

by Gwen Ansell



In August 1999, the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ) advertised a Reporting Arts and Culture course. Over five days, and with co-operation from the Johannesburg Arts Alive Festival, participants would hear background lectures on South African visual art and theatre, African popular music and jazz, cinema and dance. They'd learn reviewing techniques, and explore the range of arts stories beyond reviews and previews. Attending performances and rehearsals alongside experienced professional writers and with privileged interview access to a selection of practitioners, they'd write, review their own work, and write more and better. Many journalists phoned to inquire, but only six South African publications applied for places for staffers — although two more editors grudgingly said they “might send someone if you can cover all this stuff in just a couple of days”. On such small numbers, the IAJ could not afford to run the course. It was cancelled.

In February 2003, the IAJ advertised a similar course (with a narrower genre focus) linked with the Cape Town North Sea Jazz Festival and the Columbia University National Arts Journalism Programme (NAJP), who provided a visiting lecturer. The advertisement contained the magic word “scholarships”, although funding had been donated for only five. Thirty-two South African arts writers applied, ranging from students and interns to an arts editor. Only three titles were prepared to send fee-paying participants.

An inspired and desperate combination of subsidy, barter deals and penny-pinching ensured that the course did run, with a full 16 participants. Of its outcome, more later. But why does all this matter?

Arts journalism is in crisis in South Africa, and no one seems to care.

But We are not alone. Media coverage of arts and culture has three main categories: consumer guidance, documentation and analysis. The major 1999 Columbia NAJP study Reporting the Arts demonstrated that across America the first category (events listings, lifestyle and showbiz reporting) dominated pages and channels. In-house staffing and resources had failed to keep pace with a nationwide explosion of arts-related activities. Arts and living sections lagged behind other sections of the newspaper in terms of status, page-space and resources.

Sharing this fate is no comfort. In South Africa, a rich literary tradition was established by arts commentators in the historic black press. The example often cited is Todd Matshikiza in Drum, but the tradition predates him, extending back to the debates in the mission-based periodicals of the 19th Century. The Afrikaans press was similarly intent on establishing its own coherent cultural discourse. In the struggle era, radical papers risked banning through these debates, and specialist magazines like Staffrider took them further.

All focused in various ways on identity and how it might be shaped, symbolised, mediated or distorted by forms of cultural expression. Along the way, they provided informative and mightily entertaining writing.

In those days the words of songs, the forms of dances, who played where and to what audience, the ‘purity’ of a particular discourse and the status accorded to different categories of cultural creators were woven into the walls of oppression and forged into the weapons of struggle. Identities were annihilated: symbolically and literally with lies.

And now here we are, liberated. Striving to shape the democracy that can best grow on that distorted history. Negotiating power and gender identities that can handle a legacy of patriarchy and a present of Aids. Untangling what post-apartheid, race and ethnicity might really mean, and simultaneously co-architects of something called the New Plan for Africa's Development. In that context, anything that illuminates who we are, how we got there and who we might become, is surely news.

Add the tsunami of global culture now washing over a free-trade South Africa subject to neither censorship nor boycotts. Add the hard news that we have almost as many people out of formal employment as in it (current figures stand at 41.6%), and that dumped culture destroys jobs as surely as dumped takkies.

Yet the space (and budget) for thoughtful arts coverage in the mainstream media continues to shrink. Part of the reason here and elsewhere is commercial pressures.

Readers may enjoy extended reviews, but publicists and their friends in newspaper advertising departments do not. A preview can deal in optimism; a review may notice that the performer was a) out of tune, b) drunk or c) lip-synching. The bean counters ensconced on the upper floors have always preferred ad ratios that leave little page-space for stories, and with cinema chains and restaurants to court, where better to find these ratios than on the arts pages?

The hard truth, however, is that arts writing here has made itself more vulnerable to these pressures through shoddy standards. A popular daily captions photographs of the country's best-known musicians with the wrong names. An up-market weekly runs a story on Winston Mankunku Ngozi containing half a dozen factual errors. A Sunday paper tops a serious story on a woman trumpeter with a headline about blow-jobs. A reviewer for a big city daily tries to offer praise to a delicate drum solo with the verb “thumping”. Competing newspapers regularly bore readers with near-identical stories because the journalists are either copying out the same press release or were satisfied to sit passively in the same press conference. Praise singing and a fondness for free lunches characterise popular perceptions of the beat's ethical character. Is it any wonder readers don't care when our space gets cut?

At the same time, very little specialist training is available for the arts writer who aspires to do better. Rhodes University grasps the opportunity offered by the National Arts Festival on its doorstep to produce Cue, an arts daily, for 10 days each year. Wits plans an arts journalism option. **But many higher education courses treat arts writing simply as a variety of feature writing to be dealt with in passing.** Commercial colleges offer a slick, one-size-fits-all formula, where they touch the topic at all. As for in-service training, see above.

Yet there is a body of knowledge and skills to be learned. Good arts writing starts with passion for its subject, which cannot be trained-in. But that is true of quality performance in any profession, and does not negate the usefulness of training. And arts writing rests on — but also develops — strong general and specialist knowledge; specialist knowledge for obvious reasons, and general knowledge because **criticism without context is hollow.**

Some other skills are generic to journalism: interviewing in particular. Some of the stories that come an arts writer's way need conceptual frameworks from business, politics, economics or labour reporting. The skill lies in seeing behind the paintings, performances and poems to spot these issues.

Arts writing is framed by a specific body of cultural and critical theory, and offers a specific ethical terrain to be explored: in particular, how to handle relationships with sponsors and those frequently offered free lunches (or tickets, or books). The 2003 IAJ Cape Town course could not have run without sponsorship from Standard Bank, who was also a sponsor of the North Sea Jazz Festival. Their attitude was scrupulously hands-off. Nevertheless, it made a useful introductory ethics debate for participants — and it will be surprising if it does not **raise a few cynical eyebrows** among readers of this piece.

And then there is the non-generic skill: the very special and sensitive kind of looking and listening that arts writers need both to do, and to translate into the right words, if their work is ever to say more than “buy a ticket to this show”. To discuss that, the words of my 2003 course participants in their feedback and course diaries are the most eloquent. When young arts writers are drawing conclusions like this, I don't regret taking the free lunch. **Regrets should belong to the media houses that felt such learning was not worth paying for.**

★ “You can observe and listen to the voice of an artist in a press conference or interview, and then see if you can hear that same voice in the music. I'm going to try and do that in future.”

★ "Realising that the music that comes out of someone is a by-product of who they are. They're saying: this is how I want to show you my world."

★ "When you're in an audience, you need to watch the stage and the interactions there as well as listen."

★ "Appreciating the music is what can lead you to a style of writing that avoids clichés, because you are really listening, beyond the clichés."

★ "I realise you have to consider when you're ready to write a review: straight after, or **do you need to cook it longer?**"

★ "I realise how important it is to have a good stock of words and terms to do this kind of writing."

★ "I'm becoming aware of this battle between commercial pressures and purity; how it's everywhere in radio programming, recording and so on."

★ "I've been thinking about why there is no South African music journalism archive. In a few years we'll be looking around and asking where the documentation is."

★ "You can appreciate music much better through understanding where it comes from and how it's constructed."

★ "I've learned that it's **OK** to raise debate about artworks, so long as you have some basis for your arguments. There are minimum requirements: **you can't just write anything!**"

★ "Taking notes is just a journalist tuning her guitar."



A tale of two courses



Gwen Ansell has been an educator, writer and journalist in both the UK and Southern Africa since the early 1970s. She is the author of several training texts for writers, most recently *Basic Journalism* (M&G Books 2002). Her work as an arts journalist appears regularly in South Africa and elsewhere. She has just left her post as Executive Director of Johannesburg's Institute for the Advancement of Journalism in order to complete a book on the history of South African jazz for international publishers, Continuum. sisgwen@iafrica.com