

# ARTS JOURNALISM NOT INCIDENTAL TO LIFE OR MEDIA

To declare that arts journalism is in a state of crisis is nothing new. Historically art journalism in this country has always been marginalised in the mainstream press. However, steadily declining circulation figures in the newspaper industry are placing this vital form of journalism in a much more precarious state, which is impacting on its quality as well as its quantity.

Arts journalism has been one of the biggest casualties of the on-going crisis in print journalism. Deemed a superfluous addition and subordinate to news, business or sports reporting, this area of journalism has been hardest hit by budget cuts and other cost saving strategies implemented to secure the financial viability of newspapers – and magazines.

This has resulted in reduced column space for reporting on art, dance and even more popular arts, such as literature, film and music. There are fewer permanent positions for arts reviewers/commentators and commissioning has decreased substantially. Consequently, press releases and international wire copy has become a mainstay of culture/entertainment pages or sections.

As a result few talented arts scribes remain in this branch of journalism; many are drawn to academia or snapped up by editors for political reporting, where their critical skills are put to other uses. With most freelancers earning less per word than they did five years ago, despite incremental increases in the cost of living, undoubtedly there are few financial incentives for them to remain in the field.

Many established writers pursue other forms of commercial writing to line their pockets while foregoing their fee for arts articles in order to maintain their public profile and engage with cultural developments. This has further engendered the notion that arts reporting isn't a valuable media commodity.

The internet has provided a few more platforms, but not all of these have necessarily expanded the field. Many specialised arts websites are parasitical in nature, working as portals that feed off arts reports published elsewhere thus avoiding commissioning articles or reviews. In light of these conditions arts journalism is under severe threat.

The marginalisation of arts journalism in the mainstream press has impacted on its quality, which has paradoxically substantiated its marginalisation. Few editors demand the same level of critical rigour and research from their arts reporters as they do from their hard news writers. Nor is there the expectation that arts writers, or even culture editors, be knowledgeable in their field.

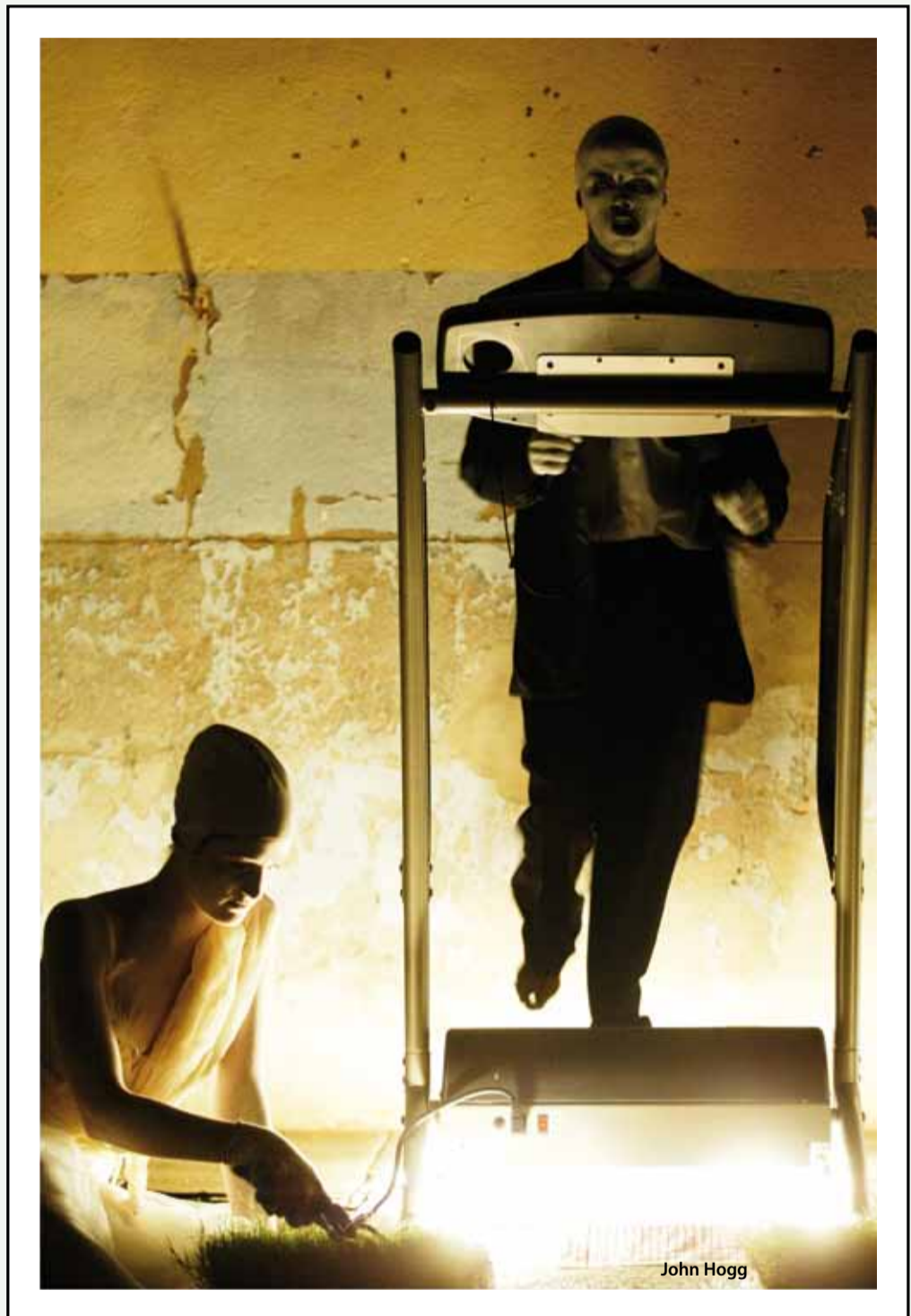
There is also often little recognition that the arts encompass a range of specialised disciplines that require specialised knowledge. Though few editors would dream of dispatching a rugby writer to cover a tennis match, a film reviewer is often requested to cover a dance event. Granted, there have been some advantages to this practice: it has given rise to a new brand of multidisciplinary arts writer, who is ideally positioned to decode interdisciplinary art products, but it has also, in many instances, detracted from the accuracy and legitimacy of the reporting.

Awareness of the worsening state of arts journalism in South Africa needs to be raised. Those arts journalists remaining in the field need to be proactive in drawing the media's attention to this crisis, while substantiating the continued relevance of arts journalism in an age where celebrity culture appears to be eclipsing cultural reporting and is perceived as a reliable way of attracting the attention of prospective readers.

It is hard to quantify the number of people in our population who are interested in arts coverage but the latest attendance figures from the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown give us some idea of the size of that readership. Given that the more than 200 000 visitors to this annual arts event reflect only a small percentage of those who patronise the arts, one could surmise that a sizeable amount of South Africans would find quality arts reports, reviews and features appealing.

It is common knowledge that the *Mail&Guardian*, a newspaper prized for its investigative reporting, recently conducted a survey which uncovered the fact that a large proportion of their readers were buying their newspaper to read their arts reports. They subsequently doubled the size of their culture supplement.

In many ways arts reporting complements political stories and op-ed pages as artists/playwrights and filmmakers often address the same issues that feature in those sections



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of newspapers – Eric Miyeni and Navan Chetty's recent documentary *Mining for Change: a Story of South African Mining*, which substantiated the ANC Youth League's call for the nationalisation of the mines, is an obvious example. Thus quality, in-depth arts reporting is able to make a meaningful contribution to the sociopolitical discourses that journalism is tasked with cultivating.

Arts journalism of a high standard also makes a substantial contribution to the development of the cultural landscape or character of a society. It educates and grows audiences for the arts but also engages in a critical dialogue with cultural producers which, if effective, cultivates the development and quality of their work, while creating a historical archive of these often ephemeral products.

In principal few oppose the preservation of arts journalism, however, it shouldn't simply be tolerated or viewed as incidental to media products. It should be enhanced and exploited to bolster the quality and diversity of publications. Arts critics and writers should also turn their critical gaze inwards and discover ways in which they can remain relevant within the fluctuating world of journalism.