

Drama for Life: the aftermath.

The Drama Department at the University of Pretoria (UP) recently hosted the fifth annual Drama for Life Africa Research Conference in Applied Drama, in collaboration with the Wits Drama For Life programme. The conference co-ordinators on UP's side were Prof Coetzee and Dr Taub, assisted by Ms Rabie, Mr Broodryk and an efficient team of student conference assistants.

The conference aimed to: create intercontinental dialogue concerning the growth of global intolerance, conflict and violence; interrogate the roles that drama / theatre can play in social regeneration; and forge innovative artistic interventions as a form of social activism. The conference further aimed to open up a dialogue space in which to confront and negotiate differences, build structures that facilitate the development of tolerance and communication, and by which to create a more humane and responsible engagement with the world. A wide variety of scholars, practitioners and activists attended the conference, all of whom contributed to the discourses of capacity building and transformation.

The African continent was well represented by delegates from, among others, Uganda, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Botswana and the DRC. Keynote speakers Prof James Thompson (lecturer at Manchester University and director of the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute), together with performance scholar, artist and member of the Kenyan National Civic Education programme Dr Mshai Mwangola, delivered thought-provoking addresses to delegates. The workshops, papers and performance offerings were well received and the feedback from delegates was overwhelmingly positive.

In her reflections during the final panel discussion of the conference, Ms Ntokozo Madlala (drama lecturer, UKZN) remarked: "I was struck by the sense that even in the most difficult circumstances beauty can be found through the work that we do. A major theme that emerged for me was that of beauty in a time of war – that even though some our work is located in the harshest of conditions we are able to facilitate beauty, find points of departure where beauty can be found and celebrated.

“I was also struck by the reality of how generations affect generations. The decisions that we make today affect not only us but others and future generations. This was apparent in a number of presentations. I found it quite haunting, the reality that one person’s decisions and actions can have such a lasting impact on another individual. But what is exciting is that the work we do also has the capacity to impact generations, and is already doing that – whether it’s drama therapists interfacing with high school youth in Cape Town, applied theatre practitioners working with agricultural communities in Uganda, or Betty from Mr Nebe’s presentation who is given a chance to reclaim her life and rebuild her identity through the applied drama intervention she participated in. Our industry has massive relevance in society and has the capacity to cross borders and positively impact current and future generations.”

From a student point of view, the conference was an “enriching, liberating and enlightening experience” (Tish Bateman).

Conference papers will be peer reviewed for inclusion in a book edited by Prof Marié-Heleen Coetzee (UP) and Hazel Barnes (UKZN/Wits).

The Drama Department would like to thank the Faculty Research Committee for their financial assistance, IT for setting up the e-payment system for the conference, and UP Arts for their continuous assistance with production logistics and related technical matters.

*554 words*