

## **PELMAMA ACADEMY 1993 -1997**

### **By Gordon Froud**

I was fortunate to teach at Pelmama Academy at a time when education went through a lot of change. I still consider that period to be one of my most fulfilling teaching experiences.

I was teaching at Bryanston High School when a post at Pelmama Academy became available. Pelmama Academy had been established through the Haenggi (SP) Foundation and offered one of the first tertiary level art courses in Soweto. The only other major art course was being offered by Funda Centre, but this did not have Department of Education status and as such could not offer the certificate courses that Pelmama could. The Pelmama art, music and dance school was set up on the grounds of Manu Technical College in Dobsonville, Soweto. Among the illustrious teachers that helped to establish the school were Guy du Toit (Art), James Mpahlele (Art), Jan Vermaak (Art), Cherry Brits (Art), Jeanette Ginslov (Dance), Jason Armstrong (Music) and Mapulani Koapeng (Music), all under the Head, Mike Muller. Later on Erika Hibbert took the place of Guy du Toit, and when she left I took the post.

Soweto and the township schools were still reeling from the effects of the changes in the educational system. General dissatisfaction resulted in school boycotts that affected the running of technical colleges. At this time,

Mike Muller was tasked to set up a similar college in Troyeville, and he ran the art school at arm's length from the Johannesburg College so to speak. This was soon found to be untenable and a decision was made to appoint a senior lecturer to run the art school under the auspices of Manu Technical College, thus subsuming the art school into the existing structure as a department. Even though this was a necessary step that allowed the school to stay open and receive state funding, it was also the beginning of the death knell for the art school. The obvious choice for the position of senior lecturer was Jan Vermaak with his years of teaching experience particularly at the Art, Ballet and Music School (as it was known then). Unfortunately Vermaak had never obtained a teacher's diploma and in spite of being an inspired teacher, could not take up the post – precipitating his decision to leave Soweto and join the Johannesburg College. This resulted in my appointment as acting Head of Department (HOD) and later as HOD of Art, Music and Dance. When the college's numbers in Music grew under the guidance of Mapulane Koapeng and Petru Reyneke, it was decided that a further HOD be appointed for Music. This post was taken up by the well-known musician and teacher Mokale Koapeng. A new deputy-principalship was established and headed by the HOD for Business Studies, Ansie Brink. Nico Aucamp

was appointed as Head of the College and was tasked with bringing the disparate departments of Engineering, Business Studies and the Arts together into a working college – a daunting task by anybody's standards.

Various other teachers worked in the Art Department over the next five years, including Karen Trollip, Flip Hattingh, Janina Pechova, Marina Aguiar, Helene Strauss, and Colleen Snyman (who was appointed as HOD when I left). During this time, the Academy was supported in part by the Pelmama and Haenggi Foundations and by donations of books from international donors coordinated by Ferdinand Haenggi. (We had a more impressive collection of contemporary art books in our library than most universities and technikons at the time. It was impeccably maintained by our Business English lecturer, Jeanette van der Lingen.)

From the time of the subsuming of Pelmama Academy into Manu College (which later became Dobsonville College and later lost the art components in an amalgamation with Roodepoort College and George Tabor Technical College), the ethos of an arts academy began to be lost and the academy became just another department in a college struggling to survive in the tough economic, political and fairly violent times in the township. Antagonism towards white teachers in the townships grew and the validity of our positions in the colleges was constantly questioned. (Part of the problem was that there were so few qualified black art teachers available at that time to replace the

white teachers.)

The great ideal of a township-based art academy as envisioned by Haenggi and Muller was eroded away and subsequently lost, leaving only two high schools and one tertiary institution that offered art. A very sad state of affairs indeed. At the end of my five-year stint as HOD, I felt that I had done what I could and had achieved an incredible amount, but that I was fighting a losing battle for any form of art autonomy in a township college. I decided to move on (spurred on by being awarded an Ampersand Award Fellowship to New York – which would have taken me away from the college for three months). I pursued my lecturing post at the University of Pretoria and later left South Africa to teach in London for five years.

During my time as senior lecturer and HOD I was fortunate enough to take a few hundred students from the level of Std 6 through to the equivalent level of first year technikon or perhaps even university. The greatest thrill for me was in taking students that had never held a paintbrush or pencil, and teaching them the basics of art, and seeing them graduate as artists-in-training within 18 months. Many of the students struggled to raise the R400 tuition fees, but once they were on track, they achieved results unparalleled in any other department. One group in particular obtained their N6 certificates, everyone scoring above 80% for drawing. These students were independently examined and moderated by the Department of Education (that also moderated all other art students at technical

colleges in South Africa). I was also privileged to assist in compiling the new syllabi for all the art and craft courses for technical colleges that were implemented and used till the demise of Art at most of these colleges. Many of our students went on to excel as artists (Nhlantla Mbatha, Dienkies Sithole, Ignatius Molumo, Alfred Mofomolo, Stompie Selibi and many more), teachers (Daniel Tsoagong – Curriculum Development Program and arts administrators (Belina Leburu, first black female art graduate at Unisa, and Mthunzi Ndimande of the Department of Arts and Culture in Gauteng, to name a few).

Pelmama Academy was the dream of a few brave individuals who had a passion for art, history and education, and with the help of

inspirational teachers, it worked for a while. But as with all pipe dreams, when institutional support and financial aid dries up, the kernel of idealism dies. What it contributed, however, touched the lives of many and has continued to influence people. I feel extremely privileged to have had the opportunity to serve the Academy and the people of Soweto in an attempt to foster a love and appreciation of art as a worthwhile activity and as a career path. I raise my hat to all my colleagues who also believed in and contributed so selflessly to the Academy.