

FORGED IN THE HEAT

25 YEARS AGO THE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM AND MEDIA STUDIES AT RHODES UNIVERSITY LAUNCHED *CUE* – A NEWSPAPER DEDICATED TO COVERING THE NATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL IN GRAHAMSTOWN. *CUE*'S FIRST EDITOR, GAVIN STEWART, GOES BACK TO THE BEGINNING

Cue's instant success in 1987 came from a coincidence of events and places around, as much as inside, the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University.

The smouldering surround was a national State of Emergency, a punishing campaign by the apartheid government to put down a decade of rebellion. The liberation movements had sworn to make the black townships ungovernable; the youth demanded "liberation before education". Weekend funerals ignited more violence; more funerals.

But the tensions of repression and rebellion in any society also set off a creative surge, a burgeoning of all the arts, of allegory and satire and, more awkwardly, of protest theatre. The arts offer catharsis and a shared cloister, escape and engagement, an eye in the storm. The inconvenience of Grahamstown for everyone who does not live there makes the National Arts Festival a pilgrimage, as Guy Butler liked to say.

Increased funding from Standard Bank ensured a greater scale of productions and exhibitions, record audiences and the presence of most of the country's top arts journalists. This was surely the largest festival in the world to happen in a town without its own daily newspaper. The bank wanted to know if the journalism department could fill this gap.

Desktop publishing (DTP) was about to change print forever, but it was in service only at the *Weekly Mail* in Johannesburg. The journalism department had one small computer room and five IBM desktops – their 384K RAM about 1/1000th the power of today's desktop; an adjoining seminar room, created a rudimentary newspaper set-up.

Don Pinnock, then a senior lecturer, insisted: "We have to have a DTP system and Simon Pamphilon" (then *Rhodeo's* layout expert). Don conjured equipment and instruction in exchange for advertising. Charles Riddle volunteered his diplomatic and phenomenal proofing skills. We wrote to the editors of the major papers asking to use their writers – we could give all a

presence while competing for sales only with the *Eastern Province Herald*. Brainstorming with honours students for a word to fit all the arts came up with *Cue*. Student skills drove production.

Journalism was housed with drama in the Rhodes Theatre Building, close to the centre of the sprawling festival and home to two theatres and a small cafeteria. Other come-ins for reviewers, until the early hours of morning, were the company of colleagues, the heat of the debates – and help with the new technology. Gone was the security of office typewriter or dictate typist, editors wanted the copy electronically. *Cue* had an on-board technician.

In return the reviewers assumed a proprietary concern for policy and content. Competing reviews were printed side by side: "With the Pigs – against the Pigs". Acerbic observations filled the *BaQstage* column. Visitors streamed up the stairs to see the show.

As technology advanced *Cue* would lose "the smell of midnight oil".

At the height of the emergency state-funded performing arts councils and independents were producing trenchant theatre. Marthinus Basson's *Anatomie Titus – Fall of Rome* (Pact), Athol Fugard's *Place with the Pigs*, Terence Shank's *Strider* (Capab) and Gibson Kente's *Sekunjalo* were undeniably political. But *Titus* was set in Rome; *Pigs* about a Russian deserter, and *Strider* a Tolstoy story about an outcast among thoroughbred horses: "What do they mean: piebald?" Only *Sekunjalo* was overtly South African, a cautionary tale about rising vindictiveness in the struggle: it was banned in King William's Town under emergency regulations.

Cue's tenuous hold on reality came in the *Herald* posters on the front page each day: 50 from SA to meet ANC... Necklace victim: wife speaks... Priest shot in East Cape town... Swazi hit on ANC trio... Payroll robbers kill PE women...

Cue concluded its first festival with two ambitions: to review every production, main or fringe, the morning after it opened; and to replace the ungainly word "festivalgoer", which would embrace everyone there.

Over time a large panel of arts lovers volunteered, many teaching at Rhodes or local schools. Their incentive was two tickets for each performance; their equipment an A5 card large enough for a short comment. The back of the card was for productions which deserved more.

"Festino" and "festivore" ("as in culture culture") leapt from a page of suggestions by Prof Jean Branford, head of the South African English Dictionary Unit, spawning "festoaf", "festitol", "festering" and "fested out"...

Cue was not exempt from criticism, which produced a calculation that the paper could, if necessary, fly on advertising and sales without sponsorship. But sponsorship won and, when I left Grahamstown, fringe reviews were relegated to the back of the *Cue*.

The festivals of the late 1980s brought a rare concatenation of political upheaval, artistic excellence, escape and engagement, deadlines, technical innovation, geographies, sponsorships, talent and skill, tiny rooms and giant egos, and huge appreciation. *Cue*, as David Williams put it, was "forged in the heat".



John Hogg