

Irish Theatre Institute's 17th Annual International Theatre Exchange 2010

South Africa - New Opportunities

Lara Foot Newton, CEO & Director, Baxter Theatre, Cape Town
Ismail Mahomed, Director, National Arts Festival, Grahamstown
Malcolm Purkey, Artistic Director, Market Theatre, Johannesburg
Aubrey Sekhabi, Artistic Director, The South African State Theatre
Chaired by
Paul Fahy, Artistic Director, Galway Arts Festival

Jane Daly (Co-director, Irish Theatre Institute): In 2008, Irish Theatre Institute invited Mannie Manim, who at that time was the Artistic Director of the Baxter Theatre at that time to come to the International Theatre Exchange. Mannie showed extraordinary generosity in terms of his advice and his time to companies and practitioners that he met here. Gare St Lazare Players who that year had a show in the Reviewed showcase, which is an initiative of Culture Ireland, Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival and Irish Theatre Institute. That played in South Africa, I think on two if not three occasions since then. Also Ray Yeates, who is the Director of the Axis Arts Centre here in Dublin, in Ballymun, facilitated a conversation, an open conversation with Mannie at that session, and subsequently Ray has in fact worked with South African artists as well.

So we decided for 2010 that we wanted to broaden the conversation and invite other practitioners, presenters, and producers from South Africa to join us here. I invited four people. Mannie, God bless him, advised me. I was astonished that all four were available and were interested enough to come. So I want to thank them very much for that.

I want to get the session going by handing over to Paul Fahy, who is the Artistic Director of the Galway Arts Festival. We selected Paul to chair this because he travels the world, like many festival directors so, so has a real sense of seeing work. But also because Galway Arts Festival has presented South African work in the early part of this decade and also in recent years. So I'm going to hand over to Paul with no more ado. Thank you very much.

Paul Fahy: Thank you Jane. I'll introduce each of our guests today and they will speak in turn, rather than introducing them all together.

First up we have Ismail Mahomed, who is on my extreme left here. Ismail is the Director of the National Arts Festival in South Africa. He's more than 25 years experience in arts administration and production management, earned a number of awards in arts management, he leads South Africa's oldest and largest multi-arts festival. The festival has witnessed increased growth in both audiences and the number of international productions being staged at the festival. He also serves as a board member on a number of arts organisations in South Africa, and particularly those that have a strong focus on the promotion and development of youth arts programmes. He's a published playwright and a regular contributor to international forums about arts leadership. So I'll hand it over to you.

Ismail Mahomed: Thank you very much. Good morning everyone, and thank you to Culture Ireland and to the Irish Theatre Institute for having us here.

Unlike my three colleagues, I am the only person here without an arts background. I come with a mathematics background. So I often try to look at work in terms of the way our audiences would respond to it, because even in my seat I often look at work through the eyes of an audience.

The arts sector in South Africa is rather complex, as our country is. Prior to 1994 we had the cultural boycott and there was hardly much international work that was coming into South Africa at the time. That forced us in many ways to create our own aesthetic and our own artistic vocabulary. As South African audiences and producers and even as artists, we are incredibly protective about the merits of what we've created, how we've created it and with the kind of resources we've been able to create that, so that when we do look at work coming in, we often try to measure that in terms of those kinds of experiences. However, post-1994 there has been a massive influx of international work that has come to South Africa. The initial years was largely the major commercial musicals, and then of course a lot of international work that filtered into the country through the support of embassies. That was mainly arts work under the guise of cultural diplomacy.

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It worked for a while. I think everyone was incredibly enthusiastic about that, whether that was audiences or managements or even just the media, because for the first time we were beginning to see work coming from elsewhere that was done slightly differently, that told slightly different stories and just pushed us a little out of our own little spaces in which we were. However, over the years, we've had a lot more South Africans who have been able to see work from elsewhere, we've had a lot of other work that has come in without the support of embassies and I think our audiences have become incredibly discretionary about the kind of international work that does come in, specifically those that are supported through embassies, high commissions and consulates and so forth. I think our audiences are like audiences everywhere else. They look for innovation. They look for work that is challenging. They look for work that resonates with their experiences. They look for gratification at the end of a performance, but I think overriding all that, they look for excellence.

Our country is not one homogenous society. We are nine different provinces. One of those provinces is incredibly wealthy, which has the greatest amount of economic resources. The largest pool of intellectual capital is located within that province. It's the province that probably has the greatest access to the arts, and also a greater access to creating educational opportunities. So your audiences in that particular province is a lot more sophisticated than your audiences and your artists and your media in some of the other provinces. We have certain provinces that have absolutely no access to the arts, or very little access to the arts and little access to any kind of opportunity, and in those kinds of provinces we find that the administrations, the bureaucracy, the government and even the managers of the arts centres generally take anything which has a stamp that says 'international'. In other cities it doesn't really work like that.

Interestingly, all our major festivals, the three major festivals, are located in towns or cities that have incredibly conservative values. But those festivals themselves are not conservative. Grahamstown, in which our major festival is located, is a city which is deeply rooted in British colonial values. It was the first seat of the British parliament in South Africa. Potchefstroom, where the major Afrikaans festival takes place, with some amount of work in other languages as well, is the seat of Afrikaner nationalism. And Oudtshoorn, where the other festival takes place, is the hometown of ostrich farmers. So it's very, very conservative towns, but the work that gets presented in those towns is not conservative, largely because those festivals are destination festivals, in that the majority of audiences who come to those festivals are not necessarily out of those cities. They come from everywhere else, they stay in those cities for about five to ten days, they try to get as much work out of the particular festival at that time, and they move away from there.

One of the interesting things about work prior to 1994 was that much of it was instrumentalised around a political agenda. But we, even post-1994, whilst we've moved away from the kind of narrow instrumentalisation of our work, I think we still are a society that is grappling significantly with issues around social justice. So whilst we don't look for work that is necessarily instrumentalising through the arts, we do look for work that does humanise our experiences. That allows us to sit and look at work and engage with its content. We often find that with international work that does come to the festival, for example, we start the conversations way ahead of the festival about what that work is going to be about, who are the artists, where do they come from, what drives them. Where do they get their money from, because that's an important question for us, because often that would dictate their agenda. So we're looking for those kind of experiences which allow us to walk out of the theatre experience feeling challenged, feeling emotionally fulfilled in some way, or disturbed, whichever way. But we want to engage. We want to talk about that work for a long while after the production has ended. We want to talk about it a long time before it even comes to our shores.

We definitely don't get interested or excited by the exotic little things like somebody from Europe wanting to come down and do a Zulu ballet. It may have excited us in 1994, in 1995, in 1996. It doesn't excite us any longer. If we're going to do a ballet with Zulu dancers, we might as well do it with a South African aesthetic and with South Africa Zulu dancers and whatever. Those kinds of things, when they land on my table, they end up immediately in the shredder. It doesn't get a consideration. I think a lot of that is the same mindset that goes through other producers in the country. Yes, from time to time we do look for collaborations around a particular kind of production, but I think we look for collaboration like that which has then gone through a long process of discussion, of talk, of sharing of experiences. Not just the kind of two-week quick fix. We'll come do South Africa, we'll work with a bunch of Zulu dancers, with Cossack dancers and musicians and we'll do a collaborative production. That kind of thing doesn't work with us. It flies right out. Essentially our festivals are playgrounds for pushing all kinds of boundaries, and we look for work that essentially does that.

Paul Fahy: Can I just ask you before introducing our other guests, what's your breakdown between international work and South African work that you present?

Ismail Mahomed: The largest amount of our work is South African work at the National Arts Festival. We have about 300 productions on our Fringe. Our Fringe is complete open access. We have an increasing amount of work there, but I think

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it's not a significant shift from what is essentially South African work. I think in our main programme we could safely say that at least 20% of the work this year was international work.

Paul Fahy: And have you ever presented Irish work?

Ismail Mahomed: Yes, we had Gare St Lazare last year with *First Love*, and we've had them back this year with the Beckett Trilogy.

Paul Fahy: What's the general appetite amongst your audiences for Irish work? Is there much interest in it?

Ismail Mahomed: I think the Beckett work works really well. *First Love*, just from the way it was marketed and packaged and the way Conor Lovett was marketed. But I think also there is a significant part of our audiences at the festival from the Eastern Cape who are an English speaking audience. A white, middle-class audience. Mainly women. And there is a largely literary community there that does know Beckett. So as soon as we opened, I think within three or four days, we were almost sold out for that work. Of course it was a small, intimate venue. We could have had another four performances. But similarly we rode on that success and brought Conor Lovett back the following year with the Beckett Trilogy and again it worked. I think we've given our audiences a good share of Beckett. I don't think they're exhausted with it. I do think if we give them another Beckett they may come, but we'd like to see other kinds of Irish work as well.

Paul Fahy: Can I ask you just one final question in terms of your audiences. Are they predominantly South Africans, or do you have many internationals as well?

Ismail Mahomed: No, our audiences are largely South African. We do have a significant number of African nationals who are coming to our festival, largely because they are migrating south, and they do come down to the festival. I think what started off as an essentially lily-white festival has become quite representative of the broader demographic of South Africa. To a significant extent we're becoming a lot more looking like we come from Africa, in terms of our content and our audiences.

Paul Fahy: Thank you Ismail.

So next is Aubrey Sekhabi on my left here. He joined the South African State Theatre in 2002 as Artistic Director, where he has produced *Sarafina!* by Mbongeni Ngema, which was presented as part of South Africa's ten years of freedom celebrations. Aubrey grew up in the townships in the mid-1980s and is an actor and a writer who has had many plays produced, the first of which he wrote when he was just 16 years of age. In 1988 he went to Wits University where he studied for a degree in Dramatic Arts. Since leaving the university he's worked in theatre, where he has written and produced many plays and developed the talents of young South African actors.

Since joining the State Theatre, Aubrey has presented more than 100 South African productions in the last five years, and has had more than 35 Naledi Award nominations. He serves on the festival committee of the National Arts Festival as well.

Aubrey Sekhabi: Thank you. You know the buzzword in South Africa has been 2010. The World Cup. Everything was just 2010. And of course we did not make it through the Cup stages as you all know. But the legacy that the World Cup has left us is amazing. Not only from tourism or infrastructural development. I mean arts and culture itself. For the first time in many years they said, here's a special fund. A 2010 special fund for arts and culture. The challenge is can we sustain that going forward, because it was marvelous that the Ministry of Culture could say we want arts and culture activities for our guests throughout the entire World Cup extravaganza, and to see if those productions can live longer. A lot of those productions, as much as we didn't make it to the next round, a lot of productions are making it to the next round. They are performing in our theatres and I think they will be touring.

But what this did, 2010, is that for the first time in many years it gave us an opportunity to do big-scale productions. I've always bemoaned the fact that our main stages – our 1,300 seaters or 1,900 seaters – if you just went on the website of all the theatres back home you'd find that it's *Mamma Mia*. It's all the international musicals which are performed brilliantly by South African artists. They've done musicals all over the world, but we could not say, this is our local musical that is being developed here at home. So with the 2010 projects, I think they developed two big musicals. We were able to stage *The Rivonia Trial* which is the trial that took Nelson Mandela to jail for 27 years, because it was a huge production. I think it has a cast of 71. That's the kind of work we wouldn't be able to do were it not for 2010.

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So that, in a way, sort of ignited the industry, because then there was so much work that was being done all over, in the villages. Whereas, before, in the townships, back in the day, Gibson Kente who is referred to as the father of township theatre, would do his work, and he would take it to community halls. It never really went to the theatres. But then that died away many years ago, I think around 1994, so your township audiences, your real audiences, never had an experience to watch theatre. Through 2010 that started happening, and like I said, the challenge is can we be able to take this forward? Can we be able to tour? One of the challenges, I've been talking with my colleagues, is that the Market Theatre does work, and it ends there. It doesn't have a long life. If it's lucky they go to the National Arts Festival or they come to the State Theatre. Or we produce work at the State Theatre, it runs at the Market Theatre and it ends there.

So, whereas before work would be able to tour, in I think 1996 when the policies were changing when Performing Arts Council and State Theatre, used to be called PACT and Artscape and all that. These companies had repertoire companies. When the policies changed, we became a receiving house. But even that policy we navigated ourselves for more than 10 years to say, what is it really. For bureaucrats we were a receiving house, we were just going to have CEOs who are running the venue, who are almost like caretakers, and everybody can come and book the venue. So as a result some of us felt that the theatre started not having an identity because everybody could come, everybody could book. It didn't matter what they did. As long as they could pay the rent they could present the work. So in the policy, in the white paper, it never really said you cannot produce, and once we found that loophole we started producing our own work, and then theatres started having their own identities. We could get involved in co-productions, we could collaborate, we could commission. Then a lot of young artists started coming forward because they had a lot of opportunities to present work, by then having institutional support.

What was going to be the issue for me, especially at the time, was once we become a receiving house, most of the artists and the companies that closed down, when they left those institutions, they left there with inherited experience, so they would be able to go out there into the industry and raise funds. But those people who were previously marginalised would still be marginalised because they never really had access to those institutions before, so they had no support. So once we realised that we could do that and then they had the formation of the National Arts Council where we could all apply for funds, and then the National Lotteries. But because a lot of people were on the sidelines for such a long time, the budget was spread too thinly because we wanted to please everyone. We wanted to make sure everyone could do a play. So when you applied for 500,000 rands you'd get 50,000 which really didn't get you anywhere. So the institutions really had to come on board and say we can support artists who are dynamic, artists who are innovative, artists who want to tell interesting stories.

So really, where the industry is at this point in time, with all the challenges I think it's more vibrant, it's more exciting because at a professional level there is more work that is happening. At the community level there is a lot of community theatre going on in South Africa, although the stories are the same everywhere you go in South Africa. It's about HIV and AIDS; it's about child and women abuse. It's all those themes the people are dealing with in South Africa. For example, when I joined the State Theatre – we have six theatres in the State Theatre. You've got the Opera House which seats 1,300 and a 640 seater, a 300 seater, 266, 150 and 100 seater. But before it was, this is the place that they do ballet and opera, so people never used to really take notice of that. The majority of the people in the country never went into the building. Even today you still get people who say, I've been passing here for 30 years and I never actually knew that I could come and see this kind of work in this venue. So I remember when we started, the first play that we presented, we had three people coming. I was thinking, why did I come here?

We started putting more work and more work on, and now we can sell out shows. Now you can have a majority black audience, or now you can have a majority white audience for the stuff that they have always come to see. But when we did something like *The Rivonia Trial*, whereby I think it was the biggest trial of the century and it had black and white artists, and then suddenly you're saying, wow, there's South African theatre, because you're starting to see black and white audiences coming to enjoy the experience together. For me it kind of said, this is probably where we want to go, rather than having black people doing black theatre, white people doing – people speaking Afrikaans doing Afrikaans theatre. Where can we tell these contemporary stories, the stories that involve all of us, because then we can begin to build an audience. You have an audience for your *Cats*, you'll have an audience for your *Phantoms* because those brands have been developed for many years, but in terms of local work and local content, South African work, developing it, it has really taken time. I think that all of our venues, the Market and the Baxter, you're starting to see people starting to go and experience their own stories.

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Political theatre, as we all know, is coming back. We're bringing it back. Before, people said, it's too early to talk about these issues, but now we're starting to say we can tell this story, we can retell the *The Rivonia Trial* and people can come and learn about it. Again, you start to see where South Africa was in the 60s, where the politics were and how they are now, and you try to get the middle point.

South African theatre is kind of vibrant. It's got its challenges. I think a week ago I went to the Afrikaans festival Aardklop, where most of the work is being done in Afrikaans. Then again, you're saying wow. What Afrikaans theatre is doing is actually what maybe black theatre was doing back in the 80s, saying the system is not cool. Now I was seeing a lot of that. I was saying to my colleagues, Jesus, there's the one leader of the youth league who they all hate, so every play you went into they were just swearing at him and swearing at him. We were here many years ago. Again, I think over the weekend, I went to see another production which was interesting for me because on the main stage you were having a big musical in Zulu. You're having a lot of people coming to see that because we never really did a lot of work in indigenous languages, in Zulu and Sotho. Now we've done works in Zulu and Sotho and people are really coming. Again for me, having directed for around 18 years, I say wow. When you look at development the actors when they start to act in their own languages, it's actually much faster than when they start to act in English, so it is actually an important vehicle that you begin to do works in indigenous languages, because it not only empowers the people with the language, but even the artists themselves, they grow and develop a lot faster.

I think that where we will be going now is to be looking at our funding bodies and saying, for the past 16 years how has this served us. Now we have these funding bodies, how do we make sure these funding bodies can assist art in the country, rather than just saying now we're going to fund everybody. To recognise excellence and to be able to know that this is professional work that really needs support, and to say this is community work, much as we support it, but it's not at the same level as that. We also have lotteries. We've had a lot of problems with it but at least that's a place where you can go now, as opposed to the past when you had nowhere to go. You could just do work in your garage and put it up there, and be happy if the Market Theatre put it up because that was the place where most of this work would be put up. But now everybody would be able to do good work, and good work will see the light of day. We would be able to do opera, we'd be able to do ballet, you would do musicals, big musicals from Europe, from the United States, and we're also doing a lot of new South African stories. You've got guys like Paul Kudvum coming up who is doing exciting work, you have the choreographer Dada Masilo coming, taking ballet and doing whatever she wants to do with it, and it's starting to get an audience. There is really movement.

In terms of collaboration, we're hosting an international festival that has started but was more reliant on embassies to bring work. We've been doing it for two or three years, but then it's not really the work that you want or the work that you're choosing that goes there. They say, we're going to bring this, and that work comes there. But I think we're starting to say, can we take it to the next level. Now that we have established it, can we be able to say, we can collaborate with people, we can be able to say this is the kind of work we think we want, because it has taken us a long time for us to be able to develop an audience for our own work featuring our own artists. Once you start to bring work, you need to have developed that audience, but we've started doing that kind of work and I think now we're almost in a position where you can go out there in collaboration with those embassies. So you can say yes, we know that you are able to bring work here, but we don't want that one that you are choosing; we want this one because we think it can work for our audiences.

I think, finally, it's really been difficult in terms of actors, because we've been struggling with funds, and then you finally get the funds, but most of your actors have run to do television soaps. Soaps are a big thing back in South Africa, so getting them becomes more and more expensive. They've got to rehearse at night. There's all these technicalities because they've got to be shooting from 6am to 5pm. If you have to do matinees you have to negotiate well in advance. But then once they're starting to see the power of theatre, which I think a lot of people have experienced this year, they think, wow, this is what we've been missing really. Telling the stories that we want to tell. Telling the big stories, the important stories. They're starting to come back and saying we want to do theatre. I think we've got good political leadership in terms of arts and culture, that is really pushing for arts and culture. Saying that arts and culture should really take centre stage. I think also politicians. We've had the Vice President, the Deputy President, coming to see work at the State Theatre. We've had ministers and everybody starting to see it. So the moment they see theatre doing that, then they say, we can actually support theatre. It's not a Cinderella department, like they refer to it in other provinces. That Cinderella department is the last thing that they think about. But now they're starting to see the importance of it again, because in the 80s it was it was also theatre that went to the world and said, this is the situation in our country. Now theatre is still doing that same thing back home. I think that we are standing at very level ground and there is a lot happening and it's more exciting to be in South Africa.

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Paul Fahy: Thank you very much. Next, Lara Foot. Lara is a theatre director, a writer and a producer. She has directed 40 professional productions, 29 of which have been South African plays. Lara's passion is the development of new indigenous work, young writers and directors. In 1996 Lara was made the resident director of the Market Theatre, and from 1998 to 2000 she took up the position of Associate Artistic Director. More recently, Lara has become involved in film, and she was selected to become part of the Sundance Film Writers' Lab in 2007 and the Directors' Lab in 2008. Her four plays *Tshepang*, *Here And Now*, *Reach* and more recently, *Karoo Moose* have all toured internationally. *Karoo Moose* enjoyed a season last July at the Tricycle in London. She's directed Sam Beckett's *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot* and she has won many awards over the years, including the Standard Bank Ovation Silver Award for Theatre at the 2010 National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. This year in January she was appointed the CEO and Director of the Baxter Theatre.

Lara Foot: Thank you and I'd like just to say how great it is to be here. It's a privilege to meet all of you.

Paul Fahy: I should also mention that her play was here in 2005 at the Theatre Festival, *Tshepang*.

Lara Foot: Aubrey is a bit of a hard act to follow with that enthusiasm. I think I should mention that Aubrey and myself were at university together. At Wits University, where I think I was a few years ahead. Three or four years ahead. One? Oh my goodness. And Malcom Purkey here was our lecturer. So there's obviously an in crowd for some reason. He lectured us in directing, so hopefully he's done something right.

At this stage I am in Cape Town and I am the Director of the Baxter Theatre Centre, which is quite a big centre. We have three stages and sometimes four, and sometimes five. Our smallest would be an 80 seater and our largest is a 660 seater. So I've moved very much from the last couple of years, being a writer and director, and then this year concentrating on managing a theatre, which is quite a big shift.

I think what's always interested me is the development of new work and new ways of storytelling, and finding new stories, and trying to develop young artists and writers. I think there has been quite a shift in the country in the last few years. My concern, really, is the lack of writers of text. We've been debating it and talking about it for quite some time now and I think it might stem from the time when we had the cultural boycott in the late 80s and 90s. We had a method of making theatre which we all called 'workshop theatre', which was really based on improvisation, storytelling through improvisation, and texts were put together very urgently and quickly, because theatre was really the only place where one could hear the truth of what was going on in the country. We had massive censorship in the media and somehow theatre managed to get away with saying things that the newspapers and television couldn't say. So we had this urgent need to tell the country as well as the world what was happening.

This workshop theatre which developed largely in the Market Theatre, through the leadership of the late Barney Simon, and in fact Malcolm's company, Junction Avenue Theatre, as well, was one of the leading theatres in what we called then 'protest theatre'. This method of writing stories was very valuable at the time. Often what happened was that the stories were made and the actors improvised and, again, using their own languages, so they became a way of mixing languages and presenting pieces which were very concerned about the truth. People's personal truths. It led the way, in many respects, in terms of the rest of the world noticing what was going on in South Africa and opening the eyes of international politics.

But what happened through that tradition is that the formality of sitting down and writing a text was kind of brushed aside, because it was the way to go. We're going to workshop theatre. I believe what happened is that young artists thought that this was the way to make theatre and this is how they started creating theatre. Of course you need a very specific talent to improvise, to be the writer and director in a rehearsal room and come up with a specific product that has merit. There were people that had that talent and three or four people came up with excellent scripts using that method. But it's not the only method of writing text, and in fact, what I think has developed is almost a laziness in the sense that young writers don't have the skills and the tutoring to sit down and write a structured formal text.

So what has happened in a way is that our written text has taken a back seat. Besides a handful of writers which include Aubrey Sekhabi, sitting here, and he has a resident writer-director in his theatre called Paul Grootboom who writes amazing texts. I've written some and there are probably five or six other formal writers in the country. What's happened is that, whilst we haven't been developing written text at the rate that we should be – sorry, I left out Craig Higginson at the Market Theatre who recently wrote *The Girl in the Yellow Dress*, which was an excellent script.

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But what's happened is that there have been other forms of storytelling that have grown very rapidly. Dance, for instance, in South Africa has grown tremendously, and there is a kind of a style that we look at now and I refer to as dance theatre, which is sort of like a play but also dance. What's happened there is that people have been allowed to be creative, or have had the means to fantasise, to create and dream in a language that has crossed various cultures, and have been able to make that work in a rehearsal room, in a method of workshop theatre. So dance is thriving and growing rapidly.

What's interesting to me is that, whilst there was this emphasis for many years on, let's tell our stories, let's engage in our own lives and tell the truth, that there is a certain sort of self-centredness in our writers and in our young writers which doesn't allow for much fantasy. This is a big concern for me. It's one thing to tell your story, but it's also another thing to be a dramatist or to write something that is theatrical. So what we have is a number of young writers writing their story as a kind of a docu-drama. Those stories are interesting, but they don't make for big plays and they don't make for a theatricality. I'm finding it difficult at the moment to source plays at the Baxter Theatre. I feel like we need to make another step. We've gone through that time of telling our specific stories which are usually concerned with our social issues and we need to somehow open our minds to other possibilities. I'm really looking towards international work again, to try and find some inspiration for our new writers and our young writers, to in a way, take them out of a place of the urgent social responsibility to a place where we can dream and be creative. I feel like we have almost had our childhoods ripped away from us as artists because we had this social responsibility. Of course I've always seen theatre as an instrument for social change, but along with that there also has to come the right to be creative. For me the next generation of writers in South Africa need to take back that right.

I think it comes with the possibility of writing in your mother tongue and fantasising in your mother tongue. Writers have been forced to write in English for some reason in South Africa. Mostly because the producers and the theatres are English and then there are the small Afrikaans festivals. But there is very seldom on the main stages in the Market Theatre or the Baxter Theatre or even at the National Arts Festival, there are very seldom plays in Xhosa and Zulu and Sotho and Tswana because there is no audience, or because the producers can't read the languages to choose the plays.

There's a start now where the National Festival are engaging with various other languages and indigenous languages, where Aubrey at the State Theatre is encouraging people to write in their home language, and I've just done it now at the Baxter Theatre too, where we just presented two Xhosa works this year. And I'm hoping that once we cross that barrier where we can say, ok we're presenting theatre in different languages, then we might find that writers become freer to fantasise and to dream, because I believe that you dream in your mother tongue. I'm hoping that we get back this right to dream and fantasise, this childish right to play. I'm looking forward to seeing what happens in the next 10 years to young writers in South Africa.

Paul Fahy: Are you looking much outside of South Africa, Lara, from a programming point of view?

Lara Foot: We're always restricted, you know, budget wise. I would like, because of this concern of mine, I would like to be doing more international work.

Paul Fahy: Do you have a remit? Is your funding generally to present South African work, or do you have a policy to present an international component to your work as well?

Lara Foot: We do have a policy to present an international component, but we're not funded. We fund ourselves from project to project. We have had a number of works from the international repertoire, but we are very limited when it comes to bringing in works.

What's more interesting to me is to do new plays with South African actors. As an experiment recently I did *Woyzek*, which I set in the Congo and had a group of six black actors do the piece. It was an experiment to see how specifically black audiences would respond to such a work. It was enormously successful, but what it did really was open the eyes of the young writers and actors that came to see the piece. Suddenly a different kind of story. Yes, *Woyzek* is set against a social backdrop which is bound by poverty and bureaucracy in a similar way like our country might have been seen some time ago. We still have huge issues around poverty. But because of the imagination of Buchner, because of the fantasy, this thing that I'm talking about where you're allowed to dream and fantasise and make up stories, here comes the story of this wonderful man *Woyzek*. We had conversations after the performance and young writers were very

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inspired by seeing work that was 200 years old, the writing, but the story and imagination were still something very inspiring.

Paul Fahy: I'm just conscious of time and would like to bring Malcolm into the conversation. Malcolm Purkey became Artistic Director of the Market Theatre Company in January 2005. He previously served as the Associate Professor of Drama at the University of Witwatersrand where he was also the leader of the Junction Avenue Theatre Company. He's also been active in film and television programme development. Malcolm has a long list of productions to his credit, including such highly regarded drama as *Sophiatown* and recently a show which some of you may have seen in Edinburgh, *The Girl in the Yellow Dress*, which is a co-production between Live Theatre in Newcastle and Citizens Theatre in Glasgow which played at the Traverse just two months ago.

Malcolm Purkey: Thank you and thank you very much for inviting me. I'm delighted to be here. I've been given the brief of talking about international coproduction. I could talk about all these topics at the table and they all delight me and challenge me and I think they are extraordinary, but I'm going to try and keep myself very narrowly focused on the understanding that you will understand that actually my first passion is with writing and directing. But now I'm a bureaucrat.

What happened was that I went to the Market Theatre, having worked there many times with an independent company, and I started there in 2005. Some of you have seen it, some of you don't know. The Market Theatre is in the heart of the so-called old town of Johannesburg. We're only 120 years old, but that's our old town and it's called New Town. New Town is an ex-meatpacking district, it's an ex-fruit and vegetable area, it's a bit industrial. It's like many centres in the world, regenerating itself led by culture. That meant we had a whole load of British consultants floating around. Two of them in particular, Brian Debenham and Peter Stark, were leading the conversation about how to regenerate New Town with the Market as an anchor tenant. Their example that they were, I think, happily trotting out was what was happening in Newcastle on Tyne. They introduced me very early to the Chief Executive, I guess, of Live Theatre Newcastle. The theory was that we shared some common interest.

I suppose the first point to make is that you have to strike up a personal relationship for these things. There has to be a kind of a sympathy or an empathy for the conversation to go forward. There was an immediate empathy, just at the level of - we both had ambitions, we both had restricted resources. We were both imagining this wonderful place, but it was threatened by all kinds of things, in particular in Johannesburg. In the last five years there have been enormous developments in New Town, but before that it was an area that was sometimes regarded as dangerous, sometimes regarded as not very attractive and so on. The Market Theatre itself is a beautiful Victorian building from 1913. No one would build a fruit and vegetable market like that any more. It looks like a Victorian railway station. And that's its beauty and that's three quarters of its success. I'm sure many of you know Live Theatre in Newcastle and what they've managed to achieve there. We know that there are always lots of stories about the question of gentrification, the question of displacement and so on. They all go hand in hand with this. That's a side story. But essentially what happened was that we struck up a relationship. They're a dedicated new writing theatre. We are very much a new writing theatre, although we have a slightly broader remit. So we started a conversation about what we could do. The first thing that we did - and it's taken five years to get to the project that we've just done this year. That's interesting in itself. These things take time. The first thing that we did was that they hosted my production of *The Island* with young actors. Fugard, Kani and Ntshona's production. I mean, writing project that they did in workshop in part. They hosted it as part of a British tour. They helped to tour it and they helped to build it. That was the first phase.

Then they said, well what are you going to do for us? I think partnership is always about how does the energy flow. Is it fair? Is it equivalent if not equal? So the second project we did was to say to their then-resident director Jeremy Heron, what do you want to do? I happened to have seen *Blackbird* and I thought it was an excellent production, and I said do you want to direct *Blackbird* specifically for the Market Theatre? They did a production which they brought to us and also to the National Festival. It was a very powerful piece of work. We had our challenges. One of our challenges at the Market Theatre is that our audiences have been enormously growing in the last five or ten years. In fact we've been training audiences since the middle 70s. But we're too successful at one level. So what we have is basically an 80% black audience that primarily want to see quite close reflections of their own lives with kind of a social base. That means that the next phase might have to be how do we train our new intelligentsia, our new middle class, our very rapidly growing hungry youth to be appreciative of things that aren't so directly reflective of their lives, but still can talk to us. So that's a challenge on the side.

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The next question was, ok so we've done these projects in a fairly simple way. You've hosted us, we've hosted you. We managed to find the budget and make it work, but how do we really collaborate? That's the biggest question: what is a collaboration? I think my first concern is how do we avoid we all know as we all know as [unclear] puddings. A bit of this and a bit of that. We've seen too many of those. How to find a project that can genuinely talk to both centres? That's a big question for me.

It so happened that the person who works as my Literary Manager was a very rapidly emerging writer. His name is Crag Higginson. He had already had a project in his mind. Essentially what happened was that *The Girl with the Yellow Dress* emerged in this way. It's a story of a British girl, a London girl actually, from Primrose Hill, who is seeking refuge in Paris from her family and from her own psyche. She's teaching English in that very particular way that TEFL teachers are asked to teach English. High level of grammar, high level of authority, high level of order, language and so on. So there's a kind of embedded colonial theme. She starts teaching a young man from Africa. He appears to be a Congolese refugee. So that was the play that was already emerging. I suppose what was really interesting, and relates to Lara's point and all of our concerns in South Africa at the moment, is that he went through ten drafts. We had really brilliant dramaturgical interventions from Britain. If Britain can offer anything it's a thousand years of literacy and a bit of machine guns. But mostly literacy. We don't have to control people with machine guns, we've got literacy. And so the dramaturgical interventions we found – I found in particular – really valuable. His capacity, Craig's capacity, with me working as a director to take the notes, to change the play, to rewrite it. We had a reading at the National last December and after that there was a major revision of the play in a way that allowed us to really leap forward.

I suppose those skills are what we're trying to develop in South Africa. Quality dramaturgical skills and quality interventions which don't feel like impositions. We have very sensitive conditions in South Africa. Any attempt to change a person's work is regarded as another act of violent racist intervention, and so on. I mean that partially in irony, but it's actually a real point. How do you help people to develop and yet not interfere in the work, and since culture is so sensitive and we have come from what past we've come from, it's very complicated around who owns the work, under what conditions etc.

The long and the short of it was that the play went into production in April this year and also, on the side, Citizens came on board because Jeremy Raison visited me in Johannesburg, sat in my office and said, what are we going to do, and I said, well we can co-produce a production I suppose. And somehow or another they got involved. I suppose one of the challenges is it's hard enough to do a co-production with two partners, but three partners became challenging. Although Jeremy's notes were really also good. What Jeremy managed to do was to secure us a month at the Traverse. There's no way the Traverse would take a work unless they believed in it, as we know. They believed in it. So far what happened was we world premiered at the National Festival, we then went to Cape Town and we then went from Cape Town to Edinburgh for a month to the Traverse, and then we've just played two weeks at Live and three weeks at Citizens. We're on our way to Sweden, because we have a long term partnership with Sweden, and we open in Johannesburg in the Market Theatre in late October.

One of the first principle I wanted to put on the table was – big joke – we've got rands, you've got pounds. We'll put in 100 rands, you put in 100 pounds. Ha ha. I think actually in the end we actually put more than the other partners on the table financially. That's a big question for us because that's a political question for us. You think that a two-hander travelling to all these venues with all these partners would save you money. Ha ha ha. Between the airfares and the put up and the housing and everything else, it actually costs a lot. And this is a two-hander. So how one does this, I don't know.

But I'd love to have more partnerships. I think lessons: only one partnership, probably only one centre for producing. Trying to produce with different centres – you do that bit and I do that bit – that's also a bit mad. The other sets of principles that I enjoyed but caused us some political question in Johannesburg and South Africa was that I wanted a British actress, I wanted a British designer. I was the director and there was a Johannesburg actor, and so on. That I think has been very fruitful for me personally. I loved working with a British designer, by Skype of all things. It was a bit complicated and interesting, but it worked. We had one or two meetings face to face and then all the rest of the meetings were by Skype. So there you go. And I'm a luddite.

So how do we go forward? Well, I have some lovely projects, including one that involves Ireland, but we need a lot of money. There's lovely stories. As we dig into our past, we dig into the fantasy world, and we're not so bound by the instrumental engagement with the crisis now, we can look, for example at the role of the Irish as they learned to be bandits in South Africa from their best teachers. And how they then got involved with their local communities and

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intermarried. These historical documents that just reveal our very interesting, complicated, perverse colonial pasts. So there you go.

Paul Fahy: Thank you Malcolm. We're pretty much done. Does anybody want to ask any question before we wrap?

Jane Daly: Can I just ask a quick one? Do you have any opportunity to commission playwrights, international playwrights?

Lara Foot: I can find the opportunity. But it's not like I have a budget to do that.

Jane Daly: But it would be an option?

Lara Foot: Yes, of course.

Paul Fahy: Ok, thank you very much Lara, Malcolm and Co. Thanks to the Irish Theatre Institute for inviting what I think was really fantastic and informative and enlightening group. Thank you.