The Market Theatre:
Drama for a new society?
Targeting the Spectator

If we recognize the distinction Marco de Marinis makes between the conception of the spectator as a passive dramaturgical object towards which each performance is directed, and that of the spectator as an active participant, contributing through different responses to what he terms "the performance text [achieving] its fullness,"¹ it can be seen that as far as the Market Theatre in Johannesburg is concerned there has recently been a significant shift from preoccupation with the creation of the performance text to what might almost be called an obsession with both the presence of the spectator and his/her active response. Although in stating this it must also be said that, from the outset, the Market Theatre had always been concerned with the composition of its audiences and the reception environment, both of which condition to a large extent the notion of active participation.

Before attempting, therefore, to consider, first, the recent changes in Market policy which might affect audience response and, secondly, the increasing importance which performance teams accord to targeting the spectator, it is necessary to recall very briefly a few specifics about the history of the theatre.²

The Company was formed in 1974 by Barney Simon and Mannie Manim with ten kindred spirits in Johannesburg in order to get away from, on the one hand, commercial drawing-room comedy inspired by British touring companies and, on the other hand, state-funded theatre embodied by the regional Performing Arts Council theatres such as Pact in the Transvaal where Mannie Manim had previously worked. Homeless until 1976, the Company was supported from 1975 onwards by the Market Foundation, a non-profit making organisation set up by mainly English-speaking big businessmen in Johannesburg who helped by leasing the old Indian Market buildings from the City Council for them. The first few years were difficult, but gradually fund-raising and the support of corporations

such as Anglo-American, Anglo-Vaal, Barclays Bank and others committed to liberal policies for South Africa, grouped together in the Market Foundation, enabled the original Market theatre with its first two theatre venues to expand enormously. By 1985, the small theatre called the Laager and a more informal venue, the Rehearsal Room, had been added to the Main Market and Upstairs theatres and within the same complex were housed an Art Gallery, a Photo Gallery, a restaurant, bars and bookshop. However, 1985 represented an all-time high for the first decade as far as theatre attendance and theatre rentals were concerned, and in 1986 there was a down-turn in investment in the Market and a lowering of theatre attendance. This was compensated by a highly remunerative commercial side-line which concerned the income generated by the Saturday flea-market held on the adjoining square, a form no doubt of “diversification” for the business world.

The financial backing of the Market Foundation left Mannie Manim and Barney Simon relatively free to pursue their aims of encouraging and producing indigenous South African theatre, the best of the classics and those foreign authors the cultural boycott allowed them to perform, for an audience which they wanted to be of what they called the “broadest possible spectrum.” From the very beginning they insisted on multiracial audiences and casts and although they had plays banned or censored, it was generally for reasons of public morality. The peripheral physical setting of the Market in Newtown, a kind of no man’s land next to the railway shunting-yards and the Indian quarter, seems to have afforded them a certain liberty from Group Areas persecution. But the physical distance of Newtown from the Central Business district and (although this was the same for other theatre venues) from the townships, notably from Soweto, was also a problem for audiences. Even for Woza Albert! during its first performances in 1981, the audience at first was that of the white liberal affluent Northern suburbs. Percy Mtwa, one of its co-devisers, reported that to start with, during the week, there would be a maximum of 10 per cent black spectators which would rise to 30 per cent or 40 per cent at weekends. It was only after establishing its reputation by playing actually in the townships, that Woza Albert! was able to play to a 50-50 black and white mix at the Market, with people willing to travel long and perilous distances from Soweto.

If we now consider the situation of the Market audience in more recent years, several new parameters have to be accounted for. From 1988 onwards the Foundation trustees embarked on an unprecedented policy of expansion which, by March 1990, had given two additional venues, “Kippies” specialising in jazz
