



Students from the University of Lesotho perform a skit in the street to get audience reaction and gather data to create the play "Moiketsi."

Masitha Hoane is Dean of Students at Technikon Witwatersrand, a 12,000-student university in Johannesburg, South Africa. In introducing himself through the online dialogue with his fellow conference participants, he stressed his background in theater and development:

I am a South African living and working in South Africa. But I spent most of my life in Lesotho where my parents chose to live in harder times.

I studied at the Universities of Lesotho, Nairobi and Leeds, the latter as researcher into theatre and development. I have been involved in various projects which dealt with development communication through the theatre. In the '80s I was teaching at the University of Lesotho, where the Marotholi Traveling Theatre under Zakes Mda was also quite active. I directed the the NUL [National University of Lesotho] Theatre Group which dealt primarily with commissioned work from government departments as well as parastatals like the LPPA, UNICEF, etc.

It took up issues such as family planning, HIV/AIDS awareness, etc. But I became more interested in working independently with communities as animateur in which regard I formed two community theatre groups.

His collection of participatory theater pieces, "Let My People Play!"¹ was published in 1994. As described in this interview, conducted by Arlene Goldbard in November 2001, Masitha's work has in recent years focused more on institutional change than on grassroots theater in villages. But whether one works with villagers confronting problems in local infrastructure or South African students facing the dilemma of creating a dynamic and authentic culture that can serve the needs of a nation emerging from apartheid, he has found that the same core questions pertain: how is it possible to protect, nourish and extend indigenous cultures against the pressures of globalized community culture?

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¹ Masitha Hoane, *Let My People Play! Participatory Theatre Plays* (Johannesburg: Institute of Southern African Studies/NUL, 1994).

Culture as the Basis for Development

An Interview With Masitha Hoeane

Arlene Goldbard: Please start by telling a little about your own work, so that people understand where you're coming from in discussing these topics.

Masitha Hoeane: I started working in theater when I was working at the University of Lesotho. At that time, I was working with a theater group based at the university, and most of the work we were doing was Theater for Development, commissioned by government ministries and so on and so forth. We took up various themes, for instance, the Department of Health asked us to do something on HIV/AIDS or family planning, and we would take these themes and turn them into theater and take them out to the rural areas and villages and perform them out there, basically taking certain messages to the community as an educational campaign.

For instance, with the National University of Lesotho (NUL) theater group, we were given a brief to do a play on what is called family-life education—family planning—to promote its adoption by women in the country. There were many problems in relation to attitudes, especially of the men, who mostly worked in the South African mines and thought it would lead to promiscuity, especially during their absence. The NUL theater group took this particular brief and tried to work around it. They expected us to go out there and tell these people what to do. But we found that rather untenable, so we decided to do a little bit of research, if you like, within the community itself in order to get a sense of what people feel and

create the play around it. What we did is to go to the bus terminal, where people are congregated in large numbers. We had a short skit. We took two nurses along, because we knew we weren't professionals in family planning, and if questions came, we wanted to handle them professionally. At the same time, we were running an experiment, because we wanted the public to react. And right in the street, we staged the play right there. The reactions of the public—some of them were quite angry, some were critical: "You're bringing these things here, you're corrupting our women!" We took that as data collection, and out of that, we started creating the play.

The final end product was actually a video, an educational video, which this LPPA—Lesotho Planned Parenthood Association—was going to use in educational campaigns. Even now they still use it in their campaigns. They were quite happy about it. It's entitled "Moiketsi." It's part of a proverb. There is this communications shorthand in Sesotho. This proverb would be well known. It says, "*Moiketsi ha a lleloe*," meaning something like, "He who brings misfortune upon himself, we do weep for such a person." Like if you go out and provoke people and you get hit, you've brought that upon yourself. But in Sesotho you don't say the whole proverb, you simply mention the first word, "*Moiketsi*," and the rest of it falls into place; people know what you are saying.

Like all Theater for Development in Africa, we saw some constrictions in working to a brief. Sometimes in the process of presenting them, we would find that they are not really priorities, and that was a bit disappointing. We began to work a little independently because that allowed us to address more relevant themes than coming into a community with prescribed things. We would go there to talk about health, or immunization, and find that the people wanted to talk about unemployment; that was uppermost in their minds. Or they were more concerned about the political situation. So it sort of gave us a feeling of irrelevance, and in the end we moved away from that and started working differently.

AG: In what way?

MH: We understood you could go out into a community without any specific agenda and then begin to commune with the village. We would carry out theater exercises to find out what people are talking about and listen when they expressed themselves. So you begin to explore together, and that made it relevant, in the sense that you picked the point of the theater from what they are saying. Then what the theater addresses would be what is raised by themselves.

AG: This was possible for you because people worked at the university? They were supported by the university?

MH: In Theater for Development, I did one big project which was part of my research. We worked with people from the university who were acting as *animateurs*, but in the end we handed over the project to the community, including its performing.

AG: When was this?

MH: We started in the '80s, up to '91, and then I left Lesotho. I came back in '95 and just worked briefly, and then left again.

AG: Since '95, have you been doing any popular theater work?

MH: After '95, I haven't been doing anything outside institutions. I've been working inside institutions with students.

AG: Why is that?

MH: Because of the conditions for Theater for Development in Africa. Working in Theater for Development can be quite frustrating.

One is that invariably you lack sponsorship. There are very few sponsors around, and that can hamper the quality of the work you do and the extent to which you can do it, and that can be quite demoralizing. When you work in communities, you definitely need some resources; and the people in the community also need things, because it costs money to run theaters, to move people around and so forth. So that's one problem we ran into. Occasionally you get a sponsor: UNICEF in this case sponsored "Moiketsi." But such sponsors are quite scarce, so you go without sponsorship. That's one problem.

The second one is that you cannot work on this thing full time. You can only give it partial attention because, again, there are no funders. Nobody works in Theater for Development full time, so you've got to get another job and do it part time. So there's a sense in which it encroaches upon your work. You don't give it sufficient attention. You can have a passion for it, you want to do it; but [there isn't] enough time, there isn't enough money. And also experience has shown elsewhere in Africa that it can actually be a thankless job. Theater for Development is people-oriented, it tries to uplift people in society; but the people who do it often run into problems with authority, as opposed to [authorities'] appreciating their doing the work of developing people.

AG: Why isn't this kind of work being supported?

MH: It's a kind of general problem we have in Africa, where there is a general absence of democracy. People get into power through the barrel of the gun, with tyrants in power. There are all kinds of tendencies, such as the oppression of women. In the very nature of Theater for Development, you are thinking of democratization, you are anti-tyranny, you are trying to liberate people, you are trying to raise their awareness. You are talking about their rights, making them feel they are important. They matter. Which is exactly what oppressive situations don't want.

AG: Did this suggest to you that a different context would be more successful?

MH: Yes. It's either that or you abandon it because sometimes you are gripped by despair. It's not the kind of despair in which you lose faith in Theater for Development; it's simply because the conditions under which you are doing it become very, very difficult. So it has been my decision, like many other practitioners, to function within an educational institution. You need to have some primary source of income which will allow you to do other things; so you do it as a hobby of a kind, and you do it for love. You don't expect to get anything in return. You need something to sustain you while you do it. It's an act of self-sacrifice, if you like. And also, it's important for you to function within an institution in the sense that when you work within an institution, then you can relate it to your work, then you can feed off your work, even in terms of resources. Also, I think African universities are the most protected environments in Africa. Otherwise the general situation is insecure.

AG: Why is that?

MH: I think the reason is simply that African tyrants are afraid of universities. Universities always have expatriates, people that are international, and if you do anything overt, you'll draw the attention of the world. Remember, these countries rely on foreign aid, so it's absolutely critical for them to pretend to the rest of the world. That's why they won't touch Westerners. It's not that they love them, but they fear exposure. So the universities are like islands, a certain measure of protection. I'm not saying total.

AG: How has globalization overall affected Theater for Development in Africa?

MH: Perhaps I will begin broadly in terms of globalization, because I feel globalization is not necessarily something new. When I talk about globalization, I am talking about a context of the way Africa has experienced the broader West. I'm talking about whatever theories of development have been brought to Africa, the attempts to emulate the Western world as a strategy of development in African countries. In the long run, that proved ineffective as a model of development, and people began to move toward alternatives, talking about the cultural dimension of development and so forth. That is the broader background.

Theater for Development as I see it is something that was started by the elite in Africa. By that I mean Western-educated people, and they started off in the traveling theaters. They started off by wanting to commune with communities, wanting to reach out. But they were reaching out in the wrong way—for instance by taking English plays to the villages. All of this presupposes an enlightened center, and some periphery out there which has to be enlightened. And in the process they ignore language issues, they ignore issues of culture and so on. A lot of mistakes were made. Over time, especially after independence, they retained the concept of the traveling theater, but began to undergo a certain transformation in the kinds of plays they were taking. The evolution I am talking about is a gradual realization over a long period of time: first, to change the language; and second, the performance modes; and third, it was not to make assumptions about the culture, but to go there by way of learning as much as teaching. In other words, the traveling theaters evolved into *animateurs* who were prepared to work on an equal footing with the community, and really that changes their content, their issues. That changes their performance modes, the language and everything.

AG: Do you feel that this transformation had been accomplished? Has everybody gotten this point, or are there still people out there trying to bring elite theater from the villages to the center?

MH: It has been a general development in that direction, although you could say that theater in Africa is not exactly the same in different places. But in general, there are very few people if any now who still do that kind of theater. The broad majority of practitioners of Theater for Development wouldn't do that anymore.

AG: In David Kerr's essay [in this volume], he talks about all foreign-aid NGOs commissioning or sponsoring traveling theater projects, describing how their agenda comes with the money. He raises the question of how popular theaters can be supported so they don't come with NGO strings attached. How do you see that?

MH: That has been a problem that I have encountered personally—because you have to have money from somewhere. As a practitioner of Theater for Development, you have to provide what you might call a courier service for the ideas, to have some way for them to reach rural areas. And in the process of doing that, you find yourself compromised, because you are like somebody who is employed to do something that sometimes is not what you believe in yourself. When you go out to the village, if you're a genuine community worker, you begin to commune with people. You might find that the conclusions you reach might be different from the ones you've been given the brief to do. But if you are working to a brief, if these are your sponsors, then you must see the message through, because that's what they paid you for. The practitioners of the theater—when they are not themselves the generators of the message, when it is generated elsewhere—I think it is not appropriate for the theater and for the village as well.

In other words, for it to develop properly and genuinely, for it to remain relevant and authentic, it needs to break that link with the current sponsor, or to get a sponsor in a different mode, who thinks differently, who can say, "Go to your community. I want to help that community." Then I didn't come with an agenda: there's no self-interest in any way, and I respect the integrity of that community to be able to identify what is desired and help it along—because it *is* possible to get sponsors like that.

AG: Who are they, for instance?

MH: I have never actually encountered one. Unfortunately, within the context of Africa, you will find that it is government that's the sponsor, and they are not in that mode. The NGOs I know operating here are also not in that mode. But some people say, "I'm doing my own work, I'm doing my own research into the field." Nobody is saying, "I should look into this or that; people are supporting me to do what I do." Do you see that kind of thing?

AG: Not a lot. It's been interesting to get everybody's essays, because we're building up a sort of composite picture of the field, and very much these same problems are coming up in a lot of different places.

MH: Well, theoretically at least, there will be a breakthrough if theater practitioners could get that kind of funding to facilitate their work rather than determine it.

AG: Yes, absolutely.

MH: And unfortunately, we are trapped in a situation where the former is the case.

AG: In essence, you're saying the practitioners are ahead of the funding sources in understanding what's really needed.

MH: Exactly. The practitioners are far ahead, and the practitioners are also, you might say, closer to the community, more receptive. They know what is going on on the ground. And I think a lot of them, the more progressive ones, are well disposed toward communities and how they develop. They're more in touch with what's going on down there. They wouldn't go and parachute something into a community. They would more likely start to say, "Let's work with the community: this community has got integrity, there are things I can learn from as well." And then work from inside there and try to get somewhere. But NGOs simply come with the attitude, that "No, no: most communities don't know what they want. They need an external person to show them where to go. We know the agenda. We know what's good for them. They can't help themselves." And it's simply because [community people] don't have the money. [NGOs] don't realize that's the difference between the two: some have money, and those that do not are incapacitated in that sense.

What we are talking about here is culture as the basis for development. Every culture should be able to have the resources to say what it needs for development. That development must really be inside that culture rather than [imposed] externally. That may sound controversial, I know.

AG: Well, not in this company. I think you'll find a lot of like minds. Because you've lived inside and outside South Africa at this important point in its history, I'm wondering if you have observations to share on this question in relation to South Africa. When you say every culture should have the resources to say what it needs to develop, there you have a particular kind of problem which we've seen in other places like in Czechoslovakia, the former Yugoslavia, where a nation has been liberated and has to develop a new culture.

MH: Within South Africa, I suppose that's about the hottest thing that's going around here. But fortunately, I think the context now in South Africa, despite whatever other problems may be there, is that South Africa is coming out of a history of conflict and, I think, extreme backwardness—racism, racial intolerance and so on—the context, guided by the constitution, explicitly promotes multiculturalism. Everywhere, everybody talks about it. The institutions here are talking about diversity and how to handle diversity, so that even the funding for these things considers the fact that people are sponsored across the spectrum. There's a lot of sensitivity for culture. Yet there is still some inequality and a great bias, I think—perhaps unwitting a lot—toward Western culture. What I see on a large scale is black people are mimicking white cultures. This is a very strong thing here. You see it on TV especially: the so-called celebrities, they mimic things that are from outside of here.

AG: So what do you feel from your perspective in cultural development: when you look at that society as it's growing, what do you feel is needed to balance that?

MH: In South Africa, in the long run, cultural activities are going to be very expensive to fund because there are so many cultures. Talking of a common South African culture is a big problem. You know, we see ourselves as the rainbow nation. We need to see ourselves in that context because I don't think there's what you can call a South African culture. We have a spectrum. It is a nation of several cultures, which... come from a history of antagonism. So what should be developed is some kind of peaceful coexistence between those cultures. In some cases, you do get a true kind of coming together. Let me say Johannesburg. If you ask the people here what language they talk, you won't get one answer. In Johannesburg, you just speak many tongues, and yet you communicate, they understand each other. In the taxi, in the public places, people get by that way. Nobody's controlling that; it's happening spontaneously. A lot of the people here in Johannesburg are really detribalized over a long process of living around here. Even their names: a person with a Zulu surname will have a Sesotho name. Intermarriages, what have you, I think they are quite integrated, and they get by quite well. Johannesburg is not a bad example of culture in South Africa.

This is also associated with the mines. I think that's where it first started. The mines brought together several tribes, and they met with the Afrikaners and the Europeans and so on, and they had to take instructions and get by somehow. They spoke something called

Fanakalo, a South African form of pidgin, a conglomeration of a little bit of Afrikaans, a little bit of Zulu, a fantastic jumble. But in the mines, they speak it and they understand it.

AG: Gary Stewart's interview [in this volume] describes work he's doing with Asian kids from London, second-generation, their parents emigrated from India or Pakistan mostly. He was saying something new is being created by the mixing of these cultures, and there's a tendency to say it should be a sort of melting pot, that it should all come together to be one British thing; but the way he looks at it and the way he's working with the kids, it's more like a constant quoting and mixing without diluting. He said, "We don't want to call it fusion, we just want to say it's normal for the conditions of our lives." Sounds a little like what you're saying.

MH: That's interesting, because when I was in Leeds I did a project like that addressing racism, so we were dealing with young people from different backgrounds, but mostly they were British and Asian and a few black ones. We decided to create a dance theater because we realized with hip-hop, that music was a sort of common ground where they meet. They aspire to the same things, the same dances; that was the one really common thing, so we played around with that. It was quite interesting.

AG: As Dean of Students, you are now seeing the younger generation in great numbers.

MH: Yes. We deal with several problems that are current: HIV/AIDS, we address that through theater as well; we deal with diversity issues. We've run some campaigns. This year, we set some goals. We were going to launch a wellness office, where originally we thought of an HIV/AIDS office, but we did not want to stigmatize it in that way, so we just called it the wellness office so we can deal with other issues that the young people want to talk about. We trained peer helpers, because we want student-to-student communication, which is better than when adults talk to them. So they were trained by counselors to be AIDS educators and peer helpers. We also ran other campaigns, like what we call the "Talk to 10" campaign, where in a particular period you are asking each student to talk to 10 other students to get them to take ownership of their own issues. So it's talking to 10 other people, asking them a question or expressing an opinion about HIV or any aspect of it. We are hoping that if each student talks to 10, and it goes like that, it will spread and embrace

the whole student community. And it worked quite well. We took a survey to find out how many people were talked to in that kind of elementary way, and we found that over 80 percent of the students had participated.

AG: I can't resist asking you a question now that relates back to your original point about work that's driven by an agenda. Did the students find out things their fellow students cared about that you hadn't known, that weren't part of your agenda?

MH: That was our concern immediately. We said that it might not be giving information; it might also involve asking a question, expressing an opinion, so that it doesn't just become didactic in a very narrow way. There should be communication, but we should leave it open to a range of possibilities. By the very nature of an intervention, you must be careful. Sometimes you come with a bias, even unwittingly. Sometimes there is an attitude you bring.

In South Africa, here on the campus, we just had a discussion the other day where we said, "You know, we are so preoccupied with race because we come from that kind of background; we think that's the thing that we've got to get right. But there are so many issues between students. Some of them are not even thinking about it anymore. I'm not saying it will fade altogether, but there are other issues now—abuse of girls, other issues that belong to the world of students—that we may lose sight of, because we are emphasizing that concern, because race has always been a problem for our generation.

AG: It's ironic in a way, isn't it? Because race was the preoccupation before liberation, and now for the healing of that, it's still a preoccupation, which can have unintended consequences as you point out. You mentioned, for instance, this need to have a culture that's not based on mimicking people from the West. How do you see it as possible to affect that, to replace it with something that feels more South African?

MH: The culture is emerging and has been for some time now in the townships, where it was a conglomeration of languages. It's got, for example, songs from different cultures that people have heard and seen as their own, because they grew up hearing them. That's an alternative source of culture, although it goes back to the question of money: Who controls the money? What will TV stations buy? I think people behave like that (mimicking the West) not only because they want to be like that, but also because that's what sells.

- AG:** When we talk about globalization, that's a big part of it, that all these commercial cultural products are coming out primarily from America and flooding the globe.
- MH:** Flooding the globe. One example: only yesterday, Manchester United, the football team, was playing against a team from somewhere in Europe. They showed it here, and there was a good local match but they didn't show it. That's a small thing, but in the morning, you listen to the news, they tell you the scores of the European Cup. They can show you the goals that were scored in Europe, but they cannot show you how the goals were scored in this country. There is more coverage of European subjects than you can get for something of local interest.
- AG:** It creates the message that what is happening here is inferior somehow?
- MH:** What is happening here is inferior, and I think it is doing a lot of damage to our children, to their self-image, self-esteem. I think it does something to their morale. Even when they grow up, they grow up with a disrespect for that which is local, because it doesn't seem to matter. I think that causes tremendous social problems. Values, respect, attitudes—they together create a system. When that system falls apart, the culture becomes confused. When you lose an identity, the identity that remains is reflected in the values I see in the young people here. I think some of them just fall apart, and I don't think they know what they are doing, whether they are coming or going, because they have lost what they had, and they have not fully grasped that which they want to change.
- AG:** If you were in a position to do whatever is needed to change this, what would you do?
- MH:** If I had the power, I would start with the media, because the media are a very powerful force that are stimulating this process and pushing it. The media ought to change priorities, to try to engage the local situation. They should become more reflective of where we are and more promotional of what goes on locally. The media would have to go back to research in the communities and reflect that on the screen. At the same time I suppose you'd have to change the educational system to begin to reconstruct wrong attitudes about culture, because I think that's where it begins. You would also have to go back and invest in developing local culture, because the media cannot promote local culture if there is nothing coming from local culture.

AG: Is that happening now? Is there funding for local cultural development in South Africa? Are people able to get resources to do things like reconstruct traditional languages or practices?

MH: There is something in that direction, but I'm not sure whether it has been strong enough. Neither do I think enough resources have been put there. There is already an entrenched inequality. My suspicion is that it becomes easier to go on with established things than to go back and try to create new foundations. As an example, let me talk about the university when South Africa became free. There were so many black universities and so many white universities. Many of the white universities were very well-resourced in terms of the level of the institution, the equipment there, everything, whereas many of the black universities were really the opposite. Some of them were almost bankrupt.

When the government changed, there were discussions of differential funding, so that we could pick up the poor universities to the level of the others. But I think that scheme was practically abandoned, because it is easier to say, "Why don't we close down the bad ones and run the already successful ones, except making sure that they have equal access?" And it becomes a very emotional matter, because those that are historically black, there's a lot of sentiment around them; but to bring them up from where they are to this level is almost impossible, because of money. So the easy way out is just to abandon them, and that is the reality. That is the writing one sees on the wall.

AG: In the American South, in the Deep South, in the places that held on the longest to segregation in this country, they also had black schools and white schools. They were both public—that is, government-funded—schools, and the white schools had a lot more money and better books and classrooms, but the black schools had a respect for black culture. They had black principals and teachers, so there was more of a feeling of autonomy, even though they were not as good in terms of resources, there was a feeling that the culture could be preserved and advanced somehow through them. Don [Adams] and I did some work down there. We talked to several people who had been principals or head teachers at black schools, and when they ended segregation, the black schools were closed down. In effect, everything that had been built up just disappeared. There are a lot of people there who say they paid a high price for the end of segregation, because it also meant the end of these community institutions.

There's an underlying theme in a lot of what you've been saying which has to do with, on the one hand, what should be happening, and on the other hand, what is happening because of how the money flows, or expediency, or what seems possible. Seems like there's a big gap between those two things.

MH: I think there's a really, really big gap, and that gap is very difficult to negotiate, because there are all sorts of things that are emotive issues. For instance, the situation is that you find that black teachers actually send their children to white schools in the post-'94 period. This is a general trend in the public, but I think it's very telling that the black teachers do it as well. This is a matter of public debate, when the public can say, "Even the teachers..." That to me is a very serious signal in a negative sense, when people have lost entire faith in their own institutions, in the things they do. They feel they would rather surrender their children elsewhere. With the coming of independence here, we see rising expectations among the black people who also happen to be the destitute majority. And their rising expectations—which are rising fast—I think really they cannot be met.

So you sort of enter a period of depression. You start with euphoria, you perhaps have unrealistic expectations, but certain things haven't happened that people thought would happen, and nobody ever thought clearly about how they could be done. So there is that period you enter into now of uncertainty, disillusionment, cynicism. It's hard for people to do anything in that kind of period.

AG: That's a frightening time for any society.

MH: I think so too. Because some of the people you see in Johannesburg here, you just don't know what happened to them. There is a big, big confusion in terms of what is happening.

I see a microcosm of this within the institution. This was a white institution not so long ago. Then it transformed very rapidly. The student population is now about 80 percent black, but the staff is still as it was. A few people have come in, just like myself. But a lot of the time you find that this is an institution that requires healing. Black students have formerly spent their time fighting authority. Schools were seen as legitimate spaces to fight the system because also they were extensions of the system. Now the whole thing has to change, and we are supposed to lead the change in that culture, so we become the shock absorbers, if you like. At the same time, I think the white lecturers have certainly been traumatized by the

coming of black students. The caliber of students that they are teaching is no longer the same, and I think some of them get annoyed with that; and then the failure rate is very high, and the students complain that they are being failed, and you get that kind of tension. Also, black students don't have the means to pay. It is so difficult. You have to bring these groups together to have some kind of dialogue that's a healing process toward the normalization of the institution, to bring it more in line with what an institution should be, so that the lecturers feel much more adjusted. The lecturers say the caliber of students is no longer the same, but their duties are the same: to bring them up. We suspect they need retraining because of all that happened, and there was no preparation for it.

AG: How has your work in the university been informed by what you've learned from your Theater for Development experience?

MH: In many ways, fundamental ways. I actually transferred the work into that environment and the entire approach is informed by that. Let us take some concrete examples. When first you meet students—the potential cast, the potential group of people you're going to work with—you'll work with them in a certain way, the methodology of preparing them with theatrical games and exercises, making them bond, building a sense of team, that interdependence that is so critical to the functioning of a cast. Then all those techniques you use to advance your goals and to communicate with these people. So that's one way. Then of course, people learn in certain ways. You can lecture to people endlessly; that's one way of teaching. But in the theater, we believe differently, because it's all about participation and involvement: transformation of people and enhancement and change of their consciousness through direct involvement and participation rather than through being told. As a matter of fact, I think my effectiveness, to the degree I've been effective, is directly dependent on my early involvement in Theater for Development.

AG: Is there a specific project you've worked on at the university that addresses these cultural concerns you've brought up?

MH: We had what we called the Diversity Project, which we did in the second half of 2001, up to October. We looked at the multicultural situation. We have different racial and cultural groups within the institution, but somehow they seem not to connect well, which we thought was denying students a very important experience in terms of their development. So that's how the project was born: find ways of getting students to bond, to communicate, to reach across these barriers.

The Diversity Project was meant to do that, and the way it functioned was as follows: identify categories—racial, ethnic and so on, including also disabled students, international students, various groupings—and bring them together in a two-day workshop. They would sleep out and have sessions together, a mixture of formal workshop sessions and entertainment to maintain the human context between them. And then you talk to them about diversity issues, and they would come back with shared feelings together. And we thought that maybe this would create an alternative world for the students, give them an experience which their society denies them, which would make education very life changing for them. When the students come back, we had sessions with them to find out how they felt. It was just wonderful listening to them, some of them telling us how this impacted their lives.

AG: What kinds of things did they say?

MH: One said, “I have been fearful of the campus. I have not been mixing with the other students. But now that we’ve been out there, I understand their cultures better. I feel more adjusted. I felt part of it. I even have a few friends, and I can tolerate other cultures better.” And he was saying the project was most useful to him.

AG: You’re starting with a core of people in the workshops?

MH: In the workshops, you actually recruit people quite explicitly. You tell them what the purpose is, what you hope to achieve and what is going to happen, so that people know that they’re not going to be forced to do anything they don’t want to do, and so on. And then they come forward, and you accept them on the basis of first-come, first-served, but there’s a quota for each category. Then the whole idea is that once you have groups like that, you take them out and you train them. When they come back, they will be used as growth points for other groups, to spread this influence. If you train 30 and each one of them forms a diversity group of 30, you can see how many people you’ll have. When it spreads like that, we just hope at the end of the day people will be part of it. And the students showed a lot of interest. Once the first group had come back, when we called for the second one, we couldn’t handle them all.

AG: In a way, you’re using the university as a laboratory for cultural transformation.

MH: Precisely, especially if you consider the kind of society in which we live—that all these racial attitudes, prejudices, conflicts continue to linger in the outside society—and we must address that. We must give our students a different experience. A university is a community of young people, and also young intellectuals, the cream if you like of society, the future of society. So one idea is that in that space, you must create people who can lead. It isn't just a space where you replicate the problems in the larger society and where they are played out. To the contrary, it's where you reverse issues. As you said, it's a laboratory, an experiment in showing new possibilities, new directions. We are hoping to lead society, rather than follow its vices. Yes, the wider society does impinge, because these students come from somewhere, with backgrounds, influences and teachings and fears, anxieties, some of which are very difficult for them to handle as young people in this time of change in particular. If they're just left to their own devices without some strong intervention to reverse those trends, the students will just go on and become like the generations before them.

AG: It sounds as if the transition to the new system after the fall of apartheid was abrupt for the university. People just came to school one day and it was all different?

MH: Yeah. And I think everybody has hoped that things would be fine. And yet I don't think things happen that way. I think some people have to go to workshops to prepare them for the transition, so they can cope with it. You can't just wait there and hope. The students just stand there and say, "They don't like us. That's why we are failing." The white lecturers feel like, "We are not wanted here." They blame that for everything. But you need to bring those groups together because if you don't, education can't happen. And when you talk to them in smaller groups and separately, there's so much good will. But someone's got to come and take the initiative to be the catalyst, try to do that healing.

AG: Is that you? Are you in that position?

MH: Yes, we are driving that process right now. It's amazing what we are doing, one person at a time. A lecturer said, "Yeah, people don't listen to us here, nobody cares. Now for the first time I can stand up and say what I think." Because otherwise they stand up there and think, "Do you even care what I'm saying?" Now we want to know

how people feel, for them to express what they feel—their frustrations, their anxieties—openly. We say, “Don’t feel guilty about it, just say what you feel.” It’s not a question of who blames who; it’s that we need some kind of articulation of what we have all felt, the students too. After that, the feeling was quite different.

AG: But it’s hard to be in your position with that. You’re absorbing a lot that you may sometimes wish you didn’t have to absorb.

MH: Yeah. I’ve felt that myself, that one might need counseling, too, because you see these people and you stand in the middle. Being a dean of students, people have these expectations. You’re concerned for young people and the need for education, and you know that fighting doesn’t help. So you have to dialogue with them on a congenial basis, you have to be their role model, their friend. But at the same time, you might have to tell them off quite frankly one day; and to do that, you must carry some credibility as well. Sometimes they are in a fight, and you have to call them and tell them, “No, you can’t do that.”

AG: On the university Web site, I saw you giving a talk to the students about drinking too much at parties.

MH: You see, those are the kinds of things we talk about. To explain why students are failing, we have to look at the whole range of issues—just dialogue with the institution, so people respond with their views, saying this is what I’ve observed, this is what I feel. Talk about everything: teaching methods, what have you. There is also the question of students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, so people don’t drive themselves. We are talking about all the policies, including drinking.

Early in 2001, Masitha authored a provocative discussion paper about the nature of education at Technikon Witwatersrand, challenging his colleagues to put students first, rather than blindly following a syllabus that produces failure rates as high as 80 percent. This excerpt seems to sum up his philosophy:

Academic disadvantage is not an original condition; neither is it permanent. Disadvantage should vanish like vapour against the advancing light of education. It can be thrown off like an unwanted coat. The question is what it consists in and what the relevant variables are. It is our observation, for instance, that a large section of our students do not have enough language resources to study in the English language. It is common for them to ask to revert to the vernacular in communication. Are we approachable enough for our students to communicate their problems? Our approachability becomes crucial because the learners are already removed from the situation by the language barrier. In the circumstances, they need more than just a dispenser of knowledge but a person who is a friend and ally, a leader, a role model and a teacher all rolled into one to guide and reassure them. Indifference might prove to be the last straw in the already difficult circumstances. The social dimensions of education are brought to the fore and trust becomes a major factor in learning. Those who have had to operate in a language different from their mother tongue will readily identify with the present line of argument.²

²Masitha Hoeane, "TWR Student Affairs: Some Thoughts on the Support Function," unpublished internal document, Technikon Witwatersrand, January 2001.