improvise a talk! There was then an opportunity to discuss in small informal groups. Unfortunately, a proposal from Canisio Ganda of the Ministry of Education, who accompanied us, for a more formal workshop involving staff from several schools in the area did not materialise. (I did give a talk to pupils at the Girls' High School.)

However, the drama workshop Bob invited me to lead for Mozambican teachers of English on a British Council course did take place, and was a very moving experience for me. The students improvised scenes based on events in their own lives in war-torn Mozambique. I feel convinced that there is tremendous scope for drama as a teaching tool where books and other equipment are in short supply, whatever the subject.

In addition to these contacts with educators I spent a few evenings with mothers from the Zimbabwean Asian community who want to involve their own children in creative dramatics, discussing appropriate techniques.

Meanwhile, Irene Staunton and Hugh Lewin of Baobab Books, and Professor Tim McLoughlin of the University and Tso Tso magazine had agreed to pursue Irene's idea of a week-long intensive workshop for writers beavering away all over the country without much success or help. Space was booked at Ranche House College,

but only after my initial departure date in early February. I was delighted to have to extend my stay in order to co-ordinate this ambitious event! We concentrated on fiction and playwriting and brought in local writers and artists, including the novelists Shimmer Chinodya and Raymond Choto; Paul Wade, a painter and weaver from the National Gallery, for a session on observation and settings; the historical novelist Solomon Mutsvairo; film-maker Ingrid Sinclair (who hails from the NE); and Hugh, well known for his Jafta children's stories, Tim, who led part of a workshop on structure, and Irene, who explained publishers' requirements on the final day. The participants all said they had gained a great deal. An unexpected by-product of the week was the setting up of a Budding Writers' Association by participant Albert Nyathi.

Although I did not see as much of Zimbabwe as I'd hoped, (a proposed visit to the Midlands to work with a few ZACT groups didn't come off) I did go to Mutare before Christmas with Bisset Chitseke of the Literature Bureau for a workshop similar to our Baobob/Tso Tso week. Sitting in for 2&1/2 days gave me a good idea of how the Bureau functions in practice (I had already had a long talk with Bisset) and I also contributed a session on avoiding stereotypes.

We then moved on to Bulawayo for 8 days where I enjoyed performances by Tose Sonke Disabled Theatre Productions, and the remarkable Amakhosi Productions, from both the adult and young people's companies. (They refuse to be called a children's group, and are totally professional.) Cont Mhlanga, the new President of the Zimbabwe Writers' Union, made me very welcome, and I had a long talk with the chairman of the Bulawayo Association of Drama Groups. I also met Agrippa Masiye, president of the booksellers' organization, playwright Andrew Whaley and painter Barry Bickle, and spent a morning with the staff of the Literature Bureau's Bulawayo office. Celine Gilbert of Zimbabwe Trust had requested

that I meet Tose Sonke, whose funding the Trust had cut, and offer what assistance I could. After an initial chat they asked if I could help them with a play on HIV-AIDS. We had a hilarious but highly productive brainstorming session in the park! And on my last morning Cont and I explored techniques for adapting novels for the stage.

Another highlight of my stay was the 3 day Women in Theatre workshop January 19 - 21 at the University. I had a few preliminary meetings with the organiser Linda Mvusi, and Rosa and I lent a hand with preparations just prior to the event. And what an event: an opportunity to meet people from all over Southern Africa and from Jamaica, to share ideas' experiences, concerns, to debate, and network, and plan strategies to combat discrimination....not forgetting the performances by the South African companies, and the nightly 'pungwes' (celebrations)....

Besides all this, I saw performances by the Simukai Co-operative assisted by drama students from the University, Batsiranai Theatre Productions Unit, the Actors' Club of Kentucky, the National Ballet School, and a Theatre for Development performance-cum-demonstration with ZACT and Passepartout at the British Council. I also heard live the outstanding singer/musicians Stella Chiweshe and Thomas Mapfumo.

I talked with Shimmer Chinodya, the poet Kristina Rungano, Kathy Bond Stuart and her team of community publishers, Andre Proctor of Anvil Press, broadcaster Fiona Lloyd, film director Oliver Maruma, Pat and Paul Brickhill of Grassroots Bookshop, writer Bertha Msora, editor and writer Barbara MkaIa, journalist Davison Maruziva, Marilyn Poole, formerly Longmans' publishing consultant for the SADC region, and Stephen and Tisa Chifunyise, who combine theatre work with jobs in government and as editor of Teachers'

Forum respectively.

Now comes the difficult part: trying to sum up in words what this experience has meant to me, while remembering that an exchange such as this involves give and take, learning and teaching, listening and talking. Living and working in an African country was itself a broadening experience, this is obvious. Some of what I brought back with me is in the form of conceptions: for example, Chipawo and the Literature Bureau, both of which I think we could do with in Britain. My enabling skills were developed by the challenge of conducting such a number and range of workshops in a variety of contexts and conditions with people for whom English was often a second language. And I learned new approaches and techniques from the writers and artists I worked with and observed which I know will be useful in future.

I feel a responsibility to share what I learned and have written articles (about the Women's Writing Weekend and Women in Theatre Conference) for a Harare news agency, and two on different aspects of my stay based on my diary for the Northern Echo. And I am hoping to find an outlet for a piece on publishing and the book trade. I have given talks to the Northern Playwrights' Society, to the Heaton Labour Party Women's Section, and to the Points of Contact International Theatre Conference at Lancaster University. I have been approached by Anti-Apartheid and by Newcastle Polytechnic for further talks.

As far as my own writing is concerned this took second place to both the demands made on me, and my desire to soak up as much as I could in the limited time I had. I wrote some poems, and I am harboring ideas for short stories, a form I have been wanting to try. This was another of the personal benefits I received: exposure to literature I had not, with the exception of Dambudzo Marechera's

'House of Hunger', come across before, especially the fiction of TsiTsi Dangarembga, Shimmer Chinodya, Chenjerai Hove, and Charles Mungoshi, my exchange partner, the creative documentary work of Julie Frederickse, Andrew Whaley's hilarious satirical play 'Chef's Breakfast', and too many poets to mention, although I must cite Musa Zimunya, not just for his own work but for his excellent anthologies. (I would also like to mention his helpfulness and hospitality throughout my stay, but particularly in the early days as I coped with immigration, money, housing and transport.)

I have been reminded of how theatre can be made with practically no resources other than human ones. I saw extraordinary ensemble work and group discipline as well as individual talent and commitment. My own belief in the importance of and potential for a theatre which is relevant to the lives and needs and aspirations of people who do not have access to theatre buildings has been confirmed and deepened.

Several individuals and groups requested that I write plays for or with them, but the time was too short. It would be presumptuous to think that I could undertake such work on my own back in Britain, I am well aware that my visit was an introduction to Zimbabwe. But this is one of the reasons why I want very much to return. People said to me, just before I left, 'But why are you going *now*? Now you could be really useful!'

My thanks to Jenny Attala and Alasdair Niven who selected me out of many equally deserving candidates; to Northern Arts for the award; to the British Council for the air fares; to the Arts Council of Zimbabwe for expenses in Zimbabwe; and to the Writers' Union for hosting my stay; to Shoba Ponappa and Bob Neilson for all their help and interest; to all the people who let me interview them, who were persuaded to assist with workshops, who gave me lifts, and

introductions and places to stay and books; to Rosa, who was a patient and supportive companion. A special thanks to Lorna and Martin and Flora and Thandi and Frank who all got up at 4:00 AM to see us off at the airport!

By Kathleen McCreery