

Towards Sustainability in the Theatre: A Look at The Company@Maitisong in Gaborone

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Abstract

In 2012 Gao Lemmenyane revived The Company@Maitisong (The Company), a theatre company previously formed in 2002 by a group of Drama students at Maru-a-Pula Secondary School, a private school in Gaborone. A number of the same students who initially formed The Company some years earlier joined Lemmenyane in an effort to develop a professional Theatre industry in Botswana. In so doing, The Company has faced a number of challenges such as lack of an adequate audience, lack of training of personnel, unavailability of theatre spaces around the country as well as lack of funding. As such it has been a part of their strategy to engage in projects that can address these challenges in order to create sustainability in the industry. This paper reflects on The Company's first production since its revival, *Pula! Money Matters* as a process of creating longevity in what is currently a fledgling industry.

Introduction

The Company@Maitisong, the resident theatre company of the Maitisong Theatre at Maru-a-Pula School, was formed in 2002 by then Head of Drama, Warren Nebe, his newest colleague, Gao Lemmenyane and a group of students looking for a deeper engagement with drama and performance. The objective of this development was 'the need to have a resident theatre company at Maitisong which would create professional work in collaboration with other local professionals' (The Company@Maitisong nd). Despite a number of successful productions, including a 2004 performance at the prestigious National Arts Festival in Grahamstown (South Africa), The Company became fairly dormant as the different performers went away to pursue further studies and work opportunities. It was only in 2012 that The Company was revived to pursue its initial mandate.

A major advantage at this point was the fact that a number of the original members, and their classmates, had returned from their studies and were working or looking to work in the Performing Arts (Lemmenyane 2015). In 2012 Lemmenyane put together a committee that would spearhead The Company's projects. These comprised Tlotlego Gaogakwe (teacher/writer), Tefo Paya (actor/facilitator), Tumisang Baatshwana (dancer/choreographer/writer), Zanele Tumelo (actor/producer/director), Gothataone Moeng (journalist/writer) and Kabelo Rapinyana (stage manager). In 2014 Moeng left the country to pursue post-graduate studies and was replaced by myself, a former Maru-a-Pula student and now a performer actively involved in The Company's projects.

This paper reflects on some of The Company's successes since 2012, particularly the *Madi Majwana* project, and how they lay groundwork for the formalisation of the theatre industry in Botswana.

A Brief History and Tradition of Botswana Theatre

This is in no way a thorough account of the history of theatre in Botswana, but it touches on the major contributors who are credited with its development. So far the most comprehensive account of Botswana Theatre is Thulaganyo Mogobe's 1995 PhD dissertation entitled 'Theatre in Botswana: A Study of Traditional and Modern Forms'. In this work Mogobe divides the development of theatre into three parts, namely the traditional theatre, modern mainstream theatre and popular theatre (Mogobe 1995). The traditional theatre is mainly cultural performances from pre-colonial times, including *mainane* (oral storytelling), *bogwera and bojale* (male and female initiation rituals), *dikgafela* (harvest festivals) and healing rituals (Mogobe

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1995). With the exception of *mainane*, Mogobe notes that traditional forms of theatre used song and dance as the main modes of expression. *Mainane* on the other hand were mostly narrative, incorporating aspects of song and dance as part of animating the performance. All modes of performance were, however, communal and served a purpose in the communities that performed them. 'Art in Setswana culture has always been utilitarian and functional.... Art is a reflection of the ethos, norms and mores, tradition and culture of a people' (Mogobe 1995:29). As such, in pre-colonial times performances took place to mark an occasion and constituted a community event. Unfortunately, these performance forms have been adversely affected by the drastic Westernisation of Botswana, a symptom of our colonial past.

While performance is an innate part of our history (Interview with G Lemmenyane and M Rabotsima 10 August and 15 October 2015), the development of theatre in post-colonial Botswana is often traced back to the 'Laedza Batanani' (Community Awakening) community action project in the 1970s (Mogobe 1995; Interview with M Rabotsima 2015 and S Setumo 22 June 2015). Laedza Batanani was a community theatre initiative developed in 1974 by the then Institute of Adult Education at the University of Botswana as an endeavour to engage communities in the northern part of the country to participate in development activities, and to work together to address social ills (Byram and Kidd 1978; Mogobe 1995 and 1999). The project ran for a number of years, and even led to the creation of similar projects such as 'Bosele Tshwaraganang' ('Dawn has broken unite') in the south of Botswana (Interview with F Youngman 15 June 2015). Despite the seeming erosion of traditional theatre forms, the core of Laedza Batanani and Bosele Tshwaraganang was the use of indigenous performance media in the form of song, dance and poetry along with puppetry and others in the interventions. As such, traditional theatre forms became incorporated into new forms of performance introduced in the country.

1983 saw the establishment of the University of Botswana Travelling Theatre (UBTT), which Mogobe describes as follows:

It started as the brainchild of the English Department under which it still operates. It is, however, and has always been open to all members of the university community, staff and students. The primary objective of the theatre when it came into being was to make theatre for the people, both on campus and the larger community outside (Mogobe 1995:70).

Although the UBTT focused more on the performance of scripted plays, it still incorporated song and dance in those performances, in an effort to give them 'some local outlook' (Mogobe 1995:78-79). Despite this, Mogobe laments that the UBTT did not perform any locally scripted plays, bar one, which he believes was a major weakness of the organisation. Nonetheless, the UBTT attracted large numbers of students, some of whom are still active in the theatre industry today.

At around the same time that UBTT was formed an entity called Reetsanang Association of Community Theatre Groups was established by Vincent Magwaza, Keikanetswe Moesi, Stella East and Lekono Paya. Although Reetsanang was based in Gaborone, the organisation had affiliates across the country, and later got involved with secondary school drama. Reetsanang's biggest contribution to the development of theatre in Botswana was their investment in the training of theatre groups and the teachers running drama in the schools (Interviews with Lemmenyane, Mogobe and Setumo 2015). The organisation benefitted significantly from international donors and was thus able to have a country wide reach.

Other organisations that coloured the theatre landscape between the 1970s and 1990s include MEDU Art Ensemble (1978-1985) which was mostly a project of refugees from South Africa (Morton 2008); Baranodi Performing Arts, which was credited with successfully blending traditional and Western forms to create plays that addressed issues affecting Botswana although they performed existing plays from the continent as well (Mogobe 1995: 100), and Capital Players which was mostly run by British

expatriates living in the country and focused on the performance of British plays. A major advantage of the Capital Players was that they had their own theatre in Gaborone, Moth Hall, where they were able to stage their performances (Mogobe 1995:101-104). Lemmenyane (2006) also makes mention of Phuthologo Theatre, Moremogolo Extension Theatre, Ghetto Artists, Mama Theatre and the Youth Health Organisation (YOHO).

The Theatre Tradition

Mogobe separates the theatre in Botswana into three forms, namely ‘art theatre’, ‘dance theatre’ and ‘popular theatre’. He observes that the art theatre is greatly influenced by Western theatre and focuses on the ‘well-made play’ and forefronts dialogue. The dance theatre, he says, forefronts dance and song as the main mode of expression and is more influenced by traditional forms of theatre. Popular theatre is also influenced by traditional theatre forms, but tends to focus more on socio-economic issues affecting communities. Popular theatre is ‘sometimes called community theatre, theatre-for-development, theatre-for-social-mobilisation etc’ (Mogobe 1999:43-44).

Mogobe further notes that theatre in Botswana seemed to have become a hybrid of different forms, namely traditional and western forms, though he decries this as lacking originality (1995). He also laments that there has not been ‘a consistent and sustained kind of developmental path. ‘When you look at theatre development in the country you’ll find that there might be a period where there is a hive of activity and there is a great enthusiasm and you know, things are happening...but then after sometime it just falls off’, (Interview with Mogobe 2015). This could be as a result of a lack of government involvement and policy that governs the running of theatre and performance in Botswana (Mogobe 1999; Interviews with Setumo, Rabotsima and Lemmenyane 2015). Although this presents a major challenge in the attempt to develop a sustainable theatre industry, it is not the focus of this article.

The hybrid form referred to above still persists, particularly in the performances of community theatre groups and school drama. This is a form that incorporates song and dance, and sometimes *maboko* (poems) in the performance of plays. This form is credited to UBTT and Reetsanang (Interview with Mogobe 2015). It began as an effort to incorporate traditional forms of theatre into the ‘well made’ plays that UBTT staged in an effort to make them relevant to the Botswana audience (Mogobe 1995:79). This then spread through Reetsanang as they used to engage members of the UBTT to train teachers running the Schools Drama Festivals and members of the community theatre groups (Interview with Mogobe 2015).

As witnessed by the demise of groups such as Baranodi (‘Translators’), Capital Players and more recently UBTT, this paper concludes that the lack of continuity that Mogobe (2015) mentions is more attributable to the severe deficiency of theatre in Botswana as a commercial enterprise. Whereas popular theatre still survives, it cannot really be said to be ‘thriving’ as compared to the time of Reetsanang and Laedza Batanani, particularly in terms of commercial gain. Despite its reach, this paper contends, however, that popular theatre has not evolved beyond the hybrid form described by Mogobe. The fact that there is no longer regular training as was the case during the time of Reetsanang is another contributing factor. In my view, the incorporation of song and dance has become routine with no real interrogation of how they contribute to the action of the plays performed. That being said, although community theatre groups do not necessarily enjoy commercial success, they still enjoy a large following as these elements seem to resonate strongly with Botswana audiences.

This popularity resonates with Mogobe’s argument that a Botswana theatre needs to speak to the lives of Botswana and incorporate their language(s) in its execution. These are the criticisms he levels against both the UBTT and Capital Players, whereas he attributes Baranodi’s success, though short-lived, to their ability to do this (1995:70-109). It could be added that it is this ability to speak to and reflect the lives of one’s audience that would allow the theatre to remain relevant as it would be able to evolve.

Despite this criticism, community theatre groups often try to reflect the issues facing their communities, although more often than not these plays seem to be improvised. Perhaps, this is what has led to another issue which Mogobe (2015) decries: the lack of a playwriting tradition in Botswana.

Lemmenyane (2015) adds that another key aspect to developing the theatre industry is regular productions as these create both continuity and employment. For instance, Baranodi used to stage performances twice a year while the UBTT used to stage one production annually, which they then took on tour to various places. In this way they took their productions to their audiences. This is important as a form of distribution by physically accessing audiences to watch one's productions. Unfortunately, there are challenges in the distribution. For instance, Gay Morris, speaking about the theatre system in Cape Town, notes that distribution is difficult because 'public transport for night-time theatre going is non-existent and in the daytime patchy at best. There are many venues in which theatre is staged that are not arts-oriented production houses' (Morris 2008:106). This also describes the Botswana situation because it is difficult to access audiences due to a lack of convenient and affordable public transport.

A key strength of community theatre and schools drama is that they take place during the day which enables them to attract significant audiences. However, community theatre events also pose a challenge to the development of theatre as a commercial entity owing to the fact that entry is free resulting in a loss of revenue. Furthermore, the lack of training has negatively affected the quality of work that is presented at these events, which has created a perception of theatre as something that is not worth paying for.

The Company@Maitisong: Prospects and Challenges

Since its inception in 1987, the Maitisong Theatre has always been viewed as being a large contributor in the development of Theatre in Botswana, serving the function of a national theatre of sorts (Interview with Mogobe 2015). According to Gao Lemmenyane, Maitisong could be said to have been a 'receiving house' hosting plays from outside Maru-a-Pula school, and bar the production of school plays by Maru-a-Pula students and staff (Lemmenyane 2015). According to Lemmenyane the resident company 'is necessary because it feeds Maitisong. So instead of Maitisong being only a receiving venue, Maitisong is able to produce its own shows. Maitisong can run without outside bookings because of The Company'.

Morris notes that a system of theatre consists of production, distribution and reception (2008: 106). In the absence of a formal policy on Arts, and more specifically theatre, this is an important development as it establishes some kind of system of theatre by allowing for production and distribution of theatre material. Production ensures the creation of local theatre works. In the past three years The Company has produced a number of plays. Their debut production, *Pula! Money Matters* premiered at the Maitisong Festival in 2013. This was followed by *Bana ba Metsi* later that same year; Donald Molosi's *Blue, Black and White* (which headlined the 2014 Maitisong Festival), and *Born Around Here* which premiered at the 2015 Maitisong Festival before going to the Artscape Heritage Festival in Cape Town. Through the committee members, The Company has also co-produced *Keneilwe: A Dance for the Given* (2014) and *X* (2015) by Sky Blue Dance Hub, *Morwa: The Rising Son* by Tefo Paya, which has performed in a number of festivals, including the 2015 National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa. Thus, The Company has created a system of production and distribution, which has allowed it to start developing a broader audience beyond the borders of Botswana. More importantly, it has begun to revive art theatre in the sense of theatre for commercial gain, as well as give rise to dance theatre. With regards to the theatre plays, there is also a creation of a body of work through the development of scripts which allows for the documentation of the work being done, and ensures that the work can go beyond the initial performance.

An important point to be made is that audience development is the key to development of the theatre industry in Botswana. Directly linked to this is audience education. At the moment a big challenge the industry faces is the unwillingness to pay for theatre performances, which makes it largely dependent on funders. However, funders also need to see a return on their investment. In other words, a beneficiary

of funding from a particular entity must meet the organisational objectives of that funder, especially in Botswana where theatre is not regarded as worthy of funding. Paradoxically, for theatre in Botswana this should not be a problem because the country's theatre has developed through the need to address issues affecting communities. Rabotsima states that the 'theatre was used for community education and social interventions so even in our writing that's the direction we take' (Rabotsima 2015). Professor David Kerr further asserts that in Botswana the 'theatre needs to engage more with communities in order for it to find a sort of relevant position in society' (Interview with Professor David Kerr 2015). This echoes Mogobe's earlier sentiments that the theatre tradition of a place needs to resonate with the people of that place, thus we need to marry the needs of our art with the needs of our communities.

Baranodi has demonstrated that art theatre can also address issues affecting society without compromising quality. Further, it is important to remember that in Botswana art has never been for 'art's sake' (Mogobe 1995:29). This essay notes that a Botswana-based theatre form will always need to serve more functions than just entertainment. It can be said that this has been the function of theatre everywhere, whether it was art theatre or theatre for development. This has been a key part of the production process. Maintaining an educational/developmental aspect within theatre production maintains both the communal aspect of theatre from traditional forms, while also addressing the challenge of funding.

The Company@Maitisong has been able to do this most notably through the 2013 production, *Pula! Money Matters (Pula)*. The play focused on the lives of multiple characters from different walks of life and their relationships with money, something that touches everybody's life, bringing in the communal aspect of the production. As a well-made play, *Pula* incorporated music and dance. These were worked into the script to form part of the action or make symbolic reference to the action instead of being stand-alone elements within the play. Often Botswana producers will feel a need to incorporate music and dance into their play productions because it brings an element of spectacle, and has the potential to help draw in the audience by making the play an event and an experience.

Because *Pula* addressed the issue of money and sought to promote financial literacy, the production was able to attract funding from Barclays Bank of Botswana to go on tour across Botswana. This served the interests of Barclays and showed its commitment to social responsibility; it also demonstrates a key aspect in theatre development – distribution. The production was able to reach a wider audience, cultivating an interest in The Company's work. This serves both the function of marketing and hosting the audience, which is key to the growth of theatre in Botswana if it is to be sustainable.

The audience education also lies in the ability to access other media. In 2014 *Pula* returned as 'Madi Majwana: Stories from Your Pocket (Madi Majwana)' – a radio drama comprising twenty, ten-minute episodes. Radio has allowed the production to reach a much wider audience, still with the help of Barclays. The radio drama was coupled with another countrywide tour for live interaction with audiences. Both the radio drama and the tour returned again in 2015, this time with new characters and new issues, though these are still tied to money. By addressing an issue that affects so many Botswana the production has managed to stay relevant for three years as it continues to evolve with its listenership. In terms of sustainability, it has given The Company, for now at least, an anchor project which allows them to carry on their mandate to engage other local professionals by creating employment for local theatre performers.

As the production has grown it has been able to employ a number of artists over longer periods, including students and graduates of theatre, which ultimately is what drives sustainability in the industry. The employment created by *Madi Majwana* has created a network of professional artists who can take the industry forward. It has thus created a cycle that allows artists to sustain themselves, and who are therefore able to keep creating new work, thus generating more employment for themselves and their fellow artists. Through the Maitisong Festival, artists also have a platform to showcase this work thus further advancing the vision to 'create professional work in collaboration with other local professionals' (Interview with Lemmenyane 2015).

As the network of performers with whom The Company works grows, there is also a possibility for a system of production thus laying a foundation for a structure of sorts within the industry.

Conclusion

The Company@Maitisong is building sustainability by drawing on elements of the traditional theatre and bridging the divide between art theatre and popular theatre, namely community theatre. This has been done by maintaining the communal aspect of theatre by telling Botswana stories. The Company's productions are also communal in the sense that they also evoke collaboration with people in the community. By focusing on issues relevant to the community, The Company has thus been able to match their artistic interests to the development goals of potential funders, especially Barclays Bank of Botswana, allowing for productions to be able to go on tour.

Tours serve an important function in developing audiences as they allow performers to distribute theatre on a wider platform by going to their audience, creating an interest in the art form. The use of radio also recognises that theatre cannot stand alone and needs to engage with other media to remain relevant and access the broader community.

Furthermore, as a resident company The Company has established a theatre system that has led to the creation of regular productions. This has infused a certain level of professionalism in the production of theatre, which ultimately is what will ensure improved quality and drive sustainability. While it may be too early to say whether this growth will have the desired long term effects, The Company has so far been able to successfully address some of the past setbacks in order to lay a foundation for a sustainable theatre industry in the commercial sense.

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