

Mandla Langa acknowledges 20 years of media freedom and diversity

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Speech to the MDDA/Sanlam Awards by Mandla Langa

First of all thanks to the Master of Ceremonies and thereafter, plaudits to the MDDA, and to Sanlam, for coming up with the awards, which, hopefully, will give encouragement to the young practitioners in media. And everyone knows, it has been said repeatedly, that media stands between chaos and us.

I am somewhat familiar with chaos, having had a ringside seat in places where it has unleashed itself and, if truth be told, caused a little bit of it in my days of youth.

A friend of mine, Jim Kelman, is a Scottish writer; his novel, *How Late it was, How Late*, was a joint winner of the Booker Prize in 1994. It's a bleak story whose genesis I witnessed, of Sammy, an incoherent Glaswegian drunk who gets beaten by cops and goes blind. The novel is about his efforts to come to terms with his disability, in an unforgiving world full of judgmental people.

I was thinking about Sammy's predicament, his blindness and struggle to navigate the world as I started writing this speech, realising that the question of blindness in a seeing world, of illiteracy in a land where the directions are in hieroglyphics, is what exercises a huge section of our population.

I was in exile in Botswana in the late 1970s, following the exodus of young people after the widespread uprisings whose epicentre was Soweto in 1976. Apart from the students whose education had been uprooted was a motley crew of refugees, some of whom had left the country for all sorts of reasons. We had established a succession of cultural formations and I had already made a kind of a name - or acquired some notoriety - as a poet and had an old Corona typewriter in the backroom where I stayed in the suburb of Broadhurst.

One of the South Africans was Bra David, whom we called Bra Deyi, who was wanted by the police and who lived with his girlfriend, Sis' Maisie, who also ran a shebeen in the area. Bra Deyi was the quiet, ageless type who didn't encourage intimacy, who doted on Sis' Maisie, who was pretty in that dangerous way and was much younger and seemed wise in the ways of the street.

One day, Sis Maisie disappeared and we learnt from Bra Deyi that she had gone back home. Her absence had a devastating effect on Bra Deyi; he hit the bottle hard and started fraternising with us, something he hadn't done before. Then, one evening, a few months since Sis Maisie's departure, Bra Deyi dropped in unannounced and sat down on the only chair in the room. He had been drinking.

"Ek hoor jy's a poet," he said. I must have murmured something to the effect that I had written a few poems and some of them had actually been used as an indictment in the trial of the black consciousness activists.

Then he told me that he had been writing to Sis Maisie, who was now in Botshabelo in Bloemfontein, and she hadn't responded to any of his messages. They had a child together back home and he was worried about them, wanting to know if they'd been arrested. And then, with tears streaming down his face, Bra Deyi told me that he hadn't treated Sis Maisie very well. Now he wanted to make amends. "So, my laaitjie, I want you to write to her, en jy moet daardie ding gebruik," he said, pointing at my typewriter. He exhorted me to reach deep down into my soul and bring out evocative language that would melt her heart. "Ek soek haar terug." I had a feeling that if this little exercise failed to produce positive results I'd be held responsible. And Bra Deyi wasn't the kind of guy you wanted to disappoint, even if the matter were out of your hands.

So I wrote the letter, now and then using lines from my friend Keorapetse Kgositse, borrowing allusions from Aime Cesaire, for instance:

And in this inert town, this squalling throng so astonishingly detoured from its movement, from its meaning, not even worried, detoured from its true cry, the only cry you would have wanted to hear because you feel it alone belongs to this town; because you feel it lives in it in some deep refuge and pride in this inert town, this throng detoured from its cry of hunger, of poverty, of revolt, of hatred, this throng so strangely chattering and mute.

I pored over the love poems of Pablo Neruda:

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.
To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her....
Why will the whole of love come on me suddenly

When I am sad and feel you are far away?

And then there was Keorapetse Kgositse:

There are memories between us
Deeper than grief. There are feelings
Between us much stronger than the cold
Enemy machine that breaks the back
Sister, there are places between us
Deeper than the ocean, no distances
Pry your heart open, brother, mine too
Learn to love the clear voice
The music in the memory pried

Open to the bone of feeling, no distances

I wrote Bra Deyi's letter that was shot through with stolen poetry, hoping against hope that Sis Maisie would respond and give this poor man a sign. I then had to leave Botswana for Lesotho in 1979 and thence to Mozambique, Angola and, much later Lusaka. Eleven years later, in December 1990, I stumbled into Bra Deyi, at Nasrec, during the Consultative Conference of the ANC, which was the period of the return of Oliver Tambo and hundreds of exiles. Bra Deyi was much older and heavier and somewhat more jovial. This surprised me, for I had thought he would be his lugubrious self. After the chitchat of catching up, I asked him if Sis Maisie ever replied. For a moment he was disoriented and then he started laughing, almost breaking into hysterics. What's wrong, I asked. "She didn't reply because she couldn't read," he said. "She did get the letters but was too ashamed to get anyone to read them for her." As I parted with him I thought of all that wasted poetry.

Much later, I think it was 1981, in Angola, I encountered another form of blindness in a seeing world. There was a ritual every Monday night in the camps, which was called the Jazz Hour, which was a period of affirmation and regeneration by the community of trainees and officers. Here, I met an old friend from Lesotho, who confided that he was embarrassed by the fact that he couldn't read and write. I asked the Company Commissar for permission to teach him; once that was accepted, the comrade and I got down to work. Today he has built on that foundation and is a functional member of society.

This reality of this blindness was impressed on me when I was in Tianamen Square in 1998, with Neil Harvey and Zwelakhe Sisulu the late CEO of the SABC. Suddenly, I found that my companions had disappeared and I was alone, without our minders and translators. Tiananmen Square is a vast stammering acreage of concrete and wall-to-wall humanity. I scanned the directional signs, perhaps to find my way back to the hotel. They were in Chinese characters, blank and unresponsive to my enquiry. No one spoke English and, to my horror, I found that I had become a curio, a prop for the millions of

Chinese tourists that had never been within touching distance of a black person. A few posed beside me while their pictures were taken. Mercifully, just as I was about to collapse from claustrophobia, Zwelakhe and Neil and our Chinese hosts reappeared and disrupted the queue of people that had formed lining up to have their picture taken with me. I was thus delivered from a possible panic attack.

In today's South Africa, this blindness and the inability to access the amenities still exist. In many instances the survival of these hobbling conditions is more sophisticated and hides under the guise of openness. Many of us believe that the wretched of the earth have struck a better bargain now that there is a proliferation of communication platforms. For instance, we cite the growth of the print and electronic media, radio, television, on-line blogs, cellular telephones, and information at our fingertips. Granted, these are measures of progress and success of the democratic dispensation ushered in two decades ago. They are part of the good story of twenty years of media freedom and diversity and couldn't have happened in this accelerated form outside of a democratic process.

A niggling question is one of how the successes towards the creation of diversity in the media have permeated those corners of society where they are most needed. I cannot claim to have monitored the media comprehensively in the period leading to the recent elections. But I was always appalled by the level of desperation in the utterances of those manning the barricades. There was a refrain, people vowing to withhold their vote to punish whosoever they regarded as culpable for lack of delivery. It seems to me that there is blindness when it comes to reading the constitution and the history of blood that forms its prologue. What I saw and read and heard was more about reporting the spectacle of revolt, bringing out the images of fire, rather than contributing some roadmaps, charts, which could guide us towards resolving problems.

A lot has been achieved. There are many platforms. The choice might seem wide but we have to ask ourselves what that choice seriously offers. To what extent are South Africans more enlightened than they were twenty years ago? Herbert Marcuse had this to say:

"The means of communication, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers to the producers and, through the latter to the whole social system. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood...Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior."

I have to end by pointing out that we're in trouble. Our languages are in trouble. You just have to listen to certain radio stations - we used to call them jukeboxes in the past - that present an aesthetic that's so remote from the lives and loves of our people. The disc jockeys - because I cannot call them anything else - outdo one another in aping pseudo-African-American accents or gangsta slang. They have no idea of the struggles of those self-same Americans to preserve their African roots after being kidnapped and sold off as slaves in the plantations. Malcolm X has commented on the basis of spirituals like "I couldn't hear nobody pray".

He had read in some books where it was said that some of the slave mothers would try to teach the ancestral language of Africa to their child who'd be off in another field somewhere but within earshot. They themselves would be praying and they'd pray in a loud voice, and in their own language. The child in the distant field would hear his mother's voice, and he'd learn how to pray in the same way; and in learning how to pray, he'd pick up on some of the language.

By language here I don't mean any of the official languages of our democracy but the inner, unquantifiable language of commitment, of criticism and self-criticism; the language of love and defence of all the things we hold sacred and dear; an adherence to the values that imbued us with the spirit that enabled us to withstand everything and fear nothing. In those days and nights of love and war, we knew how to protect the weak and become the eyes of the unseeing and the tongues of the mute. That consciousness should still stammer in the collective corner of our hearts.

Many thanks.

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- **Entries open for MDDA-Sanlam Local Media Awards** 25 Nov 2014
- **Mandla Langa acknowledges 20 years of media freedom and diversity** 28 May 2014
- **MDDA-Sanlam Local Media Awards winners announced** 27 May 2014

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