

**SPEECH BY: MZUZILE MDUDUZI XAKAZA AT THE LAUNCH OF “HANDS ON MASK OFF” DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME AT THE GRAHAMSTOWN NATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL (26 JUNE 2008)**

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentleman

I am honored and privileged by this invitation to speak at the launch of the new development programme of the Grahamstown National Arts Festival. This programme not only promise to provide the sector with an opportunity to enter into open dialogue but also offers an opportunity among the stakeholders to engage with pertinent issues that affect growth and sustainability of the sector.

“Hand on Masks off” as the name suggests, is a particular programme which is aimed at providing participants of the fringe festival with the opportunity to access the wealth of knowledge and expertise from theatre Professionals, Managers and Administrators in a form of series of workshops and seminars.

This programme is the first of its nature in the history of the Grahamstown National Arts Festival, hence the National Arts Council take pride in associating itself with the programme of this nature. The significance of the programme is that the management of the festival will offer an ongoing support to the developing theatre groups to enter the theatre mainstream.

We therefore wish to encourage the theatre groups and practitioners to take opportunities presented by this programme to enhance the administrative and artistic skills of their organisations and to further establish some networks and partnerships with other like theatre groups and organizations.

As the NAC we believe that this kind of programme will address the much needed administrative and management support such as audience development, production management, proposal writing and technical production skills within the sector. Our investment in this kind of a programme demonstrates our commitment towards the fulfillment of our mandate as outlined within the NAC act.

It is the mandate of the NAC to provide the strategic support to advance growth and sustainability within the sector. The National Arts Council is not just about funding of the arts but has much broader mandate within the sector to initiate and drive transformation. However this can only happen if all the role players assume their role and responsibilities within the broader policy framework of the arts and the democratic principles as enshrined within the constitution.

The current board of the NAC has made it its business to take up a leading role in effecting change within the sector and we will endeavor to partner with other role players and effectively engage the broader constituencies that are integral in the re-

constituting of our sector. As a Council we have made an undertaking that we are going to be visible and hands on, on issues that affect this sector.

We are in a process of investigating possibilities of revamping our operation to ensure effective and efficient service delivery to our constituencies. Critical to this is the development of the new funding model which will reduce administrative red tape and improve better turn around time in the processing of applications.

For those of you who have access to internet, I invite you to visit our website in a month's time from now, to observe the kind of programme and actions the Council will be pursuing.

In the same breath, I wish to also encourage you to engage with our Council on various issues affecting your needs as practitioners through open letters and other forms of communication in order for us to deliver better service to you. We can only improve through your active engagement and support.

We therefore view our role within the arts sector as an important partnership with our constituencies which will contribute towards job creation, poverty eradication and social cohesion of our nation. There is still a lot that need to be done in order to transform this sector and this will only happen if you voice your concerns about the sector.

A recent incident at the Naledi Awards and a subsequent public discussion on the transformation of the theatre sector is an indication that there is a need to re-look at the policies that govern the arts and in particular the institutional arrangement within the sector.

There is a need to unlock the resources from the infrastructure base of the state funded institutions and decentralize the resources more towards artistic creation and expression of our communities. These are some of the debates the NAC would like to engage with the public on, in order to be in a position to advise the sector on policy development issues.

We will also be partnering with the South African Theatre Initiative in their Provincial Indabas which are precisely designed to engage the public on the transformation of theatre and dance sector. This process should also be viewed as a ground work towards policy development.

I would like to express my admiration and appreciation for the hard work and enthusiasm of the Festival organizers in the conceptualization this programme as it serves as an important milestone in the coordination of the activities and resources within the sector. I thank you.