



John Hogg

ARTS ACROSS AFRICA SIMPLY EXHILARATING

I attended the exhilarating six-day Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA) in April 2010 as a guest of Arterial Network, the African Arts Institute and Africalia, with 20 inspiring arts writers from 15 African countries which included Cameroon, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Uganda, Zambia, Botswana, Tanzania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Kenya.

We met to stimulate discussions about the state of arts journalism in Africa and create a pan-African network of arts journalists in an attempt to improve the state of arts journalism on the continent. We all agreed there was a dire need to mentor and train young arts writers, to share experiences and resources, to ensure that news and developments in the African creative sector were being recorded and critically evaluated. We all felt the need to promote and defend independent arts journalism against intrusive economic, political and social pressures.

By the end of the festival the African Arts Journalism Network (AAJN) was formed and a task team was elected to take the recommendations further and a draft constitution and strategic plan was devised.

Interestingly a year earlier at a workshop in Maputo, the Campus Euro-Africano De Cooperacão Cultural (also with generous support of Africalia) voiced the same challenges of arts journalism on the continent. With the AAJN's awareness of issues of linguistic diversity and our concerns that the African print media reporting on African arts and culture is generally weak with more interest in gossip and entertainment, we are aware of the many challenges. But more positively we agreed with Paul Brickhill's Reflections on the

State of Arts Reporting in African Print and Web Media from the Maputo conference that: "Mostly arts journalists are transforming the landscape of arts coverage through web sites and blogs on the internet, many of which are excellent."

Peter Rorvik, a founder of Arterial Network and director of the Centre for Creative Arts in Durban, who co-ordinated the workshop on arts media in Maputo commented that the restraining contexts in Africa, poverty, poor infrastructure, lack of skills, economic instability, volatile societies, and repressive environments, inhibit freedom of expression and precipitate censorship and self-censorship.

"Space for culture in newspapers is diminishing," said Rorvik. "Syndication of articles is reducing space for local content and the disproportional presence of foreign cultural content in African media threatens development of local culture and exerts excessive external influence.

"The fact that cultural products have become the leading export of the US, for example, should motivate the strengthening of creative industries in Africa," he said. "The proliferation of web sites, social networks and mobile phone technology offers exciting opportunities. New practices offer new dimensions for cultural expression."

The AAJN's strategic plan includes starting an online forum with a minimum of 75 arts journalists across Africa, launching an AAJN website and an e-newsletter. The network aims also to produce arts radio and arts television slots aired in collaboration with media in member countries; create a comprehensive database of arts journalists with bios and pictures from photojournalists; set up a six-language pan-African magazine on the

arts and to run an independent arts news agency.

The network plans to reach into high schools and talk to pupils about reporting the arts as well as working with Unesco to find out what's in the curricula of arts and journalism schools across Africa. They will also support arts criticism through workshops, scholarships and fellowships.

Subsequently there has been a successful arts journalism training workshop with AAJN and Arterial Network working in collaboration with African Synergy/Marimba media, supported by Africalia. The training workshop for arts journalists from East Africa took place in Zanzibar in February 2011 with 11 participants from East Africa (Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania).

Telesphore Mba Bizo, a member of Arterial Network's steering committee and task team member of the AAJN who attended the training said: "I spoke to the trainees about the broader vision of the AAJN of the importance of creating a technically and financially sustainable link on the continent working towards affording a platform to promote artistic creative excellence through wide exposure, reviewing, previewing, criticising and carrying out research on all forms of art."

Following this, I joined Mba Bizo in the Cameroon in March this year with Africaphonie representing AAJN to present papers on arts journalism and to convince the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism at the University of Buea to include arts journalism in their curriculum.

*For more information on AAJ contact
Suzy Bell on bellsuzy@gmail.com or
Telesphore Mba Bizo on mbabizo@yahoo.fr
www.artsinafrica.com*