



Living Rights Festival: Youth Speak Truth to Power

By Bernedette Muthien

The Institute for African Alternatives has a small staff complement, supported by many diverse volunteers, responsible for several pathbreaking projects, from climate change to gender. Under leadership of poet-scholar Ari Sitas, IFAA embarked on one of its most ambitious projects yet: the inaugural Living Rights Festival (LRF), October to December 2024. With 18 local project partner organisations, the festival focused on intersectional justices and realising constitutional rights. Primarily aimed at, for and by youth, the festival hosted a weekend of art, culture and human rights at the activist Bertha House in Mowbray.

Friday afternoon 25 October was a specific multi-genre session, both curated and dynamically open mic, titled Youth Speak Truth to Power. Participants were asked: “What does the state of the world say to me?”. They used poetry, music, comedy and other forms of verbal inputs. I was privileged to facilitate the session, supported by comedian Goldie Shevlane.

Bertha House’s Cinema was jampacked with a diverse and energetic group of youth, supported by a few millennials, Gen Xers and the occasional anti-Apartheid struggle veteran Boomer.

We started by discussing the South African Constitution, its Bill of Rights and Equality Clause with 16 grounds of non-discrimination, and ended appreciating the poetic style of the Preamble:

We, the people of South Africa,

Recognise the injustices of our past;

Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land;

Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and

Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.

We therefore, through our freely elected representatives, adopt this Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic so as to

- *Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;*



- *Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;*
- *Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person;*
and
- Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations. [italics added]

The Equality Clause explicitly prohibits discrimination, “directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.”

It is these values our elders fought for and enshrined in our democracy’s founding Constitution, and subsequent legislation and policies, that the LRF youth embraced and embodied, especially during the Youth Speak Truth to Power session.

Performers included: poets Lisa Lily Julie, Jerome Coetzee, Jodie Simons, Pamela Silwani and I; singers Dani Petersen and Zenariah Barends; as well as comedians Goldie Shevlane, Alexander Henry and Sacre Kayembe. The audience was dynamic and actively engaged with the various performances.

For the event organisers and facilitators it was important for youth to take the struggles for realising intersectional and non-negotiable constitutional rights to heart and action, to embody these rights and quests for justice, prosperity and peace. So that rights do not become static, paper rights, but realisable rights in action. The young performers and participants were so alive with kinetic energy that a few of the anti-Apartheid struggle veterans were convinced that they could now retire from activism in favour of these beautifully inspiring young people.

Poet Lisa Lily Julie opened with, as she says, “a punch to the stomach”, a wakeup call. Poet Jerome Coetzee stepped forward and statically performed (stood still) a piece called “Seven Minutes of Silence”. He held up a sign, Peace. He followed this riveting (!) performance with a poem dedicated to his childhood friend who was killed by gang crossfire in Lavender Hill. Several participants cried visibly and others looked profoundly moved.



Dani Petersen performed a song on gender-based violence in Afrikaans and English, which the house enjoyed.

Comedian Sacre (mononym) was brilliantly hilarious, having grown up on the Cape Flats as a child of Congolese migrants, speaking Afrikaapse English. With great wit and intelligence he made fun of himself and his lived experiences, struggles and joys. He was a firm favourite of the session. My ribs were in spasm from laughing too much.

Comedian Alexander Henry, with a huge spirit that transcends the confines of his wheelchair, flirted outrageously with fellow comedian Goldie Shevlane, as well as participants including poet Lisa Lily Julie, teasing her that she had had her hair done at the salon just for the day's performance.

Veteran comedian Goldie Shevlane made some risqué jokes riddled with swearwords which had two Boomers present disapprove and gesturing to me that I should not hand her the mic again, that I should remove the mic from her, as she kept asking and reaching for and holding onto the mic, obscenities galore. *The youth loved her*. This tension between elders and facilitators, in itself was hilariously comedic, wrestling over the mic and being frowned and laughed at.

Alexander Henry shares via Whatsapp:

The role of a standup comedian is sometimes to antagonise the audience, to make them think. I did enjoy the event. In my performance I shared shades of what I want people to see about me and other people with disabilities. There is a definite line between the medical model and the social model on disability. And that is why the flirtatiousness between myself and Goldie is so important. Also be mindful of the fact that, yes, all of our sets contain the expletives, but we were also with that majority of the audience who were over 18 years of age.

Even I got into the spirit of things (no expletives) by cracking a joke from my 1980s childhood, where every wall was emblazoned with "Free Mandela" graffiti. To which a wicked tagster had added the stencilled words, "with every packet of rice crispies". Anti-Apartheid struggle veterans were very offended, offering to search for, find and discipline the perpetrator. I, child activist, thought it hilariously irreverent, and still laugh about it today.



Our session was preceded by the opening of an art exhibition by young Zara Newman, who also participated in our session. Afternoon flowed into evening, where we were all well fed, before a brilliant slam session curated by the Cape Cultural Collective kept us jiving. It is heartening that all the various sessions' artists, curators, organisers supported each other's respective events, ensuring full houses all day and evening long.

I concluded our afternoon session with the following poem, written for Pan-African Women's Day:

enough

perched
on the rim
of this cliff
whose beacon remains oddly named after the colonial amateur astronomer Maclear
highest point on my Table Mountain
1,086 meters above sea level
still used to determine the earth's circumference
contrasted with
the Eiffel Tower a mere 330 meters tall
the ironic Statue of Liberty a miniscule 93 meters short

birds and angels
soar
even planes
fly
through turbulences

all I really want
is to levitate
across my gorgeous Mother City
like the magicians from my childhood school concerts

an upside down floater
in our two oceans
seeing seeing being
touching here
there
some food for you you you and you
no, that hijacking will not happen
today
rape gender violence femicide poverty wars
I dare to interrupt
my small woman's fists Thor's hammers



it
is
enough

30 July 2024, for Pan-African Women's Day 31 July 1962

Lisa Lily Julie says that she especially appreciated our session's variety of silence, thought provoking, and silliness, the fabric of life itself. We spoke truth to power, we were moved to tears, and we laughed until we ached. This is how the arts personifies human rights and justice. And manifests fun at the same time. For everyone. Living Rights indeed.