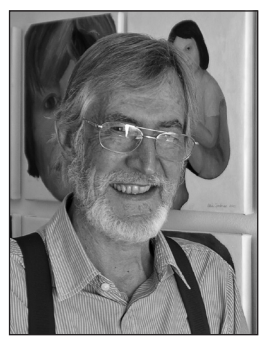
A Renoster, a Foundation and a Market: the cultural import of three Johannesburg figures between 1960 - 1990

Johannesburg, that city which purportedly rose from the veld, was about one hundred years old when it was fortunate, in the midst of the intensities of major capital development at the height of apartheid's imposition and the fierce revolt against that, to have in its midst numbers of extraordinarily creative people in the fields of photography, music, the plastic arts, literature and the theatre. Of these, particular attention is given here to three: Lionel Abrahams, Bill Ainslie and Barney Simon.



Michael Gardiner has retired from a varied career in education to explore his interest in the arts by writing a book about the contributions of Lionel Abrahams, Bill Ainslie and Barney Simon to the cultural life of Johannesburg between 1960 and 1990. He has published on educational questions and South African literature and has a particular interest in current developments the plastic arts. His previous research has been into roles of rural and township communities in promoting literacy and numeracy.

These figures are not offered here as emblematic or representative of the wide surge among cultural practitioners whose stance at that time was at profound odds with the disintegrative forces of apartheid and capitalism. But despite being male, white and middle-class, the three asserted, for those who wished to participate in the arts, alternatives to the dominant bourgeois and nationalistic cultural values that characterised the formal activities in the city of Johannesburg.

Because major political and other movements that were opposed to state policies had been prohibited, the churches and cultural formations carried the burden of articulating the dreams, hopes and fears of the broad mass of South Africans from early 1960s onwards. The fusion, therefore, between the arts in general and the political was inevitable and should be understood in that light.

Both Abrahams and Simon were born in Johannesburg, and grew up within Jewish households that bore recent experiences of the rise of Nazism in Europe. Born with 'Jewish Tortion Dystonia', Abrahams was educated in three key institutions in Johannesburg: the Hope Home for children with disabilities, Damelin College (where he was to find Herman Charles Bosman as a creative writing tutor), and Wits University, where he won prizes for his short stories.

Simon, on the other hand, dropped out of university and attributed his education to assiduous and a lifelong attendance at bioscopes, often with his mother, and his fortuitous experience of being present in London at Joan Littlewood's rehearsals and productions where he was captivated by her intelligent and improvisational energy.

Neither Abrahams nor Simon had orthodox religious interests. Abrahams came from a firmly rationalist background and Simon wove his way through rabbinical wisdoms and the politics of the left as a persistently practical person of the theatre, a thoroughly committed storyteller. He often repeated the view that God had made people because he wanted to hear their stories.

Ainslie arrived in Johannesburg in 1963, bringing with him a legacy of a broad education from his student days in Natal, and his teaching of black artists outside Bulawayo, Rhodesia. As a student, Ainslie had had direct access to the views of Chief A J Luthuli of the ANC, Alan Paton and Peter Brown of the Liberal Party, as well as a number of influential exemplars at his university and in the Presbyterian Church. Throughout his life, Ainslie located himself within an inclusive and personal Christianity that easily accommodated Sufism, shamanisms and other forms of nonrational apprehension, such as the I Ching.

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These three figures in Johannesburg were friends, they respected each other's work and, without overt collaboration, reoriented significant dimensions of the city's cultural life.

Abrahams, for example, founded a literary magazine for the express purpose of publishing and encouraging local literature. He did so in direct response to the 1956 decision by the Departments of English at South African universities not to give academic attention to local literature. His magazine, provocatively named *The Purple Renoster*, was a forerunner of a lively array of literary magazines which flourished from the 1960s to the early 1980s in this country.

Like Douglas Portway before him, Ainslie found little or nothing in mainstream local painting either to challenge or to which he might contribute. He worked initially through specifically assertive figurative paintings in local settings until he found in full abstraction the language of paint he needed to express his connections with contemporary Africa in a situation dominated by racial and economic oppression. Ainslie declared his presence in Johannesburg with an article in a 1965 number of *The Classic*, then edited by Simon, that reviewed an exhibition by four black artists. The courageous aspect of his approach to them was that, using artistic criteria, he addressed the four as colleagues, not as black people, nor as township figures, nor as special individuals because they had overcome disadvantages.

Thereafter, Ainslie argued for and influenced many painters to adopt an abstract manner with the eventual intention of revitalising South African art and also enabling the African continent to speak with fresh energy and cultural influence to Europe and the United States. The emphasis on abstract expressionism brought attacks from numbers of quarters, including Wits University academics. Having worked through the benefits and the skills gained by means of engagement with total abstraction, many of those same artists are now more figurative painters of importance.

Fresh from the impact of Littlewood, Simon found Athol Fugard at work in Dorkay House in 1958, and there cut his theatrical teeth in a context of intense intelligence among black Johannesburg artists, writers and performers who gathered in the building, including the youthful and pertinacious Lewis Nkosi. Fugard's early work, - such as the plays *No Good Friday* and *Nongogo*, derivative and ill-informed as they were – had a major impact on Simon's sensibility and opened ways for him to develop his eventual presence as an epi-centre of innovative theatre both in South Africa and internationally.

These three figures knew and came to know each other very well without being linked in organisational ways. They all worked in the public realm, publishing, editing, exhibiting, teaching, directing and interacting with a wide range of Johannesburg communities. Each formed a society around himself, outside of the academy and away from mainstream cultural activity, so as best to develop, enlarge and most particularly sustain their visions in practice. The general environment in which they had to work, when not wholly hostile or indifferent, was not naturally amenable to their aims and purposes. Each had to create and establish his specific collectivity, a community and a supportive context in order to do the work that needed to be done. In this respect they are distinct to a degree from those powerful Johannesburg-based figures who achieved eminence largely through their individual and solo work.

In addition to their extensive networks of friends, supporters and colleagues, it is certain that Simon needed his Mannie Manim, Abrahams his network of writer friends and assistants (culminating in his marriage to Jane Fox) and Ainslie had his actively involved wife in addition to his special relationship with David Koloane.

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Given their public presence and stance, these three figures had to engage with politics at local and national levels. And each managed in his own way that fusion of the personal with the political. For example, not one of them based his approach to his work on explicitly non-racial grounds. Instead, their understanding of the nature of their craft and what it meant in their situation to engage with the arts made nonracialism naturally imperative.

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Ainslie ignored laws and regulations in conducting of his art classes at the Johannesburg Art Foundation, and Simon and the Market Theatre achieved an international reputation for brave and innovative theatre of profound integrity without espousing particular doctrines or submitting to the overt constraints of apartheid. In this spirit they managed cultural boycotts and challenged racist bureaucracies.

In his personal life, Simon was close to Ruth First and to Joe Slovo. He was one of the main speakers at the memorial service for Slovo in the Johannesburg City Hall. And when Arthur Goldreich and Harold Wolpe escaped from a Johannesburg jail, they spent their first two nights on the run in Simon's flat, prior to slipping into exile.

Ainslie's close friendship with Dumile Feni brought into his world active figures such as Mongane Serote, Winnie Mandela and Peter Magubane. Presences such as these infused his life and his associates with the energy of purpose and risk, qualities

which influenced the teaching programmes and practices at the Johannesburg Art Foundation. There, continuity was leavened by the unpredictable and the unexpected. And this state of creative instability was further enhanced by the involvement of lively thinkers such as Ricky Burnett, Sam Nhlengethwa, Pat Moutloa and numbers of others who brought a serious and vibrant attention to their art and the teaching of art.

All three of these figures had to cope with the stringent exigencies of Black Consciousness and the phantom of White Consciousness. It was only after Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa had pressurised him that Barney Simon cautiously agreed to work with them to give Woza Albert its final shape.

Owing to his physical complications, Abrahams could not move around the city easily as his mentor Bosman used to. Confined to places in Johannesburg's white suburbs, and despite his subtler and more expansive views of events, Abrahams used his poetry to reflect the responses of those uncertain and ill-informed suburban people who were anxiously interpreting events from within their enclaves between 1975 until post 1994. However, Abrahams himself was never comfortable with political, social and cultural change. He feared the obliteration of distinctions and differences by "the mass", he deplored the crudity of slogans and the grisly simplicity of summary justice, and he was unremittingly stern in his assertions of the need for inviolable freedom for writers. For him, to be an artist meant that all other activities – be they in the noblest cause – meant distracting attention from the primary purpose. Though he envied young black poets for their camaraderie in their joy and their suffering, he could never submit his individuality to external pressure to shift his standards, adjust his values or relocate his focus. This brought him into sharp odds with influential figures in publishing, literature and politics.

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From his base in the Johannesburg Art Foundation in the suburb of Saxonwold, Bill Ainslie became involved in the initiative of black artists to found the Federated Union of Black Arts (FUBA), the Thupelo series of artists' workshops, the Alexandra Art Centre and other opportunities for black artists to receive training. This included his work with Koloane to get South Africans to the Triangle Workshops in the United States. Staff from the Art Foundation worked in the local centres in addition to their normal teaching routines.

Lionel Abrahams played an editorial role in publishing Mbuyiseni (Oswald) Mtshali's first collection, *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* 1971 – the biggest sale of poetry in South Africa's history – which was followed in the next year by Serote's seminal collection *Yakal'inkomo*. These publications shifted decisively the literary centre of gravity in South Africa.

The longer study of the careers and influences of these figures is currently being compiled within a larger scope than is possible in this article. The essential argument

around the quests, the work and the achievements of these three figures is that, within their contexts, they offered approaches to their fields that should provide bases from which the public engagement by the arts and within the arts might usefully proceed. Reflections on those decades recall the publications of David Philip, the boldness of Ravan Press which published revisionist histories and the magazine *Staffrider*, giving voice to thousands of aspirant writers. From the early 1960s art galleries such as the Adler Fielding, the Lidchi Gallery run by Harold Jeppe, Madame Haenggi's Gallery 101 and the Goodman Gallery gave both black and white artists serious attention and exposure. In this city alone, in the 70s and 80s, people such as Njabulo Ndebele, Mafika Gwala, William Kentridge, Wopko Jensma, Esrom Legae, Colin Smuts and Es'kia Mphahlele could interact, with each other and with luminaries like David Goldblatt and Nadine Gordimer at both personal and organisational levels.

If the three figures in this study are regarded in some sense as forerunners, then the interrelationship between their work as artists and their teaching, public involvement and debate as well as their work in extending opportunities to many more people to participate in the arts, needs to be thought through in terms of policy and practice at national, provincial and local levels. As important as employment and income-generation are, the emphasis by the current Minister of Arts and Culture, Paul Mashatile, on "the contribution of the arts, culture and heritage sector to economic development" should be situated within much broader attention to how conditions and circumstances can be generated that enable artists to do their work now, in the present. The Bag Factory, which is to celebrate its twentieth birthday this year, is seeking a new direction for itself. Until now, the emphasis there has been upon providing studio and interactive space for local artists, from Africa and elsewhere. There has been very little emphasis on teaching. However, artists from the 1970s and 1980s who plied their trade under difficult conditions in Johannesburg have been given opportunity to succeed both artistically and commercially. But apart from a few significant commentators on developments in art, there remains a scarcity of critics, essayists and writers of articles from among black individuals in the arts. This represents a continuing impoverishment of the cultural climate despite the work of those few salient figures, such as David Koloane, who are active at present.

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Can we expect trained publishers, curators, literary and dramatic critics and commentators to emerge soon from our schools, universities and other institutions, such as publishers and arts NGOs? And when will they be experienced enough to engage in the public realm about the arts?

The ANC is not known for its lively and coherent tradition of attention to the arts. It has always had within its ranks profound and wonderful performers (think musicians like Jonas Gwangwa), writers (think poets such as Keorapetse Kgotsitsile) and others. But at no time has that movement produced from among its intellectuals and politicians a body of thinking and debate beyond the important notions of 'indigenous knowledge' and 'heritage'. Neither of these is sufficient in itself as they are both premissed on indictment, compensatory action and recall, but cannot locate

themselves in the present nor drive towards a future. Funding for contemporary artists is miniscule in relation to the amounts directed at rehabilitating the past.

During the 1970s, Ainslie retorted strenuously when Wits academics distinguished between their so-called 'professional' students and those at the Art Foundation. He wrote, "I find your notion of 'training young professionals' a quaint and parochial one, and smacking more of what one would expect to hear in some sort of commercial institution than in a place devoted to the perpetuation of the disciplines of the plastic arts". A study of the teaching and activity programmes of the Johannesburg Art Foundation (not solely attributable to Ainslie) is an exemplification of how to use the freedom to innovate and reorient attention when opportunity presents itself. For example, the course of lectures given there by Terence Maloon in 1980 provide a remarkably fine and perceptive account of modernism and the trajectory of abstract expressionism in American art. People such as Ricky Burnett and Steven Sack, both of whom have had links with the Art Foundation, reoriented the thinking about South African art with the exhibitions which each respectively curated, *Tributaries* (1985) and *The Neglected Tradition* (1988). Warren Siebrits appears to be the only figure now offering opportunity to revise the ways in which we perceive our visual arts tradition.

These salient interventions have not been characterised by an intention to reveal the art of the oppressed or to achieve some notion of even-handed attention to black and white or urban and rural. These collections and exhibitions offered dynamically varied ways of addressing, incorporating and interrelating artistic practice in this country that was derived from many sources. Once again, following on from Ainslie in particular, it was initial attention to the art itself rather than ideological predispositions which shaped the purpose behind these shows.

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Barney Simon's approach to direction and play-making at the Market Theatre is superbly caught by the eighty interviews in *The World in an Orange* (Jacana 2005). His style (rather than 'method') was very different from Fugard's central focus on text. Simon drew on the dramatic precepts of figures such as Littlewood, Grotowski, Chaikin and Brook, for example, but developed highly distinctive ways of preparing for the stage production of extant and workshopped plays.

Attention needs to be paid to the centrality of workshops in the ways in which Abrahams ran his writing group from the 1970s until his death in 2004, their use by Simon in shaping his productions and the centrality of that manner of interaction used by Ainslie, who accepted the view of Josef Beuys that workshops are 'social sculpture'. In the sense that that term, workshop, is used here, it is a highly intricate and subtle event, usually involving more than two people but not necessarily so. It is a complex antithesis to conventional transmission modes of learning. And workshops are predicated on specific attitudes towards people as well as to the role of the expert, the 'director' and ways in which information and views and opinions are treated. In an educational environment in which the dominant philosophy for forty years has been the central role of the adult (usually male) in leading the uncertain but grateful youth to maturity and enlightenment (in fact a process of indoctrination), and in a patriarchal context in homes and institutions of learning and work, the real and

genuine workshop is a radical alternative form of learning and interacting which is rarely provided or experienced except in the notorious form of 'group work', a static and most commonly unproductive process employed by bewildered teachers.

One of Simon's approaches to the preparation of characters for a stage production was to send out the actors to become as close as possible to that which they were seeking to portray. Then they would return to the theatre and discuss what it was that they had observed and felt and discovered. Simon had the disconcerting knack of deciding which insights were truthful, those which were true to the character, and those which were bogus, especially the ideas that came from the assumptions and the presuppositions of the actors themselves. Once he was satisfied that the actor had penetrated to the genuine heart of the character, the actor was sent off to write up all that had been discovered. This written account was then 'fictionalised' by Simon and the actor, together. So the brute truth was transformed eventually into something that had its own verisimilitude and which was capable of being incorporated into the bigger scheme of the play as a whole. Part of that initial truth and of the process of fictionalising it, had to incorporate highly personal aspects of each actor. Something from their lives had to be dredged up and woven as well into the role that the actor was to play.

This process that Simon used is not wholly different from what Abrahams did in his two volumes of Felix Greenspan stories. There are uncanny and powerful intimations in these stories of the autobiographical, but Abrahams used his skills as a writer of fiction (mainly short stories) to present the events in the life of Felix Greenspan, the central character, so that they make coherent wholes and are accessible to readers. A notable example of this is a passage which dramatises one of the meetings between Felix and his tutor, a Mr de Waal, who guided Felix's creative writing. The discussion crackles with energy and wit, is gentle but firm, and it suggests wonderfully how special the times must have been that Abrahams spent with H C Bosman in discussing what Abrahams had written recently. But the Felix story is located unambiguously in the realm of fiction, a form which can do so much more than other kinds of writing can. For one thing, it infuses the situation with the intensity and potency of what the actual event could be like and carries simultaneously the narrative forward to make a bigger point.

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Our national education system recently sent out an instruction to all public schools that a certain time of each school day should be devoted to something that is wholly new in the lives of teachers and pupils: reading for pleasure. One of the legacies that South Africans have to shed is the notion that books are instruments of instruction for short-term purposes such as information to pass tests and examinations. This utilitarianism (a long time since Dickens's *Hard Times*) reduces literature to facts, messages and morals. Reading for pleasure is also beyond fatuous ideas of making learning fun, which seems to be what adults now use to beguile young people into any educational experience. The break from seeking only messages and morals in artistic works is a major one, and is what the approaches used by Abrahams, Ainslie and Simon demanded. In that sense, they offered a particularly liberated form of cultural exploration. They incorporated, for example, the dimensions of joy, of playfulness and of the unpredictability of creativity in their work with people, texts, skills and craft.

In inducting students into the making of art works, Ainslie confronted them with a series of challenges which he deemed suitable to who they were and what they sought. For him (and there is another link with Simon here) the personal and the public were not separate entities. His deep interest in what people were and how these elements were manifested in individuals meant that when he took a person seriously, the personal was as important as all other influential factors. What art students were encouraged to do was a variant, though never expressed in this way, of Paulo Freire's 'reading the word and the world'. This signifies the achievement of literacies of various kinds, not limited to reading the marks on a page or on canvas, but also able to use that knowledge and those skills to make sense of the world at large in which people can find ways to act.

Lest sentiment obtrude to encourage the view that the thirty or so years between 1960 and 1990 were a golden or gilded age for Johannesburg, it is as well to warn against that sort of mythologising, as has happened with the realities of Sophiatown. Those thirty years were bleak in the extreme, so bleak that one commentator, for whom alliterative labels are important, has referred to "the silent sixties". At the macro level there was the struggle between English-speaking capital and the Broederbond, as Clive Chipkin has noted, for domination of this city. And because of the thousands of black workers on the mines and the existence of massive black townships, methods of human control, as the 1994 *Setting Apart* and the 1999 *blank_* exhibitions demonstrated, became grisly art forms in themselves. In 1986 Johannesburg's centenary was boycotted and the signal date of 16 June 1976 falls right in the centre of this period. As seems usual in this country, the stakes were always high.

What was achieved was hard won and extremely precious. And that is a testimony to the human spirit both in its refusal to be thwarted and in its thrust towards creativity.

NOTE
Thanks to Lettie Gardiner and David Koloane