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Presenter Interview

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プレゼンターインタビュー
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ARTSCAPE is Cape Town's representative performing arts complex with an opera house (1,187 seats), a main hall (540 seats) a small hall (120 seats) and other facilities. We spoke to the center's CEO, Michael George Maas, about its management, the Cape Town Opera project and other aspects of the arts in South Africa today.

(Interviewer: Izuna Tanaka)

In Japan we have little knowledge about performing arts in South Africa. Please give us an outline of Artscape, of which you are on the board as executive director (chief executive).

Let me start with the background. Artscape was previously known as the Cape Performing Arts Board (CAPAB). Established in 1967, it was responsible for productions of opera, ballet, orchestra and drama. All funding came from the national government, allowing CAPAB to achieve high international standards of artistic excellence.

After the country's first democratic election in 1994, many things changed, with arts also coming under the spotlight. At the time, there were four performing arts bodies in the country - one in each of the major cities of Cape Town, Bloemfontein, Pretoria and Durban. These four organisations shared the bulk of State funding for the performing arts.

Under the new regime however, national government introduced a new method to distribute the money more equitably to a greater number of people. Funds previously designated for the performing arts at the four institutions were channelled to a newly formed National Arts Council, which became responsible for the distribution of funds to a wider number of artistic groups in South Africa.

This new arrangement forced the four entities to consider the following options: (a) Retain the art forms and source funding for them, (b) divest completely from the art forms, or (c) provide infrastructural support to the art forms, whilst allowing them to find their own funding.

When I took over CAPAB in 1997, it employed approximately 800 people. This included a large number of artists such as opera singers, drama actors, orchestral players and ballet and contemporary dancers.

The company was experiencing financial difficulties and I realized that we would not be able to maintain the theatre, as well as the arts companies, with the limited funds available. However, I did not want the different art forms, and the expertise that had been built up over the years, to be lost.

So we created a new dispensation that enabled each art form to develop into independent companies - each with its own board of control to look after its own funding and corporate governance. This gave rise to the Cape Town Opera Company, Cape Town City Ballet, Jazzart Contemporary Dance Theatre and Cape Philharmonic Orchestra.

The one area that is not covered at the moment, at Artscape and the generally in

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the country, is a professional drama company. Actors are not employed full time in companies and work from project to project. We have many freelance actors in South Africa who don't have the opportunity to learn and play different works and gain experience and knowledge.

Artscape is helping to sustain these companies by providing them with office infrastructure, financial and human resource management, allocation of theatre space, and other administrative and technical support services.

Whatever government funding Artscape receives is used to operate the theatre, maintain the infrastructure and look after the technical and administrative staff - a model similar to many Japanese concert halls and theatres.

That means that you started afresh as "Theatre Centre".

In 1999, CAPAB underwent a complete metamorphosis from a production house to a playhouse. The institution was transformed into Artscape, with a new slogan, "arts to the people, people to the arts" - and a new vision to represent the performing arts in a much wider context than before. So we included previously neglected art forms together with the established classical art forms. We also started diversifying the type of performances at our theatre by renting out space to theatre companies and private producers wishing to stage their own productions. In the past, it was predominately opera, ballet, orchestra and drama. Now we are able to offer a wider repertoire of different art forms.

But we still need to develop some indigenous art forms in order to have true diversity of art forms. You have this in Japan with the Noh theatre and the Kabuki theatre which have developed to very high levels.

As for the development of audience and training of artists, do you have any programs?

Artscape is much more than just a grouping of arts companies, it also plays a vital role in audience development, community outreach and education. Our aim is to bring the people to the theatre - and to bring theatre to the people.

Before 1994, a major part of our society was excluded from the performing arts. They could not attend ballet, opera or any other performances, and many talented people were denied the opportunity to develop their artistic potential.

Amongst other initiatives, we have now established a resource centre to harness this untapped potential and to develop a rich pool of talent and skills within a wider community. Training programmes include courses in basic literacy as well as computer literacy to enable people to access computers, databases and arts archives. Training courses in various aspects relating to the performing arts are presented, often in association with tertiary institutions.

We constantly strive to create opportunities for black artists and to nurture art forms which best enhance their natural talents such as acting, opera and choral work. In the process, we have developed many dramatic actors and operatic stars of international standard.

Our theatre is also strongly associated with contemporary dance which is a wonderful way of building bridges between diverse cultural groups.

Artscape has also introduced two more training initiatives. Our "new writing programme" is aimed at playwrights with writing talent, but who do not have the necessary experience. The training group teaches them to write plays and improve on them. In some cases exceptionally good plays are showcased before a public audience. We recently developed two new plays that reached full production within four years.

The second is a two year course for stage technicians. In our country, there are very

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limited opportunities for academic or even technical training, to transfer skills to new generations of technicians. Many people currently working in the theatre grew up in the theatre and learnt by experience. Our course deals with all technical aspects of the theatre, such as different theatre styles, sound design, and lighting design. Of the first eight students, Artscape will probably employ some as full time staff in our theatre, while others will go into other fields of performing arts.

How is the situation for arts funding in the South Africa?

It is currently difficult to raise funding. I can compare our situation to what happened in Japan in the 1980s. Although many arts buildings, theatres and concert halls were built, there is not always enough money to create the arts that are to be performed in the theatre.

We do not yet have a strong and developed culture of corporate funding for the arts. Although funds are made available through the National Arts Council, the State lottery and some provinces, it is often not enough to build and sustain performing arts companies.

Moreover, the number of art forms has grown tremendously, thus increasing the competition for a limited source of funding. Since 1996, the state adopted a philosophy of distributing its funds to a wider spread of beneficiaries. Very often the little that each organisation received was not so significant that something meaningful could be achieved. It is sad that, just as the arts finally have the opportunity to bring people together and create jobs, the funding resources and opportunities required are not sufficient.

You are in a fortunate position in Japan in that you have recognised the need to fund the “software”. We need to get to that position sooner than later.

This is the essence of Artscape's funding formula. We must look after the buildings and infrastructure, but if we cannot have live arts in the buildings, then the buildings mean nothing.

The model we have adapted for Artscape is such that we will use government funds to maintain the “hardware” such as the infrastructure and buildings, but we also need to raise funds to keep the “software” vibrant and alive.

How much is the funding for Artscape at this moment?

The national government gives us 21 million rand a year (380million yen). This amount has not increased much in the past few years. Our annual turnover is about 34 million Rand. I am trying to use the government funding as seed money to generate more money to develop the arts and look after the areas that have been neglected in the past.

From 800 employees in 1995, we now have 66 full time employees and 20 on short-term contracts. For the stage work we often hire ad hoc people to assist as required. My philosophy is to rather have a small infrastructure, so that any additional money we generate or receive from the state can be used for the performing arts, the “software”, and for education and training.

When was the resource centre in Artscape started and how does it link on to the education programmes at Artscape?

It was started in 2002. We believe that it is important for the performing arts to be introduced at school level and our audience development and education department has introduced several programmes for school children.

We also stage networks (prescribed school curriculum works) which form part of the school curriculum in the three official languages. We have three official languages in our province: English, Afrikaans, and Xhosa. These plays are

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produced and performed on stage, so that the scholars can come to the theatre and see how the words that they are reading at school, come alive. According to the educational authorities, whenever we have presented networks in Xhosa, the pass rates in that subject have improved!

I imagine you need a large budget for these programs. With the budget from the national government reduced, how did you find the additional resources to begin all these programs?

We try to raise additional funds from private companies, the National Arts Council, the State lottery and other government agencies. The funding model for the performing arts should ideally be revised along the same lines as Japan's "Plan 21."

Artscape is a non-profit organization. Non-profit organizations are treated slightly differently in each country like in the UK and in the USA. Could you explain the definition of a non-profit organization in South Africa?

In South Africa, non-profit organizations do not pay income tax. However, as a State-funded entity, we need to be completely transparent with our finances. Unfortunately there are no tax benefits for donations.

Your theatre might be called a receiving theatre or a commercial theatre even though your organization is a non-profit organization. What are the actual situation and activities like in Artscape?

Government policy required us to change from a production house to a receiving house. Artscape can be a receiving house and rent out its theatre space very profitably for 365 days a year. However, we would not make a difference in the lives of performing artists or add value to the performing arts industry. On the other hand, if we became a production house, we could not earn additional income by renting out the space and would require additional dedicated funding. So the Artscape model allows us to rent out the space as a commercial theatre and attend to the needs of the performing arts at the same time. It's a delicate balance. Sometimes we have more commercial theatre and less subsidised theatre, and sometimes vice versa. But we try to find the balance between the two that will make the budget work and raise additional income to plough back into the performing arts.

Who takes the initiative to keep this balance for the theatre?

The Chief Executive does this in collaboration with the nine members of the board appointed by the Minister of Arts and Culture. Our board members represent the theatre, education, commercial and legal sectors.

After all the changes, opera, ballet and orchestra companies associated with the theatre have become independent. What kind of relationships do you have with them, as for the management of their development?

We enjoy a close relationship with each one of the companies, pooling our individual strengths for the greater good. I meet regularly with the heads of the opera, ballet, contemporary dance and orchestra to work out plans, because a lot of the technical support comes from Artscape. Three principles keep us together, "co-operation", "collaboration" and "synergy". In addition, our association with other entities, such as drama entities, educational institutions and indigenous art forms, are also based on these three principles. Because we cannot make funding available, we need to collaborate with each other and share expertise and resources in other ways.

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The Artscape building is a theatre complex. What facilities do you have?

We have the Opera House with 1 187 seats, the Artscape Theatre with 540 seats, the Artscape Arena with 160 seats and a Cabaret theatre. Then we provide office and/or rehearsal rooms for the opera, ballet, orchestra, contemporary dance and various other companies. We strive to provide full infrastructure and support services to many different artists and art forms to allow the performing arts to flourish in South Africa.

We also have the wardrobe section, where costumes are made, stored and rented out for the local and overseas markets. I think that we even made the scenery and costumes for a Japanese company. We also have the décor section and a massive décor storage facility with a wide variety of décor sets.

We are trying to make our skills available to the broader markets so that we can generate foreign currency.

Cape Town Opera Company and Cape Town City Ballet don't have décor and costume departments. How do they manage that?

Artscape provides the services on a payment basis to fulfil their needs for sets and costumes. Their role is to "put the products on the stage". For this, Cape Town Opera Company employs 12 to 14 full-time staff members, Cape Philharmonic Orchestra six, Cape Town City Ballet three, and Jazzart Contemporary Dance Theatre three. These are mainly administrators, while artists and opera singers are mostly hired as required. The ballet company and orchestra have permanent members.

About four years ago we had five orchestras in the country, now we only have two. The others closed down due to amongst other factors, lack of funding. Currently one permanent orchestra is based in Cape Town, and the other is in Durban. There is no permanent orchestra in Johannesburg. However, there are many freelance musicians and two orchestras are regularly assembled as required. Cape Town Opera Company is the only full time opera company in South Africa. As for ballet companies, there are full time companies - here and in Johannesburg.

I have seen the theatre calendar on the website. There are lots of performances being staged. How many performances do you have a year?

During the past year there were about 800 performances coming from more than 120 different productions. As the stages are always occupied, arts companies cannot use the stage for rehearsing. Stage rehearsal times have to be scheduled directly before performance openings. We have reached the stage where we are requiring an additional building to fulfil our needs for especially rehearsal space.

Would companies like the Cape Town Opera Company like to make a co-production with other theatres? Would you like to make more co-productions with different theatres? And in which areas you are interested?

At the moment this is a fairly new territory for us. Cape Town City Ballet toured China in 2002 and participated in the international performing arts fair in Shanghai. They also performed in Nanjing and Beijing. At other times we have had a choreographer and principal dancers from other countries working with our dancers in South Africa. We will go wherever there is an opportunity.

The opera company is doing well in Europe at the moment, because of the high standard of our singers, especially the chorus members. If we can bring an opera to Japan by mutual collaboration, we would welcome the opportunity.

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I imagine that almost all the audience in your theatre comes from a specific level in the society. What are the prices of tickets for opera, ballet, orchestra and drama?

Drama tickets have to be reasonable. Music audiences are easier to reach.

Although ballet tickets are not so expensive, opera tickets are about 200 rand. It is quite expensive in a country where the average monthly salary is not very high. Yet when pop star Robbie Williams comes to South Africa, fans don't mind paying whatever is required.

One problem in South Africa at the moment is that arts education is not always a priority at school. In the past, many schools employed music teachers. That has mostly fallen away, because the priorities at our schools are reading, writing and arithmetic. In schools the teaching ratio is very high, often one teacher for every 35 pupils. So if the schools are not interested in the arts or do not have the resources, they won't employ any arts teachers, focusing instead on the academic side. I would say in the biggest percentage of schools there is little exposure to the arts and performing arts. The problem is that people grow up without exposure to the performing arts and therefore cannot learn and understanding or appreciation of the arts. That is why we have our set works to try to bring arts into the schools. What we do have in many schools are choirs. And in a small percentage of schools, there are drama and music classes. Within the Cape Town area we are fortunate that we have three music centres under the auspices of the education department that specializes in the teaching of instrumental teaching. This training normally takes place after the official school day.

I was absolutely amazed at the standard of instrumental music by young people when I attended a concert in Kanazawa. The orchestra ensemble presented a concert with invited and auditioned young musicians. They were able to assemble 80 musicians from four universities, comprised of students majoring in non-music subjects such as engineering, etc. I was surprised that you can find 80 young people with such competence in one city. I think we have the duty to expose people to performing arts at a young age. That makes the role of an institution like Artscape so important in creating and nurturing an awareness and love for the performing arts.

How productions does the Cape Town Opera Company put on a year?

They do an average of nine productions per year. Obviously their productions are fund-related: the more funds they raise, the more productions they are able to stage. Most of the productions are presented in our theatre. When this is not the case, we are still involved in providing them with the required technical and other infrastructure. During most opera seasons ballet productions are also presented, running on in rep with opera.