

SPEECH DELIVERED BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL, MS M B MADUMISE AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE AFRICA CENTRE AND THE LAUNCH OF THE ARTIST'S HANDBOOK, 11 NOVEMBER 2008, CAPE TOWN

The Executive Director of the African Centre

The Board of the African Centre

Distinguished ladies and Gentleman

First let me express our appreciation and gratitude for extending the invitation to the NAC to speak at this occasion. Let me also congratulate African centre in its visionary leadership in finding a home and launching what I believe, is a tool that will go a long way in developing the arts in this county. We wish you well in all your endeavours and believe that as the NAC we are ready to join hands with you in realising some of the objectives you have set out for yourself.

As I paged through "The Artist's Handbook: A Guide to the Business of the Arts," I realized that most contributors, whether individuals or organizations, have at one time or another crossed path with the NAC in some form. Some were funded by the NAC and others as partners on research projects. The NAC, have over the past year, critically examined our impact in the arts and I believe through the publication of the handbook we are getting a return on our investment.

It is easy to sometimes look at the magnitude of the multi-layered and multi-dimensional challenges that we face in the artistic and cultural sectors to become extremely despondent. On reconsideration, however, we persevere. While perseverance may be essential for creativity and innovation, it can also become a state of mind, a fact of being, or more worryingly, a safe harbour for bureaucrats! My address to you today is a further challenge: how do we extract ourselves from perseverance and locate ourselves in the realm of heroes? How do we become heroic and how does this same challenge to permeate individuals and organizations?

I'm going to use Joseph Campbell's seminal book "A Hero With a Thousand Faces" as the *tongue-in-cheek* basis for my reflection on the cultural landscape broadly and the National Arts Council specifically. For those who don't know, Campbell explored the different mythologies from different cultures and extracts their basic logic. He argues that, in myths and stories, there are specific stages to becoming a hero.

1) THE HERO IS INTRODUCED IN HER ORDINARY WORLD.

“Most stories take place in a special world, a world that is new and alien to its hero. If you're going to tell a story about a fish out of her customary element, you first have to create a contrast by showing her in her mundane, ordinary world”. The members of the National Arts Council were thrust into a special world by virtue of their appointment onto the Council. Clearly, no member of the Council had any real idea as to what to expect and there is nothing to suggest that any of us enjoyed any experience remotely similar to that which was awaiting us. I don't mean to suggest that the NGO environment was *ordinary* in any way but the National Arts Council was not intended to function as an NGO.

2) THE CALL TO ADVENTURE.

“The hero is presented with a problem, challenge, or adventure”. The NAC was presented with many problems, challenges and, in a manner of speaking – adventures. In other words, the NAC was called upon to be heroic.

3) THE HERO IS RELUCTANT AT FIRST.

“Often at this point, the hero balks at the threshold of adventure. After all, he or she is facing the greatest of all fears -- fear of the unknown”. I'm not really sure whether the NAC is standing at the threshold or not and whether there is reluctance to deal with seemingly intractable issues such as how to interface more effectively with the other players in the funding landscape or with the provincial arts councils. Perhaps the convenient assumption that the NAC is essentially and fundamentally a funding body provides some comfort and we may be reluctant to see the NAC as anything else.

4) THE HERO IS ENCOURAGED BY THE WISE OLD MAN OR WOMAN.

“The mentor can only go so far with the hero. Eventually the hero must face the unknown by himself. Sometimes the wise old man is required to give the hero a swift kick in the pants to get the adventure going”. The NAC could really use the services of a wise old man or woman.

5) THE HERO PASSES THE FIRST THRESHOLD.

“He fully enters the special world of his story for the first time. This is the moment at which the story takes off and the adventure gets going. The hero is now committed to his journey... and there's no turning back”. Perhaps one of the most painful realizations that we had to confront is

that we could not continue to make uninformed decisions or decisions based purely on the lived experience of the members of the Council. For this reason, I would argue that the establishment of a Policy and Research Committee was the first threshold and one that brought us into line with most arts councils internationally.

6) THE HERO ENCOUNTERS TESTS AND HELPERS.

“The hero is forced to make allies and enemies in the special world and to pass certain tests and challenges that are part of his training”. Perhaps the most ambitious project that the NAC has ever embarked upon is the hosting of the World Culture Summit in September 2009. I don't think that we ever fully comprehended the magnitude of the undertaking and the challenges that we would face towards ensuring its success. This is bolstered by our foray into Africa which saw the NAC being represented at events in Algeria and Ghana. This engagement was taken further with the African Dialogue which saw the NAC host representatives from several African countries and, while this was useful in itself, we found that we were also connecting and reconnecting with fellow South Africans as well. Clearly, our engagement with IFFACA has made us reconsider many of our *ordinary* operations. Our further engagement with the arts councils of Sweden, Australia, New Zealand and the UK has certainly convinced us that we have a multitude of helpers to assist us. Of course, we try not to make enemies.

7) THE HERO REACHES THE INNERMOST CAVE

“The hero comes at last to a dangerous place, often deep underground, where the object of his quest is hidden”. Our innermost cave resonates with echoes of debates past and present- a veritable cacophony of conflicting views and entrenched ideological positions. Yet one thing became clear: we needed to change the Funding Model because it is just not working and certainly not helping us deliver on our objects as tabulated in the NAC Act.

8) THE HERO ENDURES THE SUPREME ORDEAL.

“This is the moment at which the hero touches bottom. He faces the possibility of death, brought to the brink in a fight with a mythical beast”. The NAC has faced several supreme ordeals in its short history already but the supreme ordeal for the present NAC is to fight the mythical beast that the NAC is only a *funding* body. For some, the prospect of spending money on anything other than on the applications received from artists and companies is absolutely untenable. So, should the NAC be a reactive body that establishes and funds solely on the basis of artistic merit? Should the NAC be more proactive and embark on projects that would focus on positioning our

artists nationally and internationally? Should the NAC wait for all the provincial arts councils to be functional before embarking on the achievement of its own objects? How would the artists react?

9) THE HERO SEIZES THE SWORD.

“Having survived death, beaten the dragon, slain the Minotaur, the hero now takes possession of the treasure he’s come seeking”. Perhaps it’s time to cut through the tangled knots with a really sharp sword because the process of untangling the knots is bound to keep us inactive for a very, very long time. Perhaps, it’s time for straight-talking. The NAC cannot wait for the provinces to sort themselves out nor can it continue to function only as a funding body. We have to ask “what are the hallmarks of a mature arts council?” and “how does the NAC become a mature arts council?”

Clearly, we cannot tie ourselves in a knot by engaging in intractable and endless debates that prevent us from making urgent changes. One of our most urgent and important challenges pertains to the indigenous arts. We know that there are other agencies that should be looking at traditional arts but not all indigenous arts are necessarily traditional. There has to be the space and support for these artforms to develop and flourish without necessarily being constrained or distorted by *foreign* canons, aesthetics and even application processes.

But even as I say this, I do not want us to believe that we need to fall into the restrictive clutches of provincialism because, I believe, a sense of national identity must transcend provincialism at some point.

10) THE ROAD BACK.

“The hero’s not out of the woods yet. Some of the best chase scenes come at this point, as the hero is pursued by the vengeful forces from whom he has stolen the elixir or the treasure”. Let’s say that the NAC pursues the approach where the indigenous (not disingenuous) arts are actively supported, or, that the NAC concentrates on the production of *new* South African art, how would the art-world react? How would those, who have vested interests in maintaining the *status quo*, react?

11) RESURRECTION.

“The hero emerges from the special world, transformed by his experience. He is transformed into a new being by his experience”. Of course, the NAC cannot take its role lightly and accepts that it

will tramp on a few toes to reinvent itself into a mature arts council. We accept, as well, that we will be taken to the brink of destruction by threats both internal and external.

We know that it is not enough that we transform ourselves – we have to sell our ideas to the constituencies and, when we do so, we hope that the arts sector will be revitalized and reenergized.

12) RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR.

“The hero comes back to his ordinary world, but his adventure would be meaningless unless he brought back the elixir, treasure, or some lesson from the special world. Sometimes it's just knowledge or experience, but unless he comes back with the elixir or some boon to mankind, he's doomed to repeat the adventure until he does. Many comedies use this ending, as a foolish character refuses to learn his lesson and embarks on the same folly that got him in trouble in the first place. Sometimes the boon is treasure attained.

Sometimes it's just coming home with a good story to tell”.

Our tenure will be over towards the end of 2010. What will our legacy be?