

5th World Summit on Arts and Culture
Panel Session - Outside the comfort zone
Mike van Graan

Ibrahim Kashoush will sing no more. In early July, a few days after leading tens of thousands in a chant against the Syrian tyranny, this folksinger's throat was slit, his vocal chords removed, and his body dumped in a river. His compatriot, the acclaimed cartoonist Ali Farzat, was more fortunate. After drawing a cartoon critical of Bashar al-Assad, Farzat – head of the Arab League of Cartoonists - *only* had both his hands broken.

Egypt's representative to this year's Venice Biennale – Ahmed Basiony – a young multimedia artist, didn't make the trip to Italy. He was cut down by snipers' bullets in Tahrir Square. The Freedom Theatre in Ramallah, Palestine lives, but its director is dead. In April, Juliano Mer-Khamis – the son of an Arab father and a Jewish mother - was assassinated by a masked gunman. His two-year old son was with him in the car at the time; his twins were still in his partner's womb.

What is the murder of an artist, if not the ultimate form of censorship?

Those who remain may seek to take comfort in glib refrains: "his music will live on"; or the trite half-truth that "he will always be with us in his art", but on sober reflection, we cannot but conclude that the sword – too often - is mightier than the pen.

The dangers in Syria and Mubarak's Egypt, are the dangers typically associated with exercising freedom of creative expression under brutal regimes that serve elite minorities, and that in doing so, have little regard for the human rights and freedoms of the majority, and indeed for human life at all. In the case of Mer-Khamis, an ally of the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation, the danger lay not only in the region's interminable conflict, but in the alternative vision presented by the Freedom Theatre within the Palestinian context. In his words, the theatre allowed young people living in the equivalent of a prison, to dream again. Speaking of their production of *Alice in Wonderland*, Mer-Khamis said "Our Alice is not some silly girl....Tradition, religion, schools, papa and mama – she's going to say, give me a break guys. I have my own way. And that is dangerous...."

While no-one has yet been charged with his murder, Mer-Khamis predicted that he would be killed by a Palestinian, angry that the Freedom Theatre was corrupting the minds of the youth.

It requires courage to oppose a brutal regime; it takes another kind of bravery to challenge one's allies who enjoy ideological and cultural hegemony in the struggle for liberation.

According to Freedom House, a New York-based watchdog organisation that supports and monitors the expansion of democracy and human rights globally, about 90 countries broadly respect human rights and political freedoms, while 103 countries fail to observe the basic standards of liberal democracy. The worst of these have pervasive state control over daily life, severely limit independent political opposition, and censor or punish criticism of the state. If this is true, then in more than half the countries of the world, artists, creative workers, intellectuals – our colleagues – live their lives as citizens and practice their creativity in danger.

So we should not be surprised that Zarganar, Burma's most popular comedian, has been sentenced to 35 years in jail for criticising the authorities' handling of the 2008 cyclone, or by the four-month detention of internationally-acclaimed artist Ai Weiwei who has been critical of the Chinese regime, or by the Belarus Free Theatre in what is known as Europe's last dictatorship, having to regularly change rehearsal and performance venues to avoid arrest, or by the shutting down of Owen Moseko's exhibition that commemorated the brutal suppression of political resistance in Matabeleland in the early days of Mugabe's rule.

And yet, while we should expect assaults on artists by repressive regimes, this is not the full story, for too often, many regimes like these are supported – overtly or clandestinely – by the world's leading democracies. Right now in the US, there is a campaign against forthcoming legislation that would allow for military assistance to Uzbekistan, considered as one of the world's worst abusers of human rights, regularly silencing civil society activists and independent journalists. Last week, a special Bahrain security court sentenced 20 doctors to prison sentences ranging from 5 to 15 years for treating protestors injured in political uprisings earlier this year. Bahrain is home to the United States Fifth Fleet, and is the primary base in support of Operating Enduring Freedom, the euphemism for the war in Afghanistan. Much has already been said and written about the support of western democracies for the former dictatorships in Egypt, Tunisia

and even Libya, where political stability to secure the strategic economic, security and geo-political interests of the west were considered to be of far greater importance than the violation of human rights and freedoms by these brutal regimes.

It is one thing to point fingers at repressive regimes that have little strategic value to ourselves; it's another to recognise our complicity and culpability in the abuse of our fellow artists by regimes, through the direct support provided by our governments, through trade links that sustain and improve our quality of life, and which consequently render us mute when confronted by the abuse upon which these are premised.

The world – generally – has become a more dangerous place in the last ten years, since the terror attack of 9 September 2001 that left 3000 dead in New York. A recent study by the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University into the cost of the War on Terror, states that in ten years, at least 225 000 people have died, mainly civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, with a further 7,8 million people displaced. The names of those killed in New York are now inscribed on a wall of remembrance, but the names of the 30 000 Pakistanis killed since 2001 will at best be remembered in the nightmares of their loved ones. Or perhaps in *their* cries for vengeance.

The world is an increasingly dangerous place when the life of one American warrants the deaths of 80 others, when the life of a Palestinian is deemed to have less value than that of an Israeli, when the dignity, human rights and freedoms of people of colour are considered expendable in the economic and security interests of wealthy nations.

The world is an increasingly dangerous place when in 10 years, an estimated \$3,2 trillion have been spent on the war, while less than a third of that has been spent on pursuing the Millennium Development Goals, the global plan to ensure greater economic and social justice. And so, social inequities, the gap between rich and poor will increase, leading to greater instability at local, national, regional and international levels, in a world already made less secure by wars ironically conducted to increase security. We spend more time, resources and energy on symptoms rather than causes.

The world is an increasingly dangerous place when democracy is promoted as the best political system to protect citizen freedoms and to secure justice for citizens, and yet, a few countries can veto the decisions of an overwhelming majority; when two powerful nations can

ignore the decisions of the rest of the world, and embark on a war based on complete fabrications. Democracy loses its allure when democratic nations promote the right of people to choose the leaders they want, provided they are the leaders the western nations prefer; and when democracy uses ordinary citizens as voting fodder to produce governments that ultimately serve the corporate interests that fund their election campaigns, rather than those who voted for them.

The world is an increasingly dangerous place as economic decline takes hold, and more and more chauvinist, nationalist governments are elected by anxious voters to protect scarce jobs against immigrant communities and xenophobia increases.

The point that I am trying to make in this presentation is a simple one: of course, there are some of parts of the globe in which artists are more in direct danger than in other parts, but the world as a whole, has become, and is becoming an increasingly dangerous place, something for which rich, powerful, democratic nations – in my view - bear no small responsibility.

The question then, is not simply how do we support artists in situations of danger, as indeed we must. Initiatives in this regard are the International Coalition for Arts, Rights, Justice that seeks to support artists in distress, including the provision of safe passage to other countries, legal support, etc; Freemuse – the NGO that for the last 20 years has monitored and exposed censorship in music, and Arterial Network, the Africa wide civil society body is about to launch Artwatch Africa to map, monitor and expose the contravention of freedom of creative expression on the continent.

The much harder question for the arts community is this: if it is true that our democratic countries are responsible – some more actively than others – for contributing to an increasingly dangerous world in which the rights and freedoms of others are compromised, what, then, are the moral responsibilities, the roles, the obligations of artists, of funding agencies, of the creative sector generally?

I sometimes wonder whether artists and policy makers in the global north are not expected to be, or sometimes allow ourselves to be useful idiots in pursuing the broader political, economic and security agendas of our governments under the banners of intercultural dialogue, cultural diplomacy, culture and development, creative industries, cultural diversity – all of these framing broader objectives which we wittingly or

unwittingly pursue because of the resources made available for their pursuit.

The discourse of solidarity has largely disappeared from the global arts space, and yet, it would seem to me that global inequities and the security challenges of our contemporary world demand a different approach, if not because of our concern for others, then at least out of self-interest about the dangers that these pose to ourselves. The question is: do we have the collective imagination, the creativity, the courage and the will to move out of our comfort zones?

Mike van Graan

Regional Coordinator, IFACCA African Chapter
Secretary General: Arterial Network (www.arterialnetwork.org)
Executive Director: African Arts Institute (www.afai.org.za)
Playwright (www.mikevangraan.co.za)
Email: art27m@iafrica.com