



'Work is love made visible'

BETH WYRILL
AND ANNA-KARIEN OTTO

Street theatre will be breaking new ground at this year's National Arts Festival. With poverty in the Eastern Cape being an ever pressing problem, this year a number of projects to help disadvantaged people have been launched. One such initiative is the Ban Raku (ban rubbish) Puppet Project, which was brought into being by a collaboration between an NGO, The Arkwork Collective and funding from the National Arts Festival. In truly visionary style, some of Grahams-town's disadvantaged young people have been converting waste plastic into beautifully designed Japanese Bunraku-style puppets for spontaneous street performances.

Dylan McGarry, currently working on his PhD through the Rhodes Environmental Sciences department, has a particular interest in vulnerable communities and children whom he considers "at risk" – street children and people who eke out a meagre living on rubbish dumps. While formulating an alternative method of research, he has been helping these youngsters to use arts-based methods to discover their own innovative creativity.

"Many of these kids come from a pretty rough background. Some of them wash cars, some of them beg for a living," says McGarry.

"The idea is that working with waste can be cathartic for people who have been socially 'discarded.'"

McGarry was intrigued by the ancient art of Japanese Bunraku puppetry where the puppeteers, puppetmakers and musicians work together organically. This inspired him to create a very fluid, collaborative style of performance drawing from the unpublished text *The Quagga and the Uni-*



VISION... From left to right, Andile Booi holds Bokkie the white springbuck, a product of a previous Arkwork Collective initiative, while Simpiwe Hansi and JP Saki plan what the plastic will become. These participants of the Ban-Raku Puppet Project have been cleaning plastic to turn into puppets as part of an exciting street theatre performance for Festival.

Photo: Beth Wyrill

corn by Phinnagan Whale. So for the next couple of days it's all systems go to finish the puppets and get cracking. "It is a gentle and powerful message about the continuity of spirit and the power of love. A sort of *ubuntu* feeling" McGarry says.

"There are so many people involved. We've got some great help from people collecting rubbish on the dump, and from the kids cleaning up discarded plastic," he elaborates. Collaborators on the project include, among others, Tanya Jordaan, a fine artist and creator of the Keiskamma altarpiece in Hamburg in the Eastern Cape, and Francois Le Roux, an internationally acclaimed musician and composer.

"We have found that cleaning plastic and making it new can lead to psychological healing" says McGarry. It

is also empowering in terms of how the participants approach future situations and decision making. He says this project is inspiring on so many levels, it really is as Kahlil Gibran said: "Work is love made visible."

Although this is the first year the Arkwork Collective has been involved with the Festival in this way, McGarry is confident that initiatives of this kind will become a Festival fixture.

This year's funding made it possible for the youngsters to take part in pre-Festival workshops as well as being paid for collecting waste plastic. As McGarry quipped: "Handy Andy bottles are gold and Vanish bottles are double gold because I wanted to use a lot of pink!"

At the Arkwork Collective stall on Village Green informal street performers are invited

to come and brush up on some skills to improve their busking. Visit the stall at the main entrance to meet the team (and the puppets) and find out when the next show will be.

The Quagga and the Unicorn is all set to be taken to various schools in the area after the Festival. Readers wondering where and when to catch the performances will have to wait and see, as the element of surprise is an important component of this kind of street theatre. Don't be surprised if you end up being part of the performance!

The productions will be spontaneous, family friendly and free, although donations to the Arkwork Collective are welcome. Visit www.arkwork.yolasite.com for more inspiration.

Audience members are also encouraged to bring candles to performances.

From rags to rubbish

By Sipho McDermott
Cue reporter

Ayanda Thinta used to wash cars to fund his next meal. Life on the streets of Grahamstown was a constant struggle and all Festival meant to him was a chance to make more money from the influx of cars. He never experienced the drama of performances and the joy of comedy. But now, he's downed soapy bucket and cloth to entertain Festival goers.

Thanks to the Banrubbish Puppet Project, Thinta and four others have been taught to build puppets and act. The project is the brainchild of the Arkwork Collective and according to its director, Dylan McGarry, the aim is to "create art experiences for those who don't normally have the opportunity". During this Festival he hopes they can "create a space where there are no expectations, so the participants can explore and think about their lives – a chance they rarely get".

The five puppeteers are trained in the ancient Japanese puppet form of Bunraku. This involves large puppets which are controlled by a visible person, and McGarry says they "allow people to explore ideas in a way that is safe". He says what is especially

important is that "you have to be gentle and nurture the puppet" which helps "young men become gentle giants".

To localise the Bunraku form, and in keeping with Arkwork's ideas about sustainability, the puppets are made from recycled goods. McGarry says the goods were sourced from the municipal dump with the help of 20 volunteers, who will then have a show performed for them at the dump. Throughout Festival the group intends to build and modify their puppets with additional waste.

Their play is based on *The Quagga* and the Unicorn and consequently the puppets take the form of extinct animals, which McGarry hopes will delight all audiences, especially children.

Banrubbish falls under the Festival's Hands On! Masks Off! programme, which Festival director Ismail Mahomed says is about changing the "perception that artists stand with a begging bowl".

So Thinta, with his new skills, will be able to perform in and around Grahamstown, ensuring a viable future for himself.

The Quagga and the Unicorn is at Steven Biko lawns today at 4.30pm



National Arts Festival – Grahamstown



HELPING HANDS: Budding Grahamstown puppeteers practise their 'rubbish art' at the National Arts Festival.

Picture: DAVID MACGREGOR

Puppet initiative creates dinosaurs

By DAVID MACGREGOR

FUNKY puppets made from plastic scavenged off the Grahamstown municipal dump have given 35 marginalised people hope at this year's National Arts Festival.

Recycling white plastic bottle tops into tusks for a huge red mammoth, unemployed 20-year-old Mfundo Koliti has still not forgotten the years he spent hustling small change in High Street – washing cars.

"It was very hard walking around all day with a sponge and bucket looking for work," he explained. "You did not make much money."

But, that all changed when Koliti and four other youngsters joined the groundbreaking Grahamstown based *Bunraku/Ban-Rubbish Puppet Project* – and got paid to make and perform elaborate creations bought from 20 dump diggers.

With a South African tour planned after the festival and a possible trip to the renowned Edinburgh Festival in Scotland in the pipeline, Koliti said he still found it hard to believe he was now an artist capable of making "such beautiful things with rubbish".

"The sky is the limit ... I am glad my car washing days are over ... I

love it."

Funded by National Arts Festival director Ismail Mahomed's Hands On! Masks Off! social responsibility programme, the puppet project is one of three development initiatives making waves this year.

The exciting collaboration with the non-profit Arkwork Collective, *The Quagga and the Unicorn* street production draws inspiration from Japanese *Bunraku* Puppetry – with a proudly South African eco twist.

The ancient story-telling art often uses multiple puppeteers to power a single creation – normally made from materials not sourced off the rubbish dump.

Arkwork director Dylan McGarry told the Saturday Dispatch the project was about empowering people rather than telling them what to do.

"The collective tends to focus more on inspiration than intervention ... we find innovation is more likely to occur when we choose to inspire rather than intervene in people's lives."

Busy researching an environmental education and sustainable development PhD at Rhodes University, McGarry said the similarity between marginalised people and dump rubbish was that they had

both been discarded and forgotten by society.

"The message of the performance talks about the continuity of spirit and how nothing is ever lost."

McGarry said making extinct dinosaur puppets from plastic waste was significant – considering the petro-chemical product was "made from fossil material".

Taking between two days and a week to make, it is hoped the zany puppets will spawn a larger demand for craft made from waste, and inspire others.

"The story tries to revive the spirit of *ubuntu* by reminding people that they can still believe in the power of love."

With many of the 20 dump diggers who collected the puppet material unlikely to visit the new Village Green to see the free show, McGarry said a special performance would be held for them at the local tip.

"A priority of the collective is to create accessible avenues for people who are usually unable to create their own art ... that is the main reasoning for using discarded materials that are freely available."

The show runs at 4.30pm on both weekends of the festival opposite the Rhodes University pool.