

Opening and shutting doors of culture in Klein Karoo

The Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunsfees aims to be inclusive. But says **Andries Bezuidenhout**, who attended the festival recently, the arts event gives out very mixed messages.

Every year, for 14 years now, thousands of people congregate in the town of Oudtshoorn to attend the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunsfees (KKNK) – the Klein Karoo National Arts Festival. The theme of this year's festival was 'Daar's Afrikaans in almal van ons' (There's Afrikaans in all of us). This signals an attempt to emphasise the inclusive nature of the language.

But pointing out that the majority of Afrikaans speakers are not white is one thing. Creating an Afrikaans arts festival that truly reflects the diverse nature of the language is a different matter altogether.

The state has largely withdrawn from funding Afrikaans art and culture. This has left a void that the market is now filling. The KKNK's main sponsor is Absa Bank. Other prominent sponsors include Afrikaans-language newspapers and magazines. These sponsors have their own agendas, of which commercial interest is clearly the most important.

Arts festivals such as the KKNK, as well as others in Potchefstroom (Aardklop), Bloemfontein (Volksblad Kunstefees) and Nelspruit (Innibos), have become flagships for this market-driven model. Producers take the risk of putting on plays and music productions at these festivals. Some productions show returns, but many fail dismally.

The upside is a very dynamic and vibrant art scene that creates jobs for producers, stage managers, costume designers, actors, musicians, and sound and lighting technicians. The downside is that few South Africans can afford to travel to the Karoo, pay for accommodation, and buy tickets for theatre productions often costing more than R80 a piece.

Overall attendance this year was down by about 10% from last year. The price hikes on fuel and the interest rates are hitting even those who usually have money to spend on arts and culture. But despite this, the festival still had a turnover of R170-million and made a profit of R90-million. Visitors to Oudtshoorn spent R15-million on accommodation alone.

If you take a stroll down the streets of Oudtshoorn you will notice that those who attend are predominantly white. An important reason for this is class inequality. Even Oudtshoorn's working class and the poor just cannot afford tickets to participate in most of the events.

Another reason why the KKNK and the other Afrikaans-language festivals remain predominantly white is aggression from some ultra-conservative Afrikaners. Some wear caps with the old South African flag, while others wear T-shirts that say "100% Boer". A popular T-shirt is

one that says: "Praat Afrikaans of hou jou bek!" (Speak Afrikaans or shut up!).

Then there is the popularity of the song *De la Rey* by Afrikaans singer Bok van Blerk, which calls on Anglo-Boer War general Koos de la Rey to come and lead the Boers. The song presents Afrikaners as victims who perished in Lord Kitchener's concentration camps. Bok van Blerk says he wants Afrikaners to rediscover their sense of pride.

Black Afrikaans-speakers just don't feel welcome in this environment.

While those who tote the old orange, white and blue flag are a minority fringe group, Afrikaners are clearly rethinking their role and position in the country. The letter's pages in Afrikaans newspapers are filled with complaints about crime and corruption, and the trade union Solidarity's campaign against affirmative action has struck a popular chord.

The new wave of emigration, called the New Great Trek by some, has led to fierce debates and discussions in Afrikaans-language internet forums. Afrikaner groupings in countries like Australia and New Zealand constantly point to job opportunities and low levels of crime there. Some have even formed groups that assist others to emigrate.

Emigration is also fuelled by the

emphasis in some Afrikaans newspapers on Afrikaners who are victims of crime. Incidents of rape and torture are almost pornographically displayed on front pages. Clearly crime pays – especially if you sell newspapers.

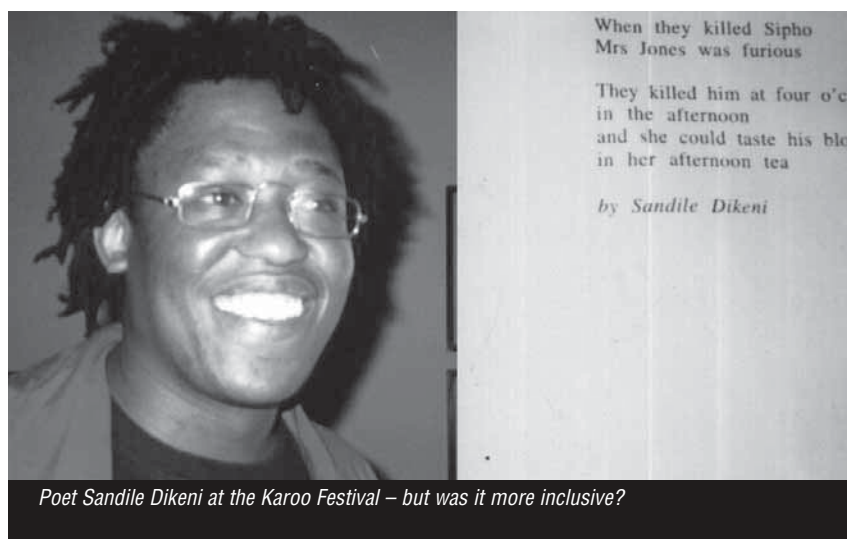
When confronted with the fact that crime affects all South Africans, regardless of race, an Afrikaans newspaper editor recently tried to justify his newspaper's approach. He argued that the victims they reported on were white by chance. Their real focus is on skilled people who tend to emigrate because of crime, which contributes to the national crisis.

So deep is the concern about the mass emigration and skill shortages that a group of prominent Afrikaners recently signed a public declaration committing themselves and their families to staying in South Africa. They present this as their patriotic duty.

For someone unfamiliar with Afrikaans-language media, it is hard to understand the siege mentality that is currently gripping white Afrikaners. Letters in newspapers expressed surprise at the media coverage and outrage over the racist video made by Afrikaans white students at the University of the Free State. This was contrasted with farm murders and rapes, crimes that are interpreted as being racially motivated. One person even wrote in a letter that "blood is worse than piss".

All these debates and insecurities play out at the KKNK in various ways. Some artists have caught on that insecurity sells. The De la Rey phenomenon is fast becoming a trend, with playwrights and musicians clambering to write plays and songs that draw on the symbols of Afrikaner history. This is then presented as 'protest' art.

This new siege mentality is



Poet Sandile Dikeni at the Karoo Festival – but was it more inclusive?

making it increasingly difficult to point out that it is in the longer term interest of Afrikaners to redress racial imbalances in the workplace and in the economy.

Nevertheless, there were a range of initiatives in Oudtshoorn that pointed to signs of hope.

A first sign of hope was discussion sponsored by *Die Burger*, the only Afrikaans newspaper with a black editor. These discussions involved a range of speakers, including Cosatu's (Congress of South African Trade Unions) Tony Ehrenreich, who addressed topics such as the state of the economy, our democracy, minorities, the media, and indeed, arts festivals themselves. For me it was interesting to witness the lively interactions between Ehrenreich and Afrikaner farmers. One farmer said that he expected to be angry at Ehrenreich, but was surprised when he found that he actually agreed with much of what he was saying about the state of the economy.

A second sign of hope was the support that productions by playwrights such as Mike van Graan received. Van Graan put on a play *Die Generaal* (The General) that explored issues such as crime and corruption without falling prey to

racial stereotyping. He also used one of the strongest weapons of art, satire and humour, in a play called *Bafana Republic*. True protest theatre is clearly alive and well.

Finally, a fascinating theme at the festival was the rediscovery of black and Black Consciousness traditions in Afrikaans. A meeting place, the *Garob Kuierplek*, was created to celebrate Khoi history and culture. The work of the late Oudtshoorn struggle poet Patrick Petersen was celebrated, and there was a discussion on the Black Consciousness tradition in Afrikaans literature.

An arts festival like the KKNK reflects all the limitations and possibilities of our fractured society. The organisers are trying in various ways to involve the local community. But real attempts to open the doors of culture to the working class and the poor who are also those who speak Afrikaans, will remain limited if the state allows such spaces to be shaped by market forces only. LE

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