

## **ADDRESS BY THABO MBEKI AT LAUNCH OF BUSINESS ARTS SOUTH AFRICA**

4 February 1997

Last night (Monday 1997/02/03) Thabo Mbeki, Executive Deputy President, successfully launched Business Arts South Africa (BASA), at the Presidential Guest House in Pretoria.

At the event, which was attended by approximately 300 guests, - politicians, businessmen and artists, the Deputy President celebrated the launch of BASA, he said:

"If you will permit this, let me start by citing some words from the Bible - "For what shall it benefit a man if he should gain the whole world and lose his soul?"

To which Pieter Dirk-Uys might remark that we must therefore proceed to set up a Ministry with the appropriate name of the Ministry for the Protection of the Soul, with himself as the Minister - naturally!

After all, we do have the Ministers entrusted with the task of ensuring that we do indeed gain the whole world, through the creation of jobs, building houses, supplying clean water, increasing investor confidence, acquiring covettes for the navy as well as judges to ensure that the Deputy President gets a higher salary.

In one of his poems, the Irish poet, W.B. Yeats writes:

"An old man is but a paltry thing  
A tattered coat upon a stick  
Unless soul clap hands and sing and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress."

I think the Bible meant the same thing that Yeats celebrates in these lines - or rather, and to avoid the charge of sacrilege - Yeats understood what the Bible meant when it spoke of us standing in danger of losing our souls.

To extend Yeats' imagery, we may perhaps say that we are all of us "a paltry thing" unless our souls sing and louder sing to give meaning, dignity and the elevation of humanity to the bodies which are us, but are, after all mere matter which as must for golden lads and lasses as for chimney-sweepers, turn to dust".

The arts belong to that form of human and social existence which both the Bible and William Butler Yeats describe as the soul - the spiritual as opposed to the material, the spiritual which cannot exist without the corporeal, the capacity for noble thought which gives the human world the special dignity which separates the human from the rest of the animal world.

Painting, sculpture and the crafts, music and dance, literature both written and contained in folklore, decorative dress, cuisine, the ornamentation of the human body - all these and perhaps more constitute a message of humanity to itself that there are such things as beauty, elevating thought, a variety of emotion, the capacity to create a mode of behaviour which is concerned with much more than a mere response to the impulses and imperatives of the material body.

They are part of the phenomenon of human existence described as culture which constitutes the barrier which blocks your path and mine towards regress to the ways of the beastly world. Their practice is not a luxury reserved for the idle rich but an affirmation that our humanity calls individuals and societies to a form of behaviour which must respect the individuality of each person and the humanity of all.

Dumile Feni died in distressful conditions in New York, far away from his motherland, because our erstwhile white masters could see that his anguished figures in painting and in sculpture were a pained cry for the recognition of the humanity of others who were different in colour.

In Mozambique, to save himself from imprisonment and torture, the poet Malangatana had to explain to the Portuguese secret that his painted images of the sick and extended bellies of the young constituted a tribute to Portuguese colonialism for the way it fed those whom it despised and oppressed.

And so some trooped into jail and into exile because in their different creative ways they sought to affirm the dignity of all and the immorality of all actions that sought to demean and degrade.

Meaning nor been moved by the poetry of the words - umntu, ngumntu ngabantu!

As we decry the violent crimes that afflict our society which take away innocent lives, impose the foulest of dehumanising crimes on women and children, the search for material gain which takes precedence over everything which entitles us to call ourselves human - so must we recognise that over the years we created a society which removed the boundaries which demarcated what is human from what is merely and brutally animal.

And as each group went its separate ways acting on the enforceable and enforced decrees of the apartheid system, we lost the possibility to hear one another.

Whereas my mother told us allegorical fairy tales to teach us to hate laziness, many among the Afrikaners and other besides, said this is a matter of fact - die kaffer is lui!

Where by chance I came across the statement attributed to Beethoven that "humanity may perish but the Ninth will live for ever!", what meaning could I attach to this when the powers that be presented Beethoven's powerful Ninth Symphony with its incomparable choral "Ode to Joy" by Schiller as, but part of the things which made them, who described themselves as Europeans, entitled to oppress and exploit!

Neither could others among my compatriots hear the Xhosa poet Mqhayi when he recited his praise poem to the British King George VI and described him, who represented the British people who had betrayed us in 1910, as distinguished by a funneled mouth fit to emit foul air!

But the political order that tore our country apart is now no more. But yet it gave us a bitter heritage which we must strive to overcome.

Above all else we must create the situation in which the soul can sing and louder sing to restore a social morality which says the pursuit of material gain at all costs is not and cannot be what distinguishes us as South Africans, a patriotism which is imbued by love and respect for the fellow citizen regardless of race, colour, gender or age and a recognition of our common humanity which says to all of us that we are after all, one nation, bonded by the variety of our cultures, with none superior or inferior to the other, a nation that cannot be if any of these cultures is absent in as much as the ancient poet of Georgia, Shota Rustaveli said the sun cannot be without each one of these because each is a particle of it.

Let the formation of a new nation that has a soul be an inalienable part of our rebirth.

The business people who are here daily pursue the legitimate daily task of making profit. In the pursuit of that task they create jobs, help provide goods and services to serve the corporal beings that we are and help create the wealth without which human existence and progress are impossible.

But even they exist not as mere automatons to do all these things. They exist as human beings who laugh and cry, who love and hate, who are kind and cruel, who are human and animal.

I am deeply moved that we are able to meet today, the elected representatives of our people, the cultural workers, the profit makers, those who serve as they only stand and wait, to say together we shall each do what we have to do to contribute to the common effort to ensure that ours is a people that has recovered not only its freedom but its soul also.

Let BASA do what it has to do so that increasingly life in its living, inspired by the noble feelings of genuine individual and social creative activity, becomes even for the most lowly in our society, an ode to joy.

Thank you.

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