

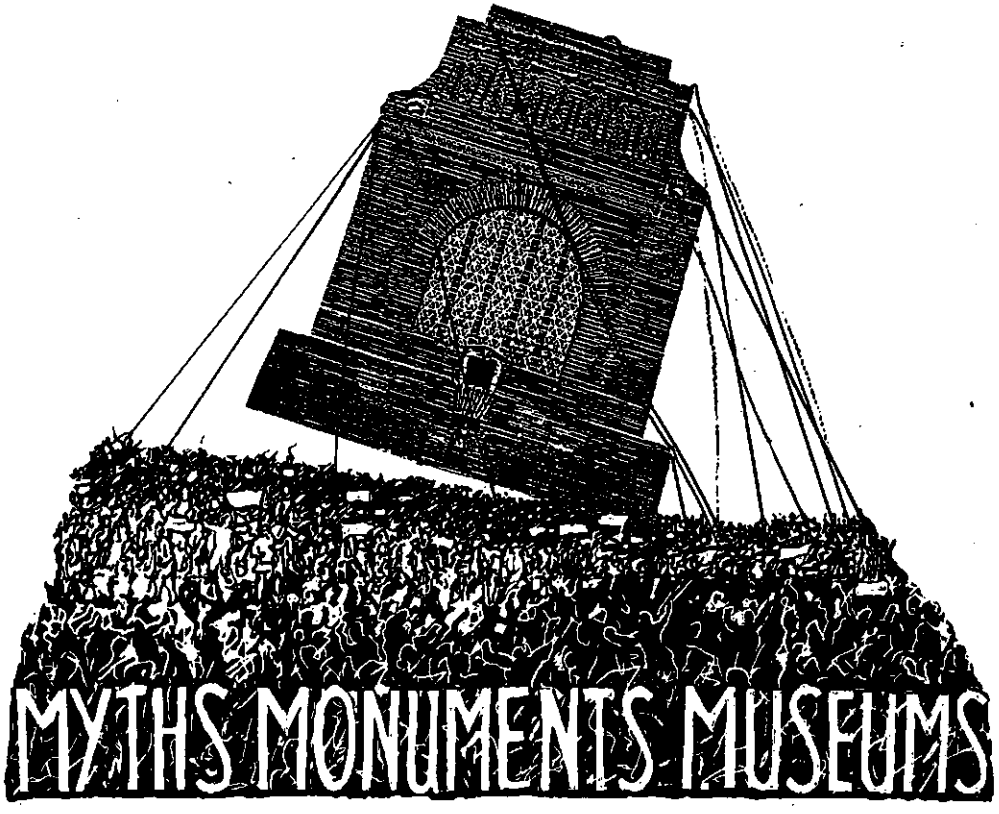
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New directions with old collections: changing existing exhibitions for new purposes.

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NEW PREMISES?

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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
HISTORY WORKSHOP

NEW DIRECTIONS WITH OLD COLLECTIONS
CHANGING EXISTING EXHIBITIONS
FOR NEW PURPOSES.

G. Dominy

Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg



AFRICANA

Paper for History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 16 - 18 July, 1992 .

From 'Dead Zoos' to 'Sources of Delight': New Directions for old Collections - changing exhibitions for new purposes.[1]

by

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INTRODUCTION:

> 'A towering Soviet soldier smashes a swastika with a giant sword. Marx stares at passing traffic. Lenin tugs on his lapel. Germany is less than three weeks away from becoming a single bastion of Western capitalism but the new nation is filled with the totems of the old East Germany.'[2]

This sounds very familiar to us poised on the painful threshold of the much vaunted 'New South Africa'. Close your eyes and think 'Pretoria 1993' instead of 'Berlin 1990'. Already there are calls for the revision of our history, for the demolition of the monuments of the old order and for the erection of new ones. Indeed, on June 16th this year, Nelson Mandela unveiled a long-overdue memorial to the fallen youth of Soweto.

This paper deals mainly with practical museological issues, although some theoretical considerations are also discussed. Let us begin by considering one of the most powerful and challenging calls on the issue of heritage management which I have read in recent times. I think that it will set the context for a consideration of the present state and future direction of South African museums.

In November 1990, Sandile Memela, of the *City Press*, wrote a challenging article which needs to be quoted extensively:[3]

> I want to say as Umkhonto we Sizwe buries its guns we must honestly face the fact that black people must address

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[1] This paper is a revised and up-dated version of a paper entitled 'From "Dead Zoos" to "Sources of Delight": Making museums matter in a changing society' which I presented in the 'University Lecture' series at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg on 5 June 1991..

[2] *Natal Witness*: 22 Sept 1990.

[3] *Echo* - Supplement to the *Natal Witness*, 22 Nov 1990.

themselves to the question of symbols of their achievements in South Africa.

> There are more than 30 million black people today, and they have not yet restructured their history to point to where they have monuments and institutions that are a source of pride to them. And one must ask the question, "Where the hell are black people going when they leave no heritage to offer their offspring?"

Memela believes that it is 'impossible for white people and institutions to instil self-confidence and pride in black folks'. The blacks involved in the struggle are forgetting the struggles of their forbearers and even names like Steve Biko and Robert Smangaliso Sobukwe are known only to a few. Memela believes that:

> Black people need to make their own symbols of achievement to sustain their identity amid the wretched circumstances that are the shadow of the new society. This shall extend our socio-cultural vision far beyond the alterative standards provided for us by whites.
>
> ...And this demands that they come up with monuments and institutions that bear witness to the struggle they have waged by refusing to ride on the creations of white people. They have to hammer out ideas that will culminate in institutions that will be a source of pride to them. Walking into the new South Africa without any concrete symbols to point to as the authenticity of what they have been able to achieve will nullify everything they will have attained.

Memela's views pose an enormous challenge to South African museums which are in many ways part of the legacy of the apartheid and colonial past. Is it possible for 'white' institutions to provide this type of vision for blacks? I think that the answer has to be NO!

But I also think that the formulation of Memela's question is unsatisfactory and that therefore NO is not the whole answer. We in museums must get beyond thinking of ourselves as 'white' institutions serving blacks, that is a dead-end road to paternalism. Our museums have to transform their historical consciousness and reposition themselves for the 'New South Africa'. Museums have vast cultural and scientific resources in their collections which should be patrimony of <u>all</u> South Africans. We must accept, however, that our existing institutions cannot of themselves fulfil the mission set by Memela, although, as I will argue in this paper creative methods can be found for utilising existing collections and exhibitions as instruments of transformation. What we can also do as museologists is to assist new institutions, such as the fledgling 'Museum of Apartheid' which is part of the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape, and welcome them into our associations as comrades and colleagues.

Memela's remarks are not entirely original. Many white as well as black speakers made similar forceful statements at the watershed SAMA (Southern African Museums Association) conference in Pietermaritzburg in 1987. This conference shook the South African museum community out of its complacency and stimulated a vital reassessment of the role of museums in the wider community.[4]

The conference also prompted a significant resistance on the part of museums to the racist structures imposed by the tri-cameral constitution. Jan Hofmeyr raised very similar questions to those posed by Memela and stressed the polarisation between black and white races and between classes and regions. The country's recent history makes these divisions tragically obvious for everybody. Perhaps Hofmeyr was being prophetic when he said:[5]

> South Africa today is driven by polarising rather than binding forces. Questions of power and conflict dominate our social life. The political mode is confrontational. Leaders in all our communities are mobilising their skills to weld the communities they command into powerful juggernauts, aimed at each other.

Hofmeyr concludes with a call for museums to become instruments of mediation. This is a complex issue and in this paper I want to address one or two methods of achieving 'museum collections of mediation', for want of a better phrase, which have been and are being followed at the Natal Museum.

The first of these is the collection of artefacts of apartheid and popular struggle, which are two sides of the same coin. We have been collecting apartheid relics for the past two years, but have only recently begun with the collection of artefacts and testimony of the resistance struggle. The second is the utilisation of existing museum exhibitions in a creative, participatory way, to change perceptions of the twee, sanitised white colonial past. A start has been made, but it is a long process.

DEFINITIONS AND BACKGROUND:

To enable us to get to grips with the need to defend old collections and exhibitions, it is necessary to clarify what a museum is, and what it is not, and to identify what makes a museum unique as an educational and cultural institution.

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[4] See the key-note address by Brian R. Stuckenberg, 'Stating the case: A synoptic view of the position of museums and of the problems they face, in the changing and divided society of contemporary South Africa', *SAMAB* 17(7 & 8), Sept & Dec 1987, pp 291-300.

[5] J. Hofmeyr, 'Serving the People: Museums as instruments of mediation in South Africa', *SAMAB* 17(7 & 8), Sept. & Dec. 1987, pp 311-23.

Douglas Allan has said that ' a museum in its simplest form consists of a building to house collections of objects for inspection, study and enjoyment.'[6]

ICOM, which is the International Council of Museums, an affiliate of UNESCO, defines museums as:

> any permanent establishment set up for the purpose of preserving, studying, enhancing by various means and, in particular, of exhibiting to the public for its delectation and instruction... artistic, historical, scientific and technological collections.[7]

There are various other definitions, the two most scathing being: 'Museums are no more than dead circuses', or, to pick up on part of the title for this paper, 'Museums are dead zoos'.

The most hopeful definition of a museum which I have ever heard was given at the 1991 SAMA conference held in Cape Town. The speaker was Albie Sachs, the ANC's constitutional expert who has also played a major role in redefining the debate on culture in a new South Africa. He described museums as having the potential to become 'SOURCES OF DELIGHT' for all people in a transformed society.

Are museums in the present South Africa more like dead circuses or sources of delight? A brief sketch of the country's museum history may help here. Museums generally are a Western European concept, although the assembling of collections of objects is widespread through many cultures. Museums as we know them as cultural and scientific institutions open to all emerged during the 19th Century. According to Charles Saumarez Smith:[8]

> The original intention behind the establishment of museums was that they should remove artefacts from their current context of ownership and use, from their circulation in the world of private property and insert them into a new environment which would provide them with a different meaning.

He adds that the meanings were held to be not arbitrary and that the collections should be open and accessible to at least a portion of the public. They are therefore associated chronologically with the spread of capitalism, the Industrial Revolution, the spirit of scientific enquiry and the ideology of the nation state, or imperialism, which manifested itself in the

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[6] Douglas A. Allan, 'The museum and its functions' in *The Organization of Museums: Practical Advice* (MUSEUMS AND MONUMENTS IX, UNESCO, Paris, 4th imp. 1978), p 13.

[7] Pierre Schommer, 'Administration of Museums' in *The Organization of Museums*, p 28.

[8] C.S. Smith, 'Museums, artefacts and meanings' in Peter Vergo (ed.), *The new museology*, (London, 1989), p. 6.

great exhibitions, eg the Great Exhibition itself in London in 1851 and subsequent exhibitions in Paris, Berlin and in cities across the Atlantic - the modern descendants of these are probably the International EXPOS.[9]

Museums in South Africa began in the 19th Century in the Cape Colony and were very much a local manifestation of the international development of Victorian museums. Their collections included specimens of the fauna and flora of Southern Africa, cultural material collected from the sub-continent's indigenous inhabitants and deemed by the Europeans to be curious, bizarre or useful for emphasising the distinctions being demanded by the emerging theories of social-Darwinism.

After the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, museum-based research continued to focus on the natural history of the country with the human relics of the indigenous cultures being collected, studied and exhibited in the same institutions as the animal specimens - dead zoos and circuses. This is not however, a uniquely horrible South African phenomenon, many internationally famous museums are guilty of the same demeaning approach. The Culture of the American Indians is to be seen in the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History in Washington DC and not in the Museum of American History.

Museums exhibiting the past of the white communities in South Africa have developed largely since the Second World War and particularly in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. A rash of local museums began spreading across the country during these years.[10] In many cases they explicitly celebrate the 'progress' of white settlement in the locality and either ignore or distort the history of other communities. Some specifically 'ethnic' museums were established, such as the so-called Tsonga-Kraal in the Hans Merensky Nature Reserve in the Far Northern Transvaal which was intended, in terms of apartheid ideology, to reinforce ethnic separatism and culture (This is also a case of developing a so-called living museum - never-never-land people in traditional costumes performing traditional crafts in a timeless environment - a living museum zoo, not a dead one). Some of the homelands, such as KwaZulu have also established museums stressing their group history.

In 1987 John Wright and Aron Mazel analysed the content of exhibitions in museums in Natal and KwaZulu and presented a

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[9] Paul Greenhalgh, 'Education, Entertainment and Politics: Lessons from the Great International Exhibitions', in Vergo, *The new Museology*, pp 74-98.

[10] See, C.K. Brain & M.C. Erasmus, *The making of the Museum Professions in Southern Africa* (Pretoria, Transvaal Museum, 1986), esp. Diagram on p. 2.

seminal paper at the SAMA conference of that year.[11] They described museums as 'Cultural Ideological State Apparatuses' - a hideous phrase, coined by D.J. Meltzer, (how you ever get such a beastie to become a Source of Delight - I do not know). They provided a sharp critique of the displays and showed that the overwhelming majority of displays were biased in favour of white settlers and ignored the legitimate history and long presence in the same areas of black peoples. So far so good. I concur with their findings and I acknowledge that their critique stimulated a healthy debate in museum circles and some very necessary and long overdue changes.

Wright and Mazel have subsequently published a further paper based on this survey. In 'Controlling the Past in the Museums of Natal and KwaZulu',[12] they provide a more textured theoretical content to their critique of museums and focus sharply on the exhibitions in the KwaZulu Cultural Museum at Ulundi. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss their criticism of the KwaZulu Museum in detail and a superficial discussion will not do justice to their views. Regrettably, in so far as the Natal museums are concerned, they also indulge in critical overkill and occasionally aim at the wrong targets. Wright and Mazel fully appreciate the manifestations of the ideology of ignorance and invisibility in museum displays, but they extend it through an argument 'by context' to the regional legislative arena. They claim that the 1973 decision of the Natal Provincial Council to support local museums in small towns and to create a professional provincial support service, can be seen as an ideological response to the emerging black challenge to white land ownership and control and that pro-settler displays would help legitimise white hegemony.

I have two major problems with this theory: Firstly, the Natal Provincial Council was controlled by the old United Party (later called the New Republic Party - the Nerps - anybody remember them?) and they would not have recognised an ideology if one stood up and bit them in the leg, unless it was dressed up as a prejudice. In fact there was a general attitude of philistinism prevailing at the time and museums were seen as a luxury and a nuisance, not of any practical or ideological use. Secondly, the Nerp political horizon was limited by the features of white politics and if anything the growth of museums in Natal was perhaps a response to the overtly Afrikaner Nationalist museums in the Transvaal and other provinces. The growth of small museums in Natal was possibly a late manifestation of the Boer-Brit struggle - showing that the Natal English had a history just like the Afrikaners who wielded national power and influence and who bored everybody else to tears on Van Riebeeck Day, Kruger

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[11] J. Wright & A. Mazel, 'Bastions of Ideology: The depiction of precolonial history in the museums of Natal and KwaZulu', *SAMAB* 17(7 & 8), Sept. & Dec. 1987, pp 301-10.

[12] *Critical Arts: A Journal for Cultural Studies* 5(3), 1991, pp 59-77.

Day and on December 16th, what my son used to call the Day of the Government.

The establishment of the Natal Provincial Museum Service was as a result of pressure from local historians: white, middle-class and often female (although the activities in this field of ex-servicemen - MOTHs - are also worth noting). One or two of the most prominent women were married to senior provincial politicians. These people, who built up the country museums and who agitated for legislation and funds, were not professional historians, their intellectual horizons tended to be limited by unconscious, or not clearly articulated, assumptions of white superiority and black invisibility. The collections made in the 1970s and early 1980s were haphazard and opportunistic, they were not predicated on a carefully thought out ideology. The Provincial Museum Service, which began its formal exhibition programmes in the early 1980s, had an ultra-conservative, explicitly pro-apartheid (even anti-English) 'hidden agenda' at one stage of its development. This programme was never implemented in full as a result of internal resistance and opposition from the Nerp-dominated advisory committee. This phase in the Provincial Museum Service's development was over by the mid-1980s.

Through their concentration on Natal museums, Wright and Mazel missed what was becoming the most dangerous ideological menace to South African museums - the tri-cameral constitution of 1983 - which made explicit generations of implicit racism through a system which captured and corrupted museums and warped their themes and policies to stress the cultural hegemony of whites, and militaristic capitalistic white rulers at that. Eight of the museums that they discussed in their papers were labelled as 'white own affairs' by Pretoria and it was only as a result of a protracted political and bureaucratic struggle that they were kept out of the clutches of the 'own affairs' bureaucracy.[13] This menace has only recently diminished and there are still reflex pounces from the dying monster in Pretoria. As with White 'own affairs' schools, museums may yet be subjected to some anti-social distortions and administrative perversions before democratic structures can be put in place.

Some museums also benefitted from apartheid in unforeseen and wickedly ironic ways. There are at least three instances of museums being planned in buildings whose original inhabitants were forcibly evicted under the Group Areas Act. The most absurd

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[13] See G. Berning & G. Dominy, 'The presentation of the industrial past in South African Museums: A critique' (Paper presented in conjunction with an AV production by P. Engblom at the 1989 S.A. Historical Society Conference, Pietermaritzburg and the 1989 SAMA conference, Bloemfontein). This paper, which is due to be published in a long overdue issue of *SAMAB*, contains further criticism of Wright & Mazel's approach and provides a contemporary critique of the system of 'own affairs' museums.

example being in the tiny Natal *dorp* of Weenen. The Indian traders were evicted from their beautiful turn-of-the-century trading stores in the village centre and banished to the end of the road and it was solemnly proposed to turn the empty buildings into museums to Indian traders - it was even suggested that they become Indian 'own affairs' museums, but that was too much for even Rajbansi's party to stomach and the proposal lapsed and as far as I know the buildings are still empty.

The 40-odd years of apartheid are years of experience common to all South Africans, although they were experienced very differently by different sections of the community. There are indications that current state political policy is to forget that apartheid ever happened. This is an act of self-deluding amnesia. Given the length of the apartheid era and the intensity of the struggle against it, apartheid will remain to haunt us for years to come. The Holocaust was the most horrifying event in 20th Century European history and while modern Germany may wish that it never happened, modern Israel and the Jewish community are doing their damnedest to ensure that it is never forgotten. The people who suffered under apartheid, and whose struggles have brought about its collapse, are not likely to let its effects be forgotten either.

The effects of apartheid are therefore central to an understanding of the country's recent past. It is therefore the duty of museums to collect its material evidence. The dramatic developments since 2nd February 1990 have enabled several museums to come out of the closet and begin openly collecting apartheid artefacts and memorabilia and ephemera of the resistance struggle. This is partly because the laws have changed and the material is no longer legally proscribed, and partly because public perceptions have changed so that people and organisations are now prepared to part with relics of apartheid because they understand it to be an order that is now passing.

NEW COLLECTING DIRECTIONS IN OLD MUSEUMS:

The Natal Museum has set itself the task of collecting the signage and symbols of the system of racial categorisation, discrimination and exclusion. This process was inspired by a report in *Time Magazine* on the 'Jim Crow' exhibitions at the Valentine Museum in Richmond, Virginia, USA. I was fortunate enough to visit this museum in 1989 and to hold detailed discussions with the curators. I also visited the National Museum of American History in Washington DC, saw the important exhibition on the internal south-north migration of Black Americans, entitled *'Field to Factory: Black Migration 1915-1940'*, and met its planner and curator, Dr Spencer Crew, who is present at this workshop.

The purpose of these exhibitions was to focus attention on the role of Black Americans in their country's history and on the obstacles placed in their path by laws, circumstances and prejudice. In both Richmond and Washington, the Black Americans are shown as conscious actors, not as passive oppressed subjects,

who make choices, initiate projects and express views.

Shortly after I returned to South Africa in mid-1990, one of the last remaining 'petty apartheid' laws, viz. the Separate Amenities Act, was repealed and this prompted a search for apartheid signs. What is noteworthy is that this particular sign was not a sign determined by National Party legislation, it was erected as a result of local English-speaking Natal prejudice against placing bets on horses of various colours while standing next to people of different colours.

We also managed to collect segregated entrance signs from a police station, various toilets and even a large road sign indicating the way to the 'Non-European Hospital' in Greytown. In all, a small, but representative collection indicating how pervasive apartheid was, both in terms of legislated segregation and in terms of social prejudice. Unfortunately, I have not yet managed to obtain a 'Slegs Blankes' sign from a cemetery.

Collecting these remnants of apartheid can be amusing, but often it shocks and embarrasses people who find it hard to understand why the signs are being collected. This leads to hostility towards the curator and the museum. This hostility can come from both the left and the right. Some progressive blacks perceive this as an exercise in nostalgia by neo-fascists while some conservative whites perceive it to be one of the proverbial 'communist plots' to damage the image of the country. Creating a context for the collection is therefore crucially important.

The Natal Museum is not the only institution that is working in this field. During the widespread publicity campaign that accompanied our collecting efforts we co-operated with both the Albany Museum and the Durban Local History Museum. In February 1991 a comprehensive press report appeared detailing the efforts being made at the University of the Western Cape to establish an 'Apartheid Museum'. UWC is collecting very much the same type of material that the Natal Museum is collecting.[14] Its museum programme is, however, part of a larger project to collect archival and oral history material from the resistance movements. The projects co-ordinator, Dr Andre Odendaal, was quoted as saying that the reason for the project is to counteract the amnesia:

> We can't just put history on the shelf and forget about it, it is important that we work through it. We need to look at the complexities and contradictions if we are to learn from history and not just get a new set of rulers.

Odendaal's project emphasizes the role of the ANC, but he hopes to be 'non-sectarian' and look at other organisations as well. This leads us to a major pitfall, political complexity.

The Natal Museum has been trying since the 1987 SAMA conference to establish links with the broader mass organisations

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[14] *Sunday Tribune*, 24 Feb.. 1991.

in the Pietermaritzburg area. This has been a difficult task to pursue. One major reason being the depth of the conflict in the region and extent of the violence which has shattered many community structures and made people look upon outsiders with deep suspicion.

The Natal Museum has been fortunate enough to be awarded a grant by the US Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies which will enable us to establish a community-based programme for the systematic collection of artefacts, photographs and documents of the period of resistance and struggle in the greater Pietermaritzburg area over the last two decades. We are anxious to collaborate with other institutions which are working in similar fields. The programme also involves the establishment of an 'archive' of oral history interviews at the museum and it is hoped to exhibit the material in 1993. One of the major issues to be addressed in the transformation of our museums is that of 'affirmative action'. Clearly one of the major ways to involve the broader community in the museum is for the museum to train and appoint people from previously excluded groups to professional and technical posts in the museum, or to spread museological skills in the community. Our project aims to recruit people from community organisations to undertake interviews, process information, catalogue material and prepare the exhibition.

NEW DIRECTIONS WITH OLD EXHIBITIONS:

It is also our duty as museologists to justify the preservation of relics of the old order. Not only for the present, but for the future when the times have changed and people are prepared to take a fresh look at the apartheid and colonial eras. Artefacts can acquire new meanings in different contexts, as I have tried to show with the collecting of apartheid signs, and I believe that the collections in all our present museums should serve to delight the future although the contexts for the development or production of the original museums has disappeared.

One museum which has been debating its future recently is the 'Oorlogsmuseum van die Boere Republieke' in Bloemfontein. This is a 'White own Affairs' institution, dedicated to the preservation and depiction of the material culture of the Afrikaner republican struggle during the Anglo-Boer War. Attached to it is the Vrouemonument. It used to have the atmosphere of a shrine and for English-speaking, let alone black visitors, it was a most uncomfortable place. Some of its exhibitions are technically outstanding and it has valuable collections. One which particularly impressed me is a diorama of a small Boer Commando about to 'saddle-up' and ambush an advancing British column. The detail is superb, the artwork is excellent, the figures are extraordinarily lifelike, but only white people are represented in the diorama. This is a powerful exhibit which misrepresents by omission. Virtually every Boer commando was accompanied by blacks who acted as scouts, servants, 'agterryers' and who contributed enormously to the Boer war effort -

not always willingly it must be said.

What should be done with such a museum? Imagine my surprise when I opened the Oorlogsmuseum's newsletter a few weeks ago to be confronted on the front page with an article questioning whether or not it would survive into the 'new South Africa'.[15] 'Allo, 'Allo, 'Allo, I thought, this is interesting. The article continued to the second page and there was a photograph of Chris Hani and his staff touring the museum with the Director! Nobody looked very happy, but there was at least a dialogue and Hani acknowledged that, in his personal opinion, perhaps there was a place in the 'new South Africa' for such a museum. It is also clear that the management of the Oorlogsmuseum are prepared to acknowledge that their museum 'deel uitmaak van die totale geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika'.

The question is: Should museums such as the Oorlogsmuseum continue as in the past, representing a highly selective fragment of the total history of South Africa? Or should they be challenged to fundamentally reassess their interpretation of the Anglo-Boer War and present it as a major South African civil war which involved racial, class, generational and gender struggles? I believe that the answer must be yes, but we are dealing with issues deeply felt by Afrikaners and regarded as fundamental to their culture and identity. A case could be made for leaving things be, or for allowing the museum to continue in some privatised form.

The Natal Museum, like many other museums, including the Oorlogsmuseum, has technically superb displays which are now outdated and which reflect a sanitised, romanticised, view of white middle-class Victorian 'Maritzburg. The 'Hall of Natal Settler History' contains the first reconstructed street scene to have been built in a South African museum. It was designed in the late 1960s, based on the model of the York Castle Museum in England - by a technician who had worked there, and opened in the early 1970s. This exhibition hall, impressive and evocative though it is, in no way reflects the realities of social and class interaction in an African city: The black experience is completely invisible and this includes the history of Indian South Africans. Visitor surveys reveal that many, although not all, black visitors find the Hall of Natal Settler History, off-putting and an alien experience because they do not readily identify with the objects or the settings. It is, however, going to be enormously expensive and time consuming to change this exhibition. You cannot just insert an 'Errata' slip into an exhibition as you can do when a printers' gremlin occurs in an academic paper.

The challenge was to make use of these marvellous facilities in a new way, to 'delight' people and begin changing their perceptions on class, gender and racial issues. We embarked on

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[15] F.J. Jacobs, 'Toekoms van museums in nuwe Suid-Afrika: is die Oorlogsmuseum in gevaar?', *Knapsak* 4(1), Mei 1992, pp 1 & 3.

an experiment for International Museums Day - 18 May 1991 - Our goal was bring the History Hall to life in such a way as to reflect the diverse reality of Pietermaritzburg's past in such a way as to inspire and amuse the public so that new concepts would not be perceived as threatening. We embarked on a joint project with the Drama Studies Department of the University of Natal, entitled 'Peopling the Past'. By using student actors in the exhibition areas and period rooms of the Natal History Hall we staged a re-enactment which conveyed the nuances and complexities of our African Victorian city.

Theatre can create an emotional environment which stimulates learning and involves both children and adults. It is also an excitingly 'different' museum experience for visitors. Dramatisation as an educational tool in museums has been fairly widely practised overseas and studies have appeared in the museological literature.[16] Theatre programmes have a shorter history in South African museums, but the Natal Museum has successfully run 'edu-drama' programmes to promote scientific and environmental concepts among township children. 'Peopling the Past' was the first analogous attempt in the historical field at the Natal Museum. While it was based on historical re-enactments which I have seen in Britain, Ireland and the United States of America,[17] it took on an authentic home-grown form. We had to be particularly careful to avoid being patronising, or falling into the trap of a timeless 'Tsonga-kraal - cum - Gold Reef City - never-never-land'. It was therefore decided that the production be scripted by the student producers themselves as an exercise in participatory project-development.

The scenario was largely dictated by the constraints of the gallery, the period rooms and the lighting. Great care had to be taken to protect the objects and exhibits and the student-actors were given crash courses in handling antiques and moving in period dress. It was decided to depict early evening in Pietermaritzburg with the inhabitants preparing for a ball at Government House. Guidelines were given to the students within which they could create characters reflecting the diversity of the city's people: British colonial officials, Zulu rickshaw pullers, black and white domestic servants, genteel middle class ladies, British soldiers, prostitutes, English-speaking black artisans, tradesmen and women, all the variety of a multi-

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[16] See Wendy Aibel-Weiss & Bernadette Brown, 'A Theatrical Solution to the Problems of Summer Day-Camp Groups in an Urban Museum', *Curator* 22(4), Dec. 1979, pp 271-180; Martyn Brown, 'One Museum's Drama Experience', *Museums Journal* 81(4), March 1982, pp 208-9; Sandra Keatch, '"Cloots, Creels and Claikin" - Drama on Display' in Timothy Ambrose (ed.), *Education in Museums: Museums in Education* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp 77-83.

[17] e.g. The Museum of the Moving Image (London), the Irish Life Viking Adventure (Dublin) and Colonial Williamsburg (Virginia, USA).

cultural city. Issues such as class and racial prejudice, the seizure of black-owned land, debt and snobbery, black technical skills and commercial advancement, human rights and women's struggles were all tackled with humour, verve and tenacity. The racial and gender mix of the Drama classes was also a constraint and we unable to reflect the role of the Indian communities in Pietermaritzburg. The project also had to be fitted in around other commitments in the Drama Department, as well as the students' own academic and social commitments!

The students' scripts were perhaps rather naive, but because they were involved in the creative process as well as the acting process, they put their hearts into it and it was an overwhelming success. Some scenes were ahistorical, particularly the argument between the 'Governor' and 'Dinuzulu, the officially unrecognised Zulu king. Yet some degree of artistic licence had to be allowed for so that the production did not become too pedagogic. I was happy to tolerate minor errors of fact and interpretation provided that the 'atmosphere' was right and the message got across (I drew the line at a rickshaw puller of the 1830s saying 'Okay' in a Zulu conversation). The crowds were so great that the facilities of the museum were overwhelmed (I must confess here that many people were also looking for clues for 'Finders Keepers', but the production entranced them and they stayed on). The reaction of the public was overwhelmingly positive regardless of race, gender or age group. Elderly white ladies could remember the rickshaws (which still plied their trade into the 1950s), black and white visitors marvelled at the institution of white domestic servants, and all enjoyed the humour which cloaked sharp messages on debt and prejudice.

The grand artefacts of the Colony of Natal's Victorian heyday took on a totally new meaning. As a pilot study it was a good exercise in how to use the gallery in a cost-effective way to provide a 'quick fix' reinterpretation of the past. The themes we tackled in the production also gave us and indication of how we can adapt the gallery, within the constraints of the period and the collection, to reflect a broader reality and to be an aid for the enrichment and education of a wide spectrum of the community.

CONCLUSION:

There is clearly a need for the existing collections in museums to be maintained and used. Exhibitions can be re-adapted and objects placed in new contexts. It will cost a great deal of money to make major changes, but on-going adjustments and re-interpretations can be done, despite financial constraints provided imagination is used and community involvement is generated so that there is a spark of excitement in the project. A two-pronged approach is necessary to accomplish the transformation of existing museums. New collecting policies must be developed in consultation with the broader community and community involvement must be a priority if the democratisation of museums is to be anything more than an empty slogan. In the second place, existing exhibitions need to be rigorously reassessed and changed, again as a result of a process of

community involvement. Historical re-enactments, 'edu-drama' programmes and the like are relatively inexpensive open-ended participatory activities that can be used to achieve the involvement of a wide range of people and organisations in the museum in an enjoyable way and serve as a catalyst for the urgently needed reassessments of exhibitions and public programmes. They make it possible to instil a measure of the pride and self-confidence in all communities that Memela sought so urgently for black people.

It is the interaction between people and artefacts that will make museums 'sources of delight'.