

Chapter Five

Performing arts in South Africa

the idea of 'Proudly South African' is very dangerous, it smells of fascism.
(Choreographer Robyn Orlin, seminar, 15 March 2004)

The work we are putting on our stages signals change – signals artistic freedom that fuses mud, hearts, intellect, Armani suits, ball gowns and naked bodies.
(Maqoma 2004: 29)¹

You must support the ANC only so far as it delivers the goods. If the ANC does not deliver the goods, you must do to it what you have done to the apartheid regime.
(Mandela to the Trade Unions, September 1993, cit. in M'boge and Doe 2004: 39)

As introduced in chapter one, contemporary dance in post-apartheid South Africa carries with it the remnants of a colonial past and an apartheid legacy. There are problems of infrastructure and funding: few spaces where dance can be created, funding battles, and difficulties in training young dancers so that they have the techniques necessary to become choreographers in their own right or to serve the choreographic vision. There are also the challenges of a new democracy – what exactly it means to be free and how this freedom is exercised both in policy and the day-to-day interactions between individuals. This chapter extends this discussion by examining the difficulties of being an artist and more specifically, a dancer/choreographer in the 'new' South Africa. Through the work and experiences of Maqoma, it asks: if this is a democracy, and one that celebrates South Africa's diversity in the metaphor of the 'rainbow nation', then just who has the space to participate? It questions how a democracy is measured and argues that democracy is about more than a narrow conceptualisation of rights and services. The focus here, through a discussion of the practical realities of being a performing artist, is on the space given to artists in this context.

¹ In proceedings of the 7th *Jomba! Contemporary Dance Conference, African Contemporary dance? Questioning issues of a performance aesthetic for a developing and ndependent continent*

The previous chapter examined the idea of the speaking body. It extended the argument about the potential of art to disrupt and challenge the status quo. This is clear in the work of Maqoma because of the themes that he chooses to address, the way in which he structures his choreography, and his blend of stylistic elements into a hybrid form that becomes a threat to essentialised and purist representations of the nation. This chapter draws out the relationship between the body and society by examining the contradictions in official culture's definitions of culture and acceptable artistic expression, the resulting restrictions on artists in the performing arts industry, and the consequences of these limits. It elaborates the idea of a conversation between art and its context first by returning to a discussion of the space of the 'new' South Africa, and then by analysing the practical realities for artists within this context and how they respond.

The space of the 'new' South Africa

There are three levels to the shape of the 'new' South Africa. These are based on sets of relationships between the state and its claims to multiculturalism, the audience and its engagement (or lack of) with the performing arts, and the artists and the arts industry. Through examples of interactions between government and the arts sector primarily, the discussion in this chapter will show the ways in which officials tighten their grip on artists wishing to critique the dominant order because these artists threaten to expose the contradictions in the official culture establishment. The establishment regards anything that exceeds the boundaries of a safe representation of democracy as a threat, as has been shown in the case of the rejection of Maqoma at the WSSD (see chapter two). What then are the practical realities that inform these three levels of interaction?

The problems with the 'rainbow'

Artists in South Africa are faced with a national project of unity that often ignores the difficulties of the diversity that it is (uncritically) celebrating. This problem is compounded by a deeply troubled political past and the ambiguity of the present

democracy. The metaphor of the 'rainbow nation' is a direct response to the institutionalization of human differences according to 'race'. Apartheid was the logical conclusion of the white supremacist government's hypocritical 'respect' for the separate development and separate expression of cultural diversity. These leaders created geographical and social boundaries predicated on 'race' and on a corresponding hierarchy of status, rights and services. In the current South African democracy, old notions of diverse 'tribes' and races have been reinvented as a rainbow of 'multiculturalism' where all citizens should have equal rights. The idea of "art for arts' sake" in this context becomes problematic because of the practical conditions, and contradictions between ideology and practice in national culture that informs the everyday lives of artists.

What are the presumptions and ramifications of the official discourse on the 'rainbow nation'? In many ways, the rainbow metaphor has been used as an antidote to the racism of the past. However, its problems are many. Gilroy (2005: 2), for instance, critiques this idea in the postcolonial setting. He is speaking against the use of this term to defend a "utopia of tolerance, peace and mutual regard". In this context, anyone who criticises the norms that are supplied by a national culture that is based on authoritarian modes of belonging is seen as "an enemy within" (ibid: 23). He potently asserts that:

Today, cosmopolitan estrangement and democracy-enriching dissent are not prized as civic assets. They are just routine signs of subversion and degeneration (ibid: 24).

In his challenge to postcolonial states to deal with the problems of their colonial pasts, he is urging these powers to face the actual existence of difference rather than masking it with a palliative appeal to a false notion of unity. Maqoma's exposés demand such a confrontation and express his resistance to official attempts at artistic containment and palliative approaches to cultural expression. Maqoma's work is exceedingly unsettling to an establishment that prefers (and tries to prescribe) self-congratulatory representations of South Africa.

The state's multiculturalism does not simply paper over differences, it effectively forces people into compartments. As Mike van Graan², the critic and playwright, states: what we have today is a democracy of "happy clappy rainbowism" that is based on superficial transformation rather than real dialogue. In this view, all South Africans are supposed to be one happy nation, but only certain people are allowed to represent the nation. In other words, identity may be fluid and open, but it has politically significant sticking points. Below the surface of constitutional freedom are tensions rooted in conflicting claims to authenticity that play themselves out in the realm of the arts. As in the case of the WSSD opening ceremony, this points to the dilemmas and conflicts around the politics of cultural production. This raises the questions of what people are doing with their freedom of expression, and just how free they are to express themselves (cf. Seirlis 2005). These questions are about the search for a new South Africa. They are about questioning what is free and what is democratic. In many ways, there are parallels to be made between South Africa and America. Abbs says of the latter (1989: 205):

We live in a society where the dominant forms of culture are corrupt, designed not to reveal but to conceal, not to illuminate but to exploit.

The effects on the performing arts

One example of the problems caused for artists by these contradictions is the National Arts Council (NAC). This body has been rife with controversy over its misappropriation of funds, its mismanagement and its lack of commitment to the arts sector³. On Friday 28 November 2003, the Network for Arts and Culture South Africa (NACSA) spearheaded a protest against the NAC because of these issues. The discontent felt by artists was clear. At 1pm, a small but noisy gathering of about fifty individuals who work in the arts sector flooded the NAC steps in Newtown. Those who had been enjoying their lunch on the steps saw the artists coming and fled inside. The protestors, however, were not fazed by the bolted doors and locked security gates. They continued their banner-waving, toyi-

² Personal communication, Cape Town, 19 August 2003

³ The history of the NAC is tumultuous, partly due to the contradictions of arms-length governance instituted by the DAC. This has become a useful way for the DAC to avoid taking responsibility for the irreparable damage that the previous minister, Ben Ngubane, caused to the NAC when he overrode the principle of arms-length governance in the first place. For further information on the NAC see the PANSa website: <http://www.pansa.org.za>

toying, and harmonious singing and drumming. While the atmosphere seemed relatively pleasant at first, the protest gained an intensity that began to reveal a deep anger that was beneath the artists' initially unthreatening presence. A few protestors stormed up the stairs and rattled the gates, others sang louder. More posters were drawn displaying slogans reading, "like sands through the hour-glass, so is your communication"⁴ and "NAC get your ACTS together"⁵.



Performing artists protest, Outside NAC offices, Newtown, 28 November 2003

This is a rare incident in South Africa. Artists do not usually protest, as do workers in other industries. The impact of artists "downing their tools" is not seen in the same way as a bus-driver's strike, or one by farm workers. The only people it seems to affect are the artists themselves. This makes it very difficult for artists to earn a living. The Department

⁴ A slogan borrowed from the lead line in an American soap opera, *Days of Our Lives*, on South African television. The line is "Like sands through the hour glass, so are the days of our lives"

⁵ ACT also stands for Arts and Culture Trust – a division of Nedbank, and an alternative route for artists to find funding

of Arts and Culture (DAC) is not afraid to pat this sector on its head for “uplifting the soul” and bring a bit of entertainment to its high-status functions. But it simultaneously undermines the real potency of this industry as a fully-functioning and viable sector of society. Because it is almost impossible for contemporary dance to sustain itself financially without outside funding, it is seen as a dependent beggar. DAC has expressed its wish to change its relationship with these performing artists into one of mutual reciprocity, but continues to function as the condescending patron of an irritating client.⁶

These tensions arise in part because of differing attitudes (official and popular) towards the arts. As illustrated in the examples of the NAC and the DAC, there is a convergence between the old and present regime. The performing arts are, in many ways, seen as frivolous and superfluous – light entertainment and window-dressing, but at the same time are given the burden of performing an acceptable identity so that official culture can prove how South African/African they are, as in the case of the WSSD. The idea of ‘proudly South African’, for example, permeates all marketing of the country. There is an expectation that art must reflect the image of the ‘rainbow nation’ in order for it stand for the country. Even Maqoma has been used in a branding exercise for the South African Ballet Theatre (SABT). Regarding his collaboration with SABT, Dirk Badenhorst, its CEO, described Maqoma as “a true born and bred proudly South African gentleman”⁷. An additional undercurrent is the extreme focus on materialism in the new democracy. It is tempting to argue that because South Africa is essentially capitalist, anything that does not produce money is regarded as useless. However much the new government appeals to ‘Arts and Culture’ as a celebration of diversity (while ignoring the real issues of difference), its aim is to make art sellable through tourism and a focus on heritage. The potency of art as social criticism is therefore undercut by a gross materialism and fundamental anti-intellectualism.

⁶ One such example is a meeting held by representatives of PANSA (of which I was one) with the Gauteng MEC of DAC. This meeting was closed and the details are therefore confidential. The discussion here portrays DAC’s general attitude to the contemporary performing arts. This is not the case in all of the provinces in South Africa. The Western Cape PANSA committee has reported fruitful exchange with their MEC. This individual has incorporated into the Western Cape’s local policy suggestions that representatives of PANSA have made

⁷ *Top Billing*, SABC 3, 14 September 2006

These values and attitudes to the performing arts also create divisions within the sector. What it boils down to is the issue of money. It is clear that whatever brings in the wealth will be supported by the state. Most often that means music, or dance that is safe and easy to watch. Academic and choreographer, Jay Pather (2004: 5) explains that this is the result of an economic policy that focuses on creating jobs and wealth rather than building a sustainable arts sector. In his view, this is reflected in a favouring of the “high arts”:

Opera and ballet have become fashionable once again, and this is reflective of a new middle class anxious to cap the smell of new money with stealthy liaisons with tulle and sopranos (idem.).

From this perspective, the notion of a viable performing arts industry for government excludes contemporary dance that is radical and pushes the limits of safe expression. This attitude is illustrated, for instance, in the opening of the Miriam Makeba Centre of Performing Arts in East London on 1 September 2006. At this event, the minister for Arts and Culture, Dr Pallo Jordan explained that:

We need to mine the rich vein of music we have in our culture ... It can be a generator of wealth.

The focus was on music, not on dance. There may have been some ‘traditional’ dancers performing to the drums that played at the opening, but they were not visible. At the centre itself, contemporary dancers may benefit from access to the auditorium for performances. However, the entire ‘performing arts’ space is geared towards musicians, who will find a home in the jazz club restaurant that forms part of the final phase of this centre’s construction. While this is happening, the longest-standing contemporary dance company in the Eastern Cape, Gary Gordon’s First Physical Theatre, was recently shut down due to a lack of funding.

There is a problem of a lack of multi-dimensionality and self-examination in the official culture establishment. A case in point is the *imbizo*⁸ on 29 September 2004 hosted by DAC in Johannesburg that I attended, where Dr Pallo Jordan was giving the performing arts community an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with him. After months of frustrated attempts by performing artists to urge their key representative to address

⁸ *Imbizo* is Zulu for gathering

problems of funding, infrastructure and sustainability in their sector, this was a much-needed event. Their frustration was perpetuated by the minister's avoidance of crucial topics such as the controversy with the NAC, and repeated statements that artists are free to talk honestly, but when they did he brushed them off. His response was surprising given that Jordan has had a reputation of being a great supporter of the arts in the past. This event confirms the belief that many in official positions of power do not wish to engage with the messy reality of the lives of performing artists or with the voice that radical art can give to alternatives in an emerging democracy. They would prefer to stay with what is seen as wealth-generating and high status. This is also because radical contemporary dance, such as Maqoma's for example, works against the government's claims to a multicultural rainbow.

In its claims to multiculturalism, the state sets up a series of contradictions in its response to the performing arts sector. Artists are free to perform, as long as they conform to the ideals of a 'new' South Africa. If they refuse, they will be excluded from the majority of funding that is available to this industry. They are free to voice any opinion that they wish, as long as it does not contradict a plan for economic growth based on appeals to an idyllic and untouched cultural heritage. This is also perpetuated at the level of the audience. As Pather (2004: 5) describes:

The hot-shot black entrepreneur is more likely to be swanning around at the opening of *Swan Lake* than of a new work by Moeketsi Koena. The thirst for lavish spectacle that reinforces notions of power and sophistication is simply indicative of how, in spite of the transference of political power, the dominant collective mindset remains firmly entrenched in colonial iconography

If the body is speaking, who is actually listening? Contemporary dance, at its best, is a conversation with its context. However, at present it is a one-sided monologue. This may be due to a weakness in the audience (as discussed in chapter three), or on the part of the choreographer and performers.⁹ This leaves contemporary dance with few alternatives in its response.

⁹ A recent example is the New Dance Festival 2006. Although there are no audience statistics, and this requires a completely different study, what is interesting to note here is that the audiences were incredibly small and comprised of the same set of people who attend most contemporary dance performances

Performing artists strike back

In the relationship between Maqoma and those in official positions of power in the arts and culture industry, there are certain trends that emerge. This section discusses these through an examination of the options available to performing artists given the shape of the 'new' South Africa described above. Because of the state's abdication of responsibility, focus on money, and deterministic attitude, performing artists (in particular contemporary dancers) are placed in a difficult position. Art is not supposed to be about bureaucracy, but because of the nature of the modern state, there are structures in place that force the artist to deal with the state on one level or another that involves money. What creates wealth is valued by the state. What does not is in an ambivalent relationship with the powers that be. In this context, Maqoma is an example of a postmodern artist who draws on a range of possible trends in his responses to the contradictions created in the state's approach to the arts. These include the artist as rebel, as professor of angst, and as jester.

Artist as rebel

Given the traditions of art in the struggle for freedom in South Africa, art is already at odds with the shape of the state in the new South Africa: because it is polyvalent, it works against the compartments created by multiculturalism. There are and historically have been examples of those specifically in the arts who do not shrink from the threats created by official boundaries. As discussed in chapter one, this has always been reflected in the work of South African contemporary choreographers. In the 1970s and 80s, much choreography was either explicitly anti-apartheid in its themes, or was in indirect opposition to oppression in the mixing of black and white dancers in one company. Robyn Orlin's *The City Theatre and Dance Group*, Adele Blank's *Free Flight*, Sylvia Glasser's *Moving Into Dance Mophatong*, Gary Gordon's *First Physical Theatre Company* and Alfred Hinkel's *Jazzart* (started by Sonja Mayo and Pat Whittcock in 1973) are examples of such companies and individuals. In the early 1990s a new wave of choreographers emerged, of which Maqoma is one. This group of artists, such as P. J.

Sabbaga, Portia Mashigo, Moeketsi Koena, Gladys Aghulhas, and Vincent Mantsoe (to name a few) rose at a time of major political ambivalence but also of many new opportunities practically and in terms of the redefinition of identity (national and personal).

These choreographers have had an opportunity (or have been forced to) tap into the mixed messages in the ‘new’ South Africa and draw on art’s potential to question and reject the boxes of multiculturalism. In a transgressive mode, art sets itself up in opposition to and outside of society. This was discussed in chapters two and four in relation to Maqoma’s hybrid work and way in which he uses the body. This can be explained in terms of the legacy of the Romantic ideal of the artist as rebel and as spontaneous creator, aflame with inspiration. In the Romantic period, art was understood to serve as an act of rebellion against the limits set by the rigidity of “civilization” and rationalism (Ritter 1989: 47). It functioned to allow a space of irrationality, one that allowed for adult play. As Schiller (in Ritter *ibid*: 48) believed, art was the only realm in which “fantasy” was given “free reign”. The artist therefore functioned as the conduit through which observers could feel themselves set free from social constraints in that moment of the performance. It is this space of performance, that moment of the freedom to express, that Maqoma uses in his work to criticise the limits in society created by narrow approaches to democracy, such as that of the state.

Artist as professor of angst

In addition to this legacy of Romantic approaches to art is the modernist view of the artist as the medium for the expression of angst and crisis. The self-searching of the 20th century was part of a crisis of meaning and an expression of the anxiety, joy and necessity of doubt – that we must question everything. Modern artists became more “self-obsessed”, which was compounded by the 20th century inward focus on the “psyche” (Ritter 1989: 315). Although Maqoma does not directly tap into the anxiety of modernity, there are many choreographers who present the crisis of identity in South Africa through the themes of the struggle against apartheid. There is much angst in this work, for

example Sifiso Kweyama's *Pictures on the Wall* (2006) at the New Dance Festival, which was based on images at the Apartheid Museum. Maqoma approaches crisis from a different angle. By blending styles and addressing themes that create discomfort, he is showing that everything is not simple and clean and smooth.

Artist as jester

One way in which Maqoma approaches his role as an artist is by exposing society's hypocrisies. In this role he is a jester, saying what others do not. The figure of the jester "exposes as doubtful what seems most unshakeable, reveals the contradictions in what appears ... incontrovertible" (Kolakowski in Ritter 1989: 53). This character "moves in good society without belonging to it, and treats it with impertinence; he who doubts all that appears self-evident" (idem). In certain ways Maqoma becomes this figure because of how he plays, and in so doing, unmasking what is taken-for-granted. In *Virtually Blond*, for example, there are different levels of political commentary: the politics of the personal, where the wounds of individuals become public through performance, and the broader aspect of what the individual stories represent of society, for example in the theme of abuse.¹⁰ There are more potent examples in his work that are tragic but also have a deeper comical element. These illustrate the contrast between what is earnest and what is sublime. For example, when he undercuts himself and the themes he is addressing, as in *Miss Thandi* falling asleep during her own performance. What this work does is mock "the foundations of ordered society" (Ritter 1989: 27)¹¹. This has more often than not been Maqoma's approach.

He is not intimidated by the limits set by those in power, and is not afraid to subvert taken-for-granted ideologies. He toys with emotion and the body – the kind of serious

¹⁰ As discussed in chapter three, *Virtually Blond* is not the most successful example of Maqoma's work. Where it falls short is in taking itself too seriously. Although Maqoma attempted to insert moments of lightness, such as the singing of a childhood song, the overall effect was jarring

¹¹ An example of a new choreographer who works in this way is Hlengiwe Lushaba who often deals with questions about what it means to be a woman in the 'new' South Africa – addressing the tensions between tradition and modernity, and abuses of power

play that has been documented on carnival from Rio de Janeiro to Cape Town¹². Carnival's inversions mean that, for one day only, paupers are princes, prostitutes reign, nothing is undesirable and anything is acceptable. Pleasure is for all just before lent when a farewell must be said to the flesh. This inversion of norms also serves to reinforce the power structures that underpin them. In the same way as merry-makers at carnival, Maqoma transgresses comfortably familiar boundaries and in so doing comments on the limits that they create.

This is powerfully illustrated in his work *Ketima*, which he choreographed for his company Vuyani Dance Theatre, where he portrays stages of life and processes of socialization. The fleshy meat of the body becomes the toy for adult games. While touching themselves intimately the four male dancers pose at the edge of the stage staring provocatively into the audience. One of the performers breaks away from this line of men and runs to the back of the stage in a childlike rebellion against the conformity of the line in which they stand. In another scene, the men communicate with one another through a mirroring of movements, all dressed in the same bandage-like hot-pants and vests – costumes that look like a mixture of adult underwear and children's play-clothes. This explicit and symbolic public display of intimacy is simultaneously uncomfortable and enticing. In the case of *Virtually Blond*, it is also what is beneath the skin, the rawness of the self that hides under the surface of the flesh that is the focus of the stories that are told through the body.

¹² cf. Martin 2000, Parker 1991, Regis 1999, Scheper-Hughes 1992



Tebogo Tlhale, Gregory Maqoma, Smolly Mashita in *Ketima*, Dance Factory, Johannesburg, March 2004; Photograph by Suzy Bernstein

This is a form of Bakhtin's carnivalization, which

involves subverting conventional social order through an integration of normally conflicting elements (Ritter 1989: 16).

Maqoma subverts hierarchies through his blending of dance elements that are traditionally separated. In the themes that he addresses, he inverts social roles, whether it is in relation to gender, class, sexuality or race. Although he is now in some ways part of the new elite of South Africa¹³, his work still has the potential to provoke. In this case, the artist does not have to be a member of the downtrodden to speak against abuses of power. With the body as the primary tool of expression, contemporary choreography has the potential to challenge the imagined order that the neat boxes of a multicultural view create.

¹³ In 2005 Maqoma bought a Mercedes Compressor to drive. He explained to me that this is a symbol of his social mobility and wants it to be an inspiration to other young black South Africans who are working their way up. The fact that his company received close to R1 million from the National Lottery Fund in 2005 also places him in the upper echelons of choreographers in South Africa today. His manager explained how hard they have had to work for that over many years. They are also still waiting for a portion of this money a year later

Maqoma's role

Together, these trends, artist as rebel, as professor of angst, and as jester, are expressions of Maqoma as a postmodernist who draws from a storehouse not only of possible dance styles, but of ways of being as an artist. He uses these roles to figure a place for himself in an emerging democracy. In this context, the artist is a part of civil society, whose role is oppositional and anti-hegemonic. As in the view of Habermas (in Cohen and Arato, 1990) civil society is in the coffee houses and on the stage as much as it is in trade unions. This is one of the spaces from which civil society can call the powerful to account. There are practical realities to this. Artists have to find ways of living and making ends meet. Part of this is finding ways to earn money, and another is in their political organisation. The ramifications of how performing artists are positioned in South Africa will be explored later, when this chapter returns to the question of democracy. The following section addresses the practical aspects, for contemporary dancers in particular, of working in this industry.

Living as an artist

Through Maqoma's style and process, and the narratives that the dancers create and embody, what results are often unexpected pictures of what it means to be man, woman, human, black, white, South African or African. As described above, these images transgress the boundaries of such definitions that are often imposed by decision-makers in government who influence notions of what is an acceptable aesthetic for South African representations locally and abroad. According to Mike van Graan¹⁴, the effects for many artists of these kinds of boundaries have been that

artists are becoming so unreflective with regard to politics and government and the system and funders because they fear being victimized should they raise issues that are politically of a difficult nature.

¹⁴ Personal communication, Cape Town, 19 August 2003

As choreographer Ntombi Gasa expressed “Are we free? Because I think we are really saying to ourselves, ‘We are afraid’”¹⁵.

This relationship between the state and artists is played out along the lines of money and political organisation. It is all very well to create work that is playful and challenging, but this is where reality bites. If democracy is about space for everybody, what happens when an individual wants to participate as a contemporary dancer and not as a rugby player? Because of the attitude of the state towards the performing arts (discussed above), there are very practical restrictions on the lives of the artists. Given the shape of the state, artists are forced into the role of beggar or into commercial work that would not be their first choice as a mode of expression for their creativity.

There are a range of challenges that contemporary dance faces. Dils and Albright (2001: 233-234) describe the challenge to American contemporary dance having to negotiate between a range of influences such as “tradition and change, heritage and class mobility, regional interest and the influence of mass culture”. As described in chapter two, South African contemporary choreographers face these same issues. Hanna (2004: 9) elaborates this point to contemporary dance in general and adds that the challenges of the twenty-first century include the problem of “innovation beyond the achievements of the twentieth century”; lack of funds, “diverse” training in dance, and self-marketing; dwindling opportunities for dance criticism; problems with censorship; the “complexities of preservation”; dance in education; and the need for audience development. Contemporary choreographers face these pressures in creating work that speaks to their local contexts (with audiences who often do not engage with their work), while having relevance to global audiences.

The most profound challenge is that of money. Options for making a living as an artist in South Africa include commercial work and international funding, collaboration with international choreographers, and exchange programmes. Many contemporary

¹⁵ ¹⁵ In proceedings of the 7th *Jomba! Contemporary Dance Conference, African Contemporary dance? Questioning issues of a performance aesthetic for a developing and ndependent continent* (2004: 48)

choreographers benefit from these avenues for making art. However, when the products are not sustainable as contemporary works, they are relegated to the realm of 'pure entertainment' or are pushed into becoming representations of a dominant ideology. What was a racially segregated struggle under apartheid has become a struggle for limited funds based on value ascription of a different kind and new constraints on freedom based on a capitalist economy. As discussed above, there is also a general lack of interest in contemporary dance. Most of the money that is available is given to sport¹⁶. The example of the WSSD discussed in chapter two is a case in point. This raises questions about the values that underpin the structures that are supposed to support the arts industry.

There is little argument against the idea that the new regime in South Africa is informed by the profit-making emphases of capitalism. In this context the idea of the artist changes, and so does their role. In the 1800s, this was a shift from the artist as a noble being to a beggar, where "the artist appears increasingly as a martyr to the commercialization of art" (Ritter 1989: 11). The reality is that in addition to being social commentators and tapping the creative soul of society, artists also have to make a living. In the dance sector in South Africa, there is a necessary and yet often strained relationship with commercial work. In order to survive as dancers and choreographers, individuals often have to do some form of commercial work. This is not to say that it is not creative, as one choreographer defensively remarked to me in a conversation in July 2003. However, it points to the complexities of making dance in South Africa. Many choreographers would not do commercial work if their contemporary work paid the same.

The commercial dance sector is also not clear-cut, as the experiences of WSSD so clearly illustrate. There was controversy surrounding the selection process that has not ever really been clarified. One choreographer in particular complained that her dancers were not given a fair chance because the details of the auditions were obscure. She also

¹⁶ The Gauteng Department of Sports, Recreation, Arts and Culture 2006/7 Budget Speech Summary clearly emphasises "economic growth and development", predominantly for sports. Approximately one eighth of the national budget for this sector has been set aside for arts and culture. What compounds this difficulty for contemporary dance is the focus within this realm on crafts, music, heritage and tourism. See the Gauteng Provincial Government website for further details

explained that the same choreographer and dancers always get the commercial work¹⁷. She took the issue to PANSA, but it was difficult for them to take it any further. As PANSA national coordinator at the time Tammy Ballantyne explained:

since no further complaints were forthcoming, and many dancers accepted contracts for the event..., it was difficult for PANSA to pursue the issue further. This is often the case, where performers will rather not make a fuss if it means losing a job, even if the process was not entirely satisfactory¹⁸

A woman from the production company explained that the chief choreographer was involved from the beginning and worked with the production company to win the pitch. In her view

other choreographers have relationships with other companies. You work with people you know are good. You can't work with suppliers you don't know.¹⁹

What this reveals is the central role that industry networks play in who gets the commercial work and who does not. It is often the same people who are chosen for the big moneymakers. At the same time not every choreographer particularly wants to create the kind of work that is valued in the commercial sector. There are jokes that circulate about this work. One choreographer remarked to me that it is so formulaic that they are not surprised that this same person is chosen each time.

While it is clear that commercial work often pays more, there is also a tension between the values ascribed to professional contemporary versus commercial choreography. According to the chief choreographer of the WSSD ceremony, contemporary dance is only relevant to a small sector of the public, and does not have "entertainment value, because everyone's so busy worrying about what it means". In her view, there is sponsorship, but "no decent living". She describes her experiences of doing commercial work:

I'm answerable to nobody, a client phones with a brief, I phone my dancers, they work like dogs and they get their payment, which can be up to R20 000 a month.²⁰

¹⁷ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 21 July 2003

¹⁸ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 21 July 2003

¹⁹ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 18 July 2003

²⁰ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 25 July 2003

Her work is about entertainment, it is a crowd-pleaser that pays salaries way above what professional contemporary dancers would normally earn. She explained that at times she felt insulted when she was told that she “always made sure the audience would be happy”, because the undertone of this was that she “was not good enough to give a deeper concept”. In the next breath, though, she stated:

ten years later, we’re all happy – the audience, myself, the dancers and the country. I’m working on major productions that spell South Africa.²¹

This attitude reveals the perception that only certain kinds of dance can tell the South African story (“spell comes from the German “spielen”, which means .to tell a story or to play).

When asked about the tensions between making money and making dance, Sylvia Glasser stated:

My work is not commercially viable because it doesn’t perpetuate the stereotype. There is a signature to our work, but it’s not an image of Africa frozen in time. Even though the work is embraced, it’s still not perceived as commercial – thank goodness! Not that I don’t think that money matters. We have been supported by the NAC since they were established and we appreciate this, but historically in all art forms, real innovation has not been immediately marketable; and the innovators in a society are often those who blaze a trail for others who come afterwards where it becomes a fashion.²²

It is clear, therefore, that there are tensions between creating work that is fulfilling for the choreographers who make it, and making a living at the same time. This speaks to the way in which contemporary dance is valued in society. The fact that work that is formulaic is often what gets the funding for major national and corporate events shows the politics of who is supported and what kind of work is allowed to appear on the public stage without the obstacles usually faced by contemporary choreographers. As Glasser explains, funding has been an essential component of the growth of her company, but it has not always been easy for her to find support for her choreography when it has not fitted into an expected representation of South Africa. This points to the relationship between national identity and the limits that this creates for artists.

²¹ *idem.*

²² Personal communication, Johannesburg, 17 July 2003

One possible response to these issues has been for artists to organize themselves politically. There are a number of NGOs that represent the different sectors of this industry. For performing artists there is PANSa. There are a few motivated individuals who work to create a network for artists across South Africa, who lobby government on their behalf, and who organize events that support the idea of a sustainable arts industry. Although there has been a response to certain of these events, such as fundraising and marketing workshops, the overall attitude of artists is one of territoriality and self-preservation. This is not surprising given the fact that there is so little support for this industry and such ongoing threat of survival. There are very few options available to performing artists in the 'new' South Africa.

Space to Move?

In a South Africa that is attempting to form a new identity, contemporary choreographers find themselves stuck in a space of wanting to innovate ways of expressing themselves, while at the same time being forced to respond to the limits created by the practical realities of their everyday lives. They are not easily mapping their own future: they are forced to respond to their circumstances and are more often than not being determined rather than determining for themselves. The performing arts in South Africa are fragile because of the practical realities that inform them. At the same time, there is a tenacity that these artists show in continuing to find ways to make their work, and to do so in ways that challenge the limits that they face. An important aspect of this is the exchanges that take place between artists in South Africa and abroad. This informs the hybridity that is the foundation of the most challenging work. For dancers and choreographers, this is crucial to their currency as artists. The options that are available to them boil down to the following: remain within the confines of South Africa, exchange with other choreographers abroad, leave and find a new base for themselves elsewhere. Each of these has its consequences.

Young choreographers, for example, have even more scope for exchange than their predecessors with Europe and America and are growing up in a 'free' society. In many cases, they choose 'South-South' interactions, or to return home once they have been overseas. It remains to be seen what the impact of this 'homegrown' work, such as that of Hlengiwe Lushaba will be. As Tammy Ballantyne believes, these younger artists face the increased difficulties of lack of infrastructure, but are also very patriotic and could begin to build a new solid base for their generation, drawing on the lessons of the groundbreakers that have come before them. What still remains (and probably always will) is the tricky question of national identity, the role of performing arts and the artist in questioning this, and the impact of certain ideologies on the place of art in society.

Dance for dance sake in this context is a luxury that most in South Africa cannot afford. This situation is very different in many European contexts. Swiss choreographer Giles Jobin, for example, had 10 months fully-funded to create his work *Möebius Strip* (2004). This amount of time is unheard of in South Africa. That is not to say that *Moebius Strip* is necessarily aesthetically stronger because of the time allowed to it. A woman that I interviewed after the performance of *Möebius Strip* at the Dance Factory in 2004 felt that South African dance has an edge that is lacking in European work because of the limits of time and money in South Africa. This raises a number of issues: 1) the practical realities of making dance, as discussed in the above section, 2) differences in aesthetics and context, and 3) perspective and taste. However, what is central is the idea that dance is a critical arena for culture to be understood. In the South African context, engagement with the state is necessary. Artists cannot afford to become complacent. In Europe, the relationship with the state is different. As Maqoma explains:

It would be interesting for African art to go beyond just the aesthetic of history. But the Europeans have to understand: our situation is so very different from theirs. We live in these things [social problems and contradictions], it's our daily experience. So how do you expect people to create away from their environment?²³

Some South African choreographers have left the country, based themselves in Europe or America, and visit South Africa to perform or exchange with dancers here. Vincent

²³ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 17 August 2006

Mantsoe, for example, lives in France and has taken his work with him. However, the roots of his choreography relate very strongly to his African heritage and his relationship with his ancestors. Many of his works are based on the rituals of his upbringing and his connection to his family and culture in Africa. In a parallel example, Hanna (2004: 9) explains how dancers in Cuba leave their country of origin for the ease of the life offered to them abroad and for the range of opportunities open to them. This is not a clear-cut issue. While some believe that Cuban dancers who leave are traitors to their social duties in their country of birth, certain dancers are supported by their companies and reach agreements of exchange between Cuba and the countries to which they travel (*idem*). In South Africa, there are choreographers who may exchange with others abroad, but draw on what they see as an African spirit and remain in South Africa to create work that articulates this quality.

Renowned choreographer Gladys Agulhas, for example, who has created opportunities to work overseas, uses dance as a source of healing for disabled and able-bodied performers and raises questions about social ostracism. Matshikiza (2006: 26) describes how Agulhas feels oppressed by the limits to contemporary dance in the new South Africa. He explains, however, that the work of artists like Agulhas “shows a strong commitment to carry on with what they are doing, in the way they choose to do it, in the land of their birth” (*idem*). What Matshikiza ignores are the extreme challenges and the reality of survival that performing artists in this context have to face, and that affect the choices that they are able and choose to make. His view reinforces the constraints that these artists experience in being acknowledged for their commitment only when they remain loyal to an idea of home. He also excludes the issue of audience raised in chapter three – artists may be making important statements, but who is listening?

There is also the irony that there is more funding for exchange with Europe or America than there is within the borders of Africa. There is also a much stronger infrastructure for contemporary dance in Europe and America. This exchange is central to the development of a choreographer’s style. In Maqoma’s case, much of his style has developed through his exchanges with international choreographers, and yet his work is rooted in his

interrogation of what it means to be an African. When asked by Matshikiza (2005: 26) why he has not left to work with wealthy and well structured European or American companies, he replied that he loves what he is doing in South Africa and “sees no reason to leave. This is his soil”. Maqoma has also explained that:

My work is still very much embodied in what happens around me. Joburg has kept me intrigued because it’s like a stage – you see a performance. Wherever you are you see characters, it keeps me interested in creating.²⁴

Processes of exchange also relate to the discussion in chapter two about expectations of what constitutes an ‘African’ performance or work of art on the world stage. Erlmann (1999: 111-112) illustrates this using the example of the tours of the African choir in the 1890s in England and North America. This was one of the earliest encounters between South Africa and the West *in the West*, and it received mixed responses. For some, their performances proved the success of Christian civilising missions in Africa, while for others, the singing was influenced too much by Europe and its harmonies (idem.)²⁵. When an African choreographer takes his/her work overseas, they are faced with questions about how their work fulfils a notion of an authentic African experience. As illustrated by the example of Maqoma’s work with Linyekula at Tanzwogen in Vienna discussed in chapter two, these choreographers are not only forced to be answerable to an idea of Africa at home, but are required to embody an exportable version of their identity. Shows that have been run-away successes on international stages, such as *Umoja* and *African Footprint* provide images of Africa that fulfill these expectations.

The broader context to this is the idea that mobility across geographical borders brings with it alternative ways of constructing ideas about identity. It is in this realm that contemporary dance has its power. As Appadurai (1995: 4) argues, flow through the channels of “mass-mediated images” and “mass migration” are a challenge to the nation-state. Modernity becomes a space of contestation based on the workings of the global within the local. The idea of a bounded state or national identity is then foregrounded as a construct (cf also Gellner 1983). In explaining Anderson’s notion of “imagined worlds”,

²⁴ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 17 August 2006

²⁵ For further work in this area, see Lindfors (1999)

Appadurai (ibid: 33) posits that there are multiple ways of imagining the world, which are “constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe”. In other words, it is in the “transactions between social groups” across borders that affect the creation of the boundaries between them (ibid: 27).

It is my argument that performing artists are crucial to this imagining of the world, and to the questioning of boundaries that seem set but are always fluid. One dimension of this, according to Appadurai’s (ibid: 33) outline of “global cultural flows”, is the “ethnoscape”. He defines this as “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live” (idem.). These are the persons who move across the globe – tourists, immigrants, refugees and exiles for example (idem.) – and in so doing unsettle the boundaries that they overstep. Therefore, while exchange across international borders is most often a practical necessity, which has aesthetic implications, for choreographers and dancers in South Africa, its effects go beyond a particular artist’s work and experiences. Art becomes one of the most powerful ways of reconfiguring ideas about nationality and identity because of its ability to cross borders and challenge boundaries.

Art as social commentary

art or literature ... is the privileged place of transformation
(Kristeva in Moi 1986: 17)

Art needs this exchange because it is constitutively about conversations with other times and other places and other people. It plays a key role, then, in the creation of a national identity. As part of civil society, artists voice opposition that is an essential part of the dialogue of a new democracy. As discussed above, it is very difficult to be a performing artist in South Africa. Despite the fact that they have a crucial role to play, the lives of these artists are made even harder because there is no-one who is really listening to what they have to say. However, they continue to create work, because that is who they are and what they do. They are also forced into a vigilant role, as Maqoma states:

You are made to be a watchdog.²⁶

²⁶ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 17 August 2006

It may be the function of art in society to become a “watchdog”, however, in the South African context, contemporary performing artists like Maqoma are limited in the possibilities of creating art for sheer pleasure and enjoyment – art for arts’ sake. Regardless of the space that they have to express themselves, and often because of it, what these artists have to say is fundamental to questions about freedom and its consequences in the ‘new’ South Africa.

There is a particular experience of colonialism and apartheid that informs the current context. Although South Africa is far from being the only case of denialism in official culture, the effects of this are often very surface and especially raw for those working to define new ways of being in a relatively new democracy. This refers again to the problems of national identity in a postcolonial context. As Hall (1992: 277) states, the identity of the post-modern subject is situational and often fleeting. National identity, then, is not as homogenous as its creators would like because, according to Hall (ibid: 296-297), a national culture is based on power, and a history of conquest that brought together disparate groupings, and is therefore a hybrid. In his now familiar view, national cultures are “a *discursive device* which represents difference as unity or identity” (ibid: 297). As Ranger (1996: 274) reminds us, it is important to understand colonialism as a mix of cultures rather than a single monolithic process. Contemporary choreographers in Africa, such as Maqoma, are well aware of this as it resonates with their experiences of living in a context of difference. It is the denialism in national culture that underpins the pull to bring together diverse groupings that these choreographers challenge.

As Maqoma states:

While we have problems with accessing funding, such high levels of crime, abuse and poverty, it’s hard for artists to create work for the sake of just creating work. We are forced to respond to our circumstances – it’s our only inspiration.²⁷

The corollary of this is the profound effect that art can have as social commentary. Elements of Maqoma’s work have offered potent illustrations of this in relation to dance.

²⁷ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 17 August 2006

It is through the dancing body that contradictions in society are articulated. There are parallels to the South African situation in the Cuban and South American contexts. Daniel's (1995) work on the *rumba*, for example, speaks to questions of race and gender in Cuba. (Thomas 2003: 148). The variety of *rumba* dances were traditionally performed by the dark-skinned working class with clear gender divisions representing the bravado associated with men and the grace associated with women (idem). While, after the 1959 revolution, the government wished for this dance to represent a non-racial society uniting against capitalism, it is still only those with dark skin and lower class status who perform it (idem). The ideal of gender equality is also not realised in the performance of *rumba*, where *machismo* is reinforced because it is still the men who lead (idem). This is an example of the state attempting to co-opt a form of dance for its own purposes. It also illustrates the potential of dance to resist the limits imposed by the contradictions in national ideology.

A parallel example is in Browning's (1995) work on *samba* and the Bahian carnival. She shows how dance has the potential to subvert norms. One of the central dances at this carnival is the *capoeira*, a mixture of African and Brazilian dance, play and martial art that "embodies the history of racial struggle" (ibid: xiv). Blacks in Brazil as a form of defense used this form of movement for escaped slaves. Due to its prohibition by the Portuguese colonial government, the only way it could be practiced was through subversion, by being disguised as a form of dance (ibid: 91). Maqoma's work is a theatrical parallel to this. He critiques the status quo by inverting gender, playing with ideas about race, and questioning the limits on sexuality (as described in the previous chapter).

In South Africa's past, popular dance under apartheid was often performed as a subversive critique of authority. *Isishameni*, the stick-fighting dance, for example, was a safe way of expressing resistance to oppression (cf. Glasser 1992, 1993). The same can be said for *isicathamiya* and *marabi*, both a veiled confrontation with the laws of the time (idem.). *Isicathamiya* seemed to be a neat line of western-dressed black men dancing and singing in unison, but was also a way for these men to appropriate the culture of the

oppressor and use it to make statements about their social position (cf Erlmann 1996). *Marabi* on the other hand, was spontaneous and improvised, but also spat in the face of the authorities. Those who danced this form did so in illegal drinking houses, *shebeens*, which is already a statement of resistance. Dancing in this way was also out of bounds in the everyday, another way of behaving against the norm.

Dance therefore has the potential to address issues of power and its abuses. Savigliano (1995), for example, deals with struggles over authenticity. She draws on postcolonial theory for her analysis of the Argentinean *tango* in a context of decolonization (in Thomas 2003: 153-154). Any performance of the *tango* requires the male conqueror, the female seductress, and the observer. For Savigliano (idem.) the power of this dance is in the gaze. The *tango*, and other hybrids such as the *samba* and *rumba*, were appropriated by the west, cleaned up, and sold back to their country of origin as popular dance forms (ibid: 154). The western gaze exoticises these dances. They become ‘other’ and represent a hierarchy of power. This issue is clear in the question of what is African that has been explored in chapter two and above. It relates to the politics of who gets to decide on what is a ‘real’ representation. It points to the limits on dance and the ways in which dancers respond.

Democracy and the burden of an artist

Maqoma’s work, as with the examples above, becomes “resistance in motion” (Browning in Thomas 2003: 151). Performing bodies make political and social statements often more effectively than the spoken word. This may be overt or implicit in a dance form. When individuals in America are taught *capoeira* today, for example, they are reminded of the racial struggles that underpinned its performance in Brazil (Browning 1995: xv). Dances and the bodies that perform them carry the histories in which they were made. In contemporary dance it is up to the choreographer and performers to choose how they wish to comment on society, if at all. For Maqoma, the contradictions in South Africa have always been a part of his thematic repertoire.

What the above examples illustrate are the problems with national identity and, most importantly, the way in which dance becomes a social comment on the contradictions in the ideologies that inform it. The role of the performing artist in this context is to speak truth to power (cf Said 2001: 420). If a political party is seen to have moral authority, what space is there to criticize them, as introduced by the Mandela quote at the beginning of this chapter. What Mandela was saying was that a political party should earn the support that it gets from the people. As part of civil society, it is the obligation of artists to include themselves in a critique of government.

According to van Graan²⁸,

The whole idea of a national identity is spurious. The best we can hope for is a lot of different identities. People support European soccer teams, but they live in Brazil. This is identity, it's not one solid thing, it's different things at different times.

What is interesting about this fluidity of identity is how those in positions of power seek to contain it, when it is not something that can be contained. The effect of trying to create a bounded notion out of something that is, in its nature, open to interpretation and revision, is a clash between those who want to control its definition, and those who aim to question it. As van Graan says,

No wonder people are confused. On the one hand you have this idea of a rainbow national identity and on the other you have this idea of Africa in which some are included and others excluded

This tension is framed well by the argument of Stallybrass and White (1986) on the relationship between the hierarchies of 'high' and 'low' culture. In explaining the importance of the rejection of the Other for the rationalisation of the superiority of dominant forms, they state that "what is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central" (ibid: 5). What this means is that the threat of a representation that challenges the status quo is simultaneously marginalised and central to the divisions that are created between acceptable and unacceptable forms of expression. They argue for the centrality of the Other for the identity formation within dominant forms (with reference to Said 1979). Through a development of Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, they show how

²⁸ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 15 July 2005

in everyday cultural practice, the exclusion of the Other is necessary to the creation of identity in dominant discourse (Stallybrass and White 1986: 26). The point of mediation between the so-called 'high' and 'low' is in the moment of transgression of the laws laid down through social classifications and hierarchies.

In other words, Maqoma's transgression of expected representations of Africa, masculinity, sexuality, for example, reveal the divisions between 'high' and 'low' as constructs that require the 'low' in order to define the 'high'. As in the example of the WSSD, those who wish to mask the problems of difference see Maqoma's work as a transgression of the African ideal in a postcolonial setting. As Stallybrass and White (ibid: 191), explain:

The bourgeois subject continuously defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as 'low' – as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating. Yet that very act of exclusion was constitutive of its identity. The low was internalized under the sign of negation and disgust.

Although Maqoma's work is not explicitly defined as dirty, it symbolically contaminates the purist ideals of nationalism set out by the new elite in South Africa.

Maqoma's questioning of the contradictions in South African society challenges the way in which the official cultural establishment attempts to create a national identity. In his refusal to conform, he throws open new possibilities for dealing with identity in a changing social context. In making visible what is hidden, Maqoma breaks through this facade to a deeper engagement with what it means to be in a new democracy. Maqoma's radical work is a hybrid that can be read in parallel to Gilroy's (2005) critique of multiculturalism in a postcolonial setting. In contrast to the kitsch, essentialised images of the nation, Maqoma's work illustrates that facing the reality of difference allows for far more productive engagement with issues of equality than any attempts at constructing a false unity. At his Inaugural speech on 10 May 1994, Mandela stated that his government would build "a rainbow nation at peace with itself"²⁹. Maqoma's work confronts the problems with this view through his performative cocktail that is a call to address the difficulties of living in a democratic postcolonial society.

²⁹ http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Inaugural_Speech_17984.html

When Mandela gave his Freedom Day Celebrations speech on 27 April 1999, he envisaged a nation that would “emerge strong and more united, true to our pledge that, whatever our political affiliation, we are one people with one destiny”³⁰. Yet in its conflation of the singular and the plural, this statement ignores the contradictions between a national ideal based on unity and the reality of diversity. As Gilroy (2005) asserts, a national culture that masks real difference with a fake sense of unity cannot truly be representative of a whole society. From the discussion above, it is clear that the path to the unity that Mandela imagines is fraught with tensions. The post-struggle liberation regime in South Africa pretends to embrace plurality. However, in practice, it ignores the contradictions and debates that diversity produces, such as the question of authenticity and the perpetuation of colonialism in a postcolonial context.

Conclusion

What is clear from this and the preceding chapters is the power of a transgressive form of expression to highlight the contradictions in the ideas that created the boundaries that are being transgressed. In Maqoma’s case, he is working in a context that he believes forces artists into the position of social commentator. This raises certain issues. Firstly, what this could mean is that creating art for arts’ sake is not possible for South African choreographers because they are too busy trying to make a living. Secondly, when they do so, they are limited by the expectations and demands of an official culture establishment that is distracted by its capitalist agenda. Those, like Maqoma, who are committed to making statements about their social context, feel the constraints of dealing with the downside of freedom and difficulties of diversity that are denied by claims to heritage and authenticity. The upside of this is the potential of art to make comments in ways that transcend the limits of narrowly defined nationality. Perhaps it is for the sake of art to comment and critique where others will not.

³⁰ <http://www.southafrica-newyork.net/consulate/freedom.htm>