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Interview with Angifi Dladla
by Joan Metelerkamp

ANGIFI PROCTOR DLADLA, also known as Muntu wa Bachaki, was born at Wakkerstroom old location in 1950. He is a history and language teacher in Katlehong. He wrote and produced the plays *Mene Tekel*, *Mistress Magumbo*, *Dennis the Goat on Trial*, *Saragorah*, and other plays. For the past few years he has taught writing and produced newspapers with inmates of Boksburg Prison and the youth in Katlehong.

On a practical level, how do you write? Where and when you do it?

I write everywhere, anytime. That's why, when I go, I always carry a booklet and a pen. If an image or anything flashes on me, I must be ready to jot it down, otherwise I'll regret – it will never come back. Then at home I record that on the computer.

Do you do it in a disciplined way, every day? or once a week? do you have a rhythm?

Friday is my day – poetry day. During the course of the week, as I said, I record sketches on the computer, allowing my mind to work on them. Then on Friday, I bring things together. On Saturday I work on plays, because I'm also a playwright. But there is flexibility. When a poem or a play shapes itself, it takes over – it becomes a dictator, taking all my time – sometimes the whole night, sometimes many days. So other work suffers! I want to be alone during this period, and my stamina is incredible. If one can peep into my study, one would say "Disorder!" because things are just scattered all over, even on the floor.

When I'm through, I'm filled with satisfaction. I want to go out somewhere where there is noise, to a shebeen or tavern to talk and dance. Then as I am a teacher, during the holidays, especially in December, I get enough time to polish my work.

What is the relationship between writing drama and poetry? Do you see the two as part of one enterprise, or are they divided?

They're part of one enterprise. I let what has struck me settle in my mind, then the genre will choose itself. Sometimes when I work on a

poem, I feel I could explore more and turn it into a play. Sometimes when I write a play, I steal something from it, and transform it into a poem. When that relentless force takes over, the division no longer exists. Though a play is different from a poem, they both deal with human life. They influence each other: there is poetry in some of my plays and there is drama in some of my poems.

Like in the poem about the woman who drowned, "Remembering Zanyana after four decades" – that's complete drama! Do you have a sense of priority, that your plays are more important for this, or your poems more important for that?

A play gives me the feeling of how it is to be God, to be a Creator. I am a creator, creating worlds of my people including other creatures, the situations, and the atmosphere. This is exciting, especially the most difficult part – to be invisible as a creator!

But there's something unfair about a play. I tolerate the characters, but they do not tolerate me. As they go their own ways they become real human beings. I see them moving away from me like a growing child moving away from what the parents thought it would be. From the characters of the play I learn about human nature. Their independence frightens me, but at the same time it gives me pleasure and satisfaction. I hear their voices. That's why I want to be alone in this state, to talk and argue and laugh with these people.

With poetry it's more like crossing the borders. Poetry demands a search for the essence of things. The deeper I go, the more I'm sucked in and in and in. I become liberated from the physical world to the spiritual world! Take, for example, the poem "Rubbished". That was about a schoolchild who was shot and hacked and left to die at a rubbish dump in Katlehong. I wrote this poem the very day I saw the body. Then one day, after many years of seeing people dying and visiting the mortuaries to identify my relatives, I wrote "Ubuntu". This poem led me to go deeper, to write "At the government mortuary", "So turned a taxi", "Our bodies", "Rotting", "Bodies", "The dead". No matter how many corpses one sees, one cannot get used to them. I had questions!

Poems started to unfold as if a divine hand was working. My stepfather passed away one August. Then in August the following year he visited me. I wrote "Exposure" about that experience. Later I wrote another poem in Zulu, "Uhambo". It was when I was in hospital. While the doctors were busy with me, I left my body . . .

Your poems have a sense of objective observation at the same time as intense personal connection. How do plays differ?

My plays are not so personal. Characters are on their own living their own lives. But there is a new trend in my plays now – I share with the characters of my plays the great truths I gained from poetry.

I'm thinking of the title poem of your book: "The girl who then feared to sleep" – can you tell me a bit about that poem?

I won't go into detail, those memories . . . but she was afraid of death, she didn't want to sleep . . . Why? She thought if she fell into sleep, she would die.

There's something about the diction – the language is completely accessible. Do you read your poems aloud?

I read aloud what I write – lines, stanzas, and the whole poem. I want to hear the words, the lines! This helps in editing the work. That's why I want to be alone. Then I'll shelve the work for some months. When I return to it, it's a new thing. I read it, sometimes I change roles. Sometimes the people in my township ask me to write a poem for a certain event. The last poem in my collection, "song of the aged" is one of those. I was invited to an old age home in Katlehong.

How did that feel?

Inner joy and satisfaction. People themselves appreciated in wonder and awe. So engrossed were they that at the end of the poem they waited some seconds in disbelief, then they simultaneously ululated and clapped hands as if something pressed them. Again, I've got a lot of clocks at home, shirts, and other gifts presented by those who invited me to various events.

Which were you led to first – drama or poetry? or were you led to them simultaneously?

When I was a child, at the time I mastered reading, they hid all family letters, maybe because I used to read them aloud outside. That's when my aunt brought me comic magazines from where she worked. I started writing notes about my experiences, people I knew, places I visited. I was not aware that I was writing a diary! Nobody told me to do that. In that book there is a part where I wrote about my

girlfriends, all of them: name, age, physique, personality. It's amazing! This diary is my treasure now, my mine!

When I was doing a teacher's course, we were compelled to take theory of music in the first year – staff notation and all that stuff. We students from Transvaal knew nothing about the theory of music. In Natal it seemed they were doing this even in the primary school. I was so frustrated, and our music master seemed to be amused when we struggled with these knobkerrie-like things. One day during the study period, as some students were composing their own songs, I wrote a poem in Zulu. My classmates praised me. That was the beginning . . .

What started you on the plays?

I guess it was the influence of radio plays and school sketches. At high school I had already started writing plays which were performed. One that I wrote at St. Chad's High changed my vision about plays. I was commissioned by one of the teachers to write it. We worked as a team – choristers, teachers, school clerks, villagers, local priest, the whole student body took part. The play became ours, not mine. It was one of the greatest moments in my life! Later I studied speech and drama. I had this vision of community involvement when I started the Akudlalwa Communal Theatre . . . We created a lot of plays with the nurses, social workers, students, church people, sangomas and the faith healers. Unfortunately the blood-letting of the 90s disrupted this vigorous community programme.

Was your reading of other poets an influence?

In those days, there was no 'poetry' in our midst except what we studied at school. The school did not regard community poetry as poetry because it was not in print. There was no soul of the community in the classroom. We were just forced to memorise poems in English, Afrikaans and Zulu. I first read a Zulu poetry book in Junior Secondary School. Even at the university I did not get a real sense of poetry. But I kept on writing. Then in the late 1970s Prof Zeke Mphahlele arrived from exile. I attended all his writing workshops. The hall was always full at first, but later we became very few. Those who remained are writers today.

Those workshops really opened me up. Mphahlele exposed us to African, Afro-American and Caribbean literature. It was my first time to hear of South African writers like Dennis Brutus, Mazisi Kunene,

Keorapetse Kgositsile and others. He exposed us to strange names like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Sembene Ousmane, Leopold Senghor, Antonio Jacinto, Frantz Fanon, Okot P'Bitek – names I couldn't even pronounce. I liked Okot P'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. I still feel that one day I must dramatise this work.

And now? Do you read a lot?

Absolutely. A writer must read, must be knowledgeable about everything. I like ancient history and books on literary criticism and on spirituality.

What inspired you to teach writing?

It was Professor Zeke Mphahlele. From him I learnt that writing can be taught. In my school days, teachers used to say writing cannot be taught. A person must be gifted, that's all! At the Teachers' College we were just told that a composition must have a beginning, a body and an ending or conclusion. No details. This was troubling me. Then, from a certain book I learned about a topic sentence in each paragraph. I tried all this, but I was not satisfied. So, as a young writer, the school did not show me the way. Even as a teacher, it is obvious, I was stuck, I could not go further in really arming my students. For years I did what was expected – giving the kids topics and demanded work. I did not write with them; I was not exemplary!

I was a sole reader of their works. I was sort of a commander and a judge with a stick and a red pen, always finding faults, condemning the child to do corrections! The child gained nothing – but fear, frustration and the art of cheating for survival.

And the skills of teaching, where did you get them?

At IAJ, the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism in South Africa, and at the Poynter Institute, Florida, USA. Writing teachers such as Hugh Lewin, and Roy Peter Clark have really given me confidence with the writing process and everything concerning the teaching of writing. I am still learning . . .

Situations, incidents, are often a spur to your writing, aren't they? Like your poem, "An Intruder".

Oh yes. That was in 1979. I was a new teacher in Vosloorus. One day, immediately after break, I was writing something on the board, and

students were coming in. Then something came storming in. It was a wild man, kicking, punching, biting and scratching the hell out of me. Fortunately, the boys dragged and kicked him out. Girls were pleading to them he must not be killed “It is Mahlomola, the local madman.”

I couldn’t teach that day. Students and teachers were laughing at me, even the principal himself, though consoling me, was laughing in a way. I was not angry, I also laughed! After school at Moleba bus stop, there were students in groups. It was obvious they were talking about my misfortune and giggling. In the bus to Katlehong, same thing. At home I took my typewriter and worked on a poem . . .

In the morning, it was the same thing, even at the assembly. When students looked at me, they could not control themselves. Some were covering their mouths, others with tissue papers were wiping their eyes. My first period was in the same classroom where I was attacked. Laughter again! Smilingly I said, “I have a poem”. All shushed one another. They collected themselves in that adolescent mischievous silence. I read the poem. “Encore, Meneer!” I read it again. Coins were tossed . . . “Read it again, Meneer!” That was the end of laughter . . .

At the end of my period the class did not want me to go. But I went out, some students following me. In the classes where I entered, I found one or two stanzas of the poem, though corrupted, already on the board. There was interception! They asked me to read. I read the poem several times even in the classes where I was not teaching. The headmaster said I should read the poem for the whole student body at once at the assembly. That was the end of laughter . . . Even today, when I meet my former students, they are oldsters now, some are in high positions . . . they all ask,”Meneer, where is ‘The Intruder’?”

You often write directly in response to events, or even requests?

I was once persuaded by a friend of mine, Judas Mahlangu, the artist, to write poems on his artworks. He invited me while he was busy working on a fertility doll and other works. He wanted me to read them at the exhibition, to give dignity to the whole occasion. So I wrote a poem about the fertility doll; but unfortunately the exhibition did not happen….

call me between your tears and eyes;
i’m the shadow, i won’t drown.

draw me between your pain and faith;
i'm the shadow that leads.
will me within your heart of hearts;
i'm the energy that's divine.
hug me with the arm of your heart;
i'm reality, i am love ...
listen to the silence in silence –
the dream materialising ...

It's the voice of the fertility doll… the voice of our desires…

All the miracles are within us; we have a lot of power but we are not aware of the power we have. The fertility doll is a symbol of that – I'm meditating on how we work from within to make things happen

You're living in a spiritual reality, but at the same time you're looking out – grace and pain co-exist in your work. You manage to observe without being overwhelmed by the pain we inflict on one another. It's a quality of vision, an integration, which is very rare. It strikes me as the voice of wisdom.

Thank you, I was not aware of this. In the 1980s the scourge of the necklace took many lives in our country. The UDF used the youth to silence their opponents and to force people to join them. That agonised me. School kids would prowl around the township or schools and cause unspeakable havoc. They would burst into the classrooms and force others out to burn the shops, the houses, the vehicles and the people in the township as they wanted to make the country ungovernable. Teachers were damn scared of these 'comrades'. Even black journalists did not dare condemn them. They knew the scourge of the tyre! These boys and girls would disrupt even the funeral of their opponents, throwing away food and stoning the vehicles. Sometimes they would prevent the family from burying their loved one. They had an incredible urge for necklacing. If it happened that their 'enemy' was killed by other people, they would dig his body from the grave and necklace it there for their pleasure! In the 1980s Katlehong was one of the necklace champions.

Even though it was dangerous, you wrote about it . . .

Something said to me "Write a play. Write, write . . !" I wrote Mene Tekel. In this play I made the main character to be a powerful born-again Christian boy – these students who used to preach that "Si jola

no Jesu, hhay abantu base zweni … We fall in love with Jesus, not lovers of this sinful world." In the play a powerful born-again girl was killed. Students suspected a notorious tsotsi. They toyi-toyied to necklace him. Later the detectives led to the arrest of the main character.

When it came to performing, I took for actors the very boys and girls who were the veterans of the necklace, to use their profession on stage. As we were rehearsing, teachers were afraid of coming nearer. They were afraid even of me. After three weeks of rehearsal, I invited the teachers, others from other schools, the parents, and some born-again people for a dress rehearsal at the school hall. Unfortunately the born-again people left during the play, shaking and visibly angry. When I pleaded with them to see the whole play and then we would discuss, they accused me of Satanism. They said I was inspired by the devil. I never saw them again, till this day. But a certain pastor who saw the play several times encouraged me to continue with it. He sent his congregation to see the show and there were discussions.

Whenever we performed, we had our fanatics just like soccer fans – the halls were always full. The performance was ghastly. We used methylated spirits for the flame . . . And then – necklacing decreased in Katlehong! These kids, they changed!

That's an astonishing story!

Kids are kids, they like beauty, they like good things. It is easy to mould them. If you just work with their energy for a good cause, they'll follow you and do wonders. No wedge or threats can take them away from you. But don't take chances. Be professional. Nothing can beat honesty, truth, beauty and quality. Everybody wants to be praised for what is good and beautiful, no one wants to be praised or feared for being a monster.

It was interesting to see teachers mingling with the parents shaking hands with the performers. Imagine what happens to a child when a teacher asks: "How did you do that, you were so natural . . . you were crying, I saw your tears," or "You were a real pastor" or "You were a real tsotsi." Their parents invited me for lunch or supper, and asked: "How did you do that? SAP failed. SADF failed. But with you . . . these boys, they changed."

Your work in prisons, is it similar?

Ja, but there is a problem: a prison is a prison! Some people in power there are not yet ready, they are hampering the programme. But the parents of these inmates visit me and say, “Keep it up, these boys . . . their dreams now . . . their perception of the world now . . . is positive.” This gives me strength that good will triumph. Even the prison bosses are also human beings, they do have human goodness. So, change they will!

Your experience suggests that art can be a powerful form for social healing.

No doubt about this. Experience has shown me that art is a shorthand for healing. For example, I used to have a terrible stutter. I am a sensitive person by nature, this stutter was embarrassing me. But strange, on stage there was no stutter, no stammer. Another example – some years ago I found out that my stepfather tried to poison me. I almost died a horrible death in a train to boarding school. This made me despondent and withdrawn. I trusted no one! I feared taking food or drinks from anyone. A year later I wrote a poem about my poison ordeal. I was literally crying as I was writing. But I was cured!

As a writing teacher, I encourage my students to write about their own lives, their own experiences – what they know best. Even with a play the actors or actresses, whether at school or in the prison, work from within, living their characters. It is taxing, but professional. I like the improvisation. We all contribute in making a play.

You have an amazing range of technique – many different voices and different forms. For example, in the fertility doll poem, you use a dramatic voice, the voice of the fertility doll that is quite close to another voice, the prophetic voice, which you also use. Then you have a narrative voice, a different mode; close to the dramatic, like in your tragi-comic poem “Remembering Zanyana”.

Did you see the film *The Great Dance*? The Khoisan hunter says when he chases his prey he transforms himself into that animal. I also do that when I go deeper and deeper, I transmogrify myself into, for example, a fertility doll . . .

You are a history teacher. It is a crucial school subject. How can our children get any political or sociological perspective without it? and

yet it isn't a priority in our schools. My daughter, for example, has to choose between science and history for matric.

All languages have past, present and the future tenses. For us to communicate we use these tenses; so does learning and teaching. . . so does this interview! For us to advance as a human race we need to remind ourselves of who we really are and thus we communicate and build on past achievements. Even ourselves, we are the products of history. The past exists in us – it is perceptible! South Africa is not Denmark because our history is different. History is crucial. Even the psychologists are aware of this – thus psychoanalysis. "Never Again" is the slogan of politicians in South Africa – never will we oppress another human being because of colour, gender, beliefs! And never will we misinterpret and distort historical facts to further our sectarian interests? The politicians look back and cry "Never Again". How can a child celebrate Human Rights Day if he or she is denied the history that led to this?

Our children must learn history whether they are interested in mathematics or physical science or economics or management. Our science students must know about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Dr Wouter Basson and Dr Joseph Mengele, so that they will confidently sing a chorus, "Never Again will we invent a science of destruction!" How can economics students solve the problems of South Africa if they know nothing about the historical background? South Africa will never have geniuses if we run away from our history. We'll never be an inventive nation. Instead we will hire foreigners as consultants with foreign solutions to solve our problems.

Your historical awareness informs your poetics. Do you want to say something about your political beliefs? For example, in "When I was a child" and "From sunrise" you deliberately speak in terms of race. Why is this?

I am a Pan-Africanist. Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, one of the shamefully marginalised giants, says, "There is only one race to which we all belong and that is the Human Race. In our vocabulary therefore, the word race, as applied to man, has no plural form." I am a Pan-Africanist, I belong to the Human Race! So are the Delits of India, the Australian Aborigines, the Gypsies of Europe, the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey and the native Americans.

But some human beings – the Hitlers of this world with their Herrenvolk sickness, because of their colour and shape of their noses,

feel superior to those with a different colour, different shape of nose. They regard them as things to be hunted, auctioned, owned, pressed, driven, operated and destroyed. As a Pan-Africanist I say I am not a thing, I am not a body – I am not what is bound by time, I am not what is disfigured by accidents and diseases, I am not what is aging and decaying. I am not a nose, you are not a hair! We all belong to the Human Race, even Hitler and his descendents. We can feed our bodies from sunrise to sunrise, but this is not our goal as a Human Race, we are not the stomachs. Though we are here, we are with the universe! Because of the Hitlers of this world and their segregation policies, we never lived side by side with those of a different skin colour . . .

Whites were a mystery to me, although I knew white police and white soldiers very well. I'm sure this made me fail to differentiate whites – they were all the same to me, as there are whites also who could not differentiate blacks. But again, this is a fact of history! My little boy does not fear the whites. When we are in town, at the mall, he stops and plays with them, he goes to a computer and plays games with them. He does not have a 'body mentality'. He does not see colour, he sees human beings. My son is a Pan-Africanist by nature, though I never talked with him about it.

It is true that our civilisation as a human race is highly advanced bodily, materially, but we lack the knowledge of why we are here. In South Africa bodies attract bodies – accumulation of weapons, money, Pajeros, Mercedes-Benzes (in Gauteng we call them Yengenis), mansions – these things all harmonize with those bodies in places of power. Where is love and compassion? I wonder what they think when their plane is about to land in Cape Town . . . down into an ocean of shacks, the constituencies of our leaders, singing after their names . . . I wonder . . . is this modern ubuntu or modern cannibalism?

It is our call as poets and learners to read the past, to work on the now, not for the future – but for eternity. Otherwise we'll be part of the Hitlers of this world, part of the 'bodyism' which is causing the destruction of our planet. So, it is clear in the poems, "When I was a child," and "From sunrise" and "Rotting", I am not dealing with race – but with humanity and with bodies. We are not just bodies!

You know people are always talking about the marginalisation of the poet, of poetry; but you seem to have a very different sense of poetry – does it worry you how the poet is looked at by other people?

But who is marginalizing the poet?

Publishing houses, 'the market' – it's difficult to get poems published, as you know, you certainly don't have any institutional support if you're a poet. You can't make a living from poems . . .

Great teachers and poets in history did not make a living from their works. Socrates, Gala kaNodada and Mohlomi; Simon Kimbangu, Jesus of Nazareth or Simeon Toko; Fard Muhammed and Elijah Muhammed; Sobukwe, Tabata, Mothopeng, Lembede, Zulei and Biko; Arthur Nortje, Ingoapele Madingoane and many more. Apartheid made sure that nearly all publishing companies exist for schools. These companies won't publish anything that will hurt the politicians, otherwise their books won't be prescribed. Great poets are not cheap singers praising what is imperfect, disposable and dying. They praise only the universe . . . the Almighty God!

No, the market is there – we need only ideas to reach it. Jazz musicians in this country were or are in the same situation. Let's look at what they are doing ... and take notes ... Let's look also at those who came before us ... History again!

You are suggesting that there are communities within communities that support poetry or who recognize a need for it . . .

Poems are with the people, they must remain there . . .

Is the support of poetry a community attitude, or is it your own attitude? Do you have a sense of yourself as a poet within a community? Or is it that the people amongst whom you live are receptive? How much do you have to make opportunities for yourself?

The people are important, not the publishing houses. The people regard poets in high esteem. In my community, for example, when there is a funeral, family members, either the kids or the adults, read poems they have written about the deceased.

Recently, a well-known businessman, but certainly not a poet – Mr Themba Mashinini – lost his wife. During the funeral, he let someone read a poem he wrote about his wife. At the lobola ceremonies, at the weddings, at parties for the initiates from the mountain school,

at the school concerts and debates – poetry is there. Even at political rallies, poetry is there. This is our strength!