

ADDRESS BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF ARTS AND CULTURE, Ms NGW BOTHA, AT THE LAUNCH OF PUBLICATIONS AND OPENING OF EXHIBITIONS OF THE GALA HERITAGE PROJECT : 24 MAY 2008

Programme Director, Busi Kheswa

The Honourable Chief Justice Pius Langa

Chairperson of GALA, Sandra Gordon and
Member of GALA Board of Trustees

Representatives of the South African History
Archives and OUT

Ladies and Gentlemen

Comrades and Friends

Good afternoon

Firstly, let me start by thanking GALA for inviting me to address you this afternoon and to share my thoughts with you. I would also like to commend GALA, which is celebrating just over ten (10) years of their existence, for the sterling work it has been doing and the contribution it has made towards our common goal of achieving substantive equality and freedom in South Africa.

Equality is the cornerstone of our constitutional democracy. Our human dignity and ubuntu can never be restored without eradicating the social and economic inequalities which plague our country. We owe it to our country and our people to take radical measures to eliminate all forms of inequalities and discrimination.

GALA, we are proud to say, is one such effort which promotes the achievement of equality by making information relating to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-gender and intersex issues available and accessible and by raising public awareness about the Gay and Lesbian Archives.

This year marks the fourteenth anniversary of our democracy, and yet we are still confronted with incidents that threaten to reverse the gains of our hard-earned

freedom. The past four months have seen some of the most gruesome incidents in our country. In February we saw on national television a shocking racist video produced by some students of the University of Free State, where they humiliated cleaners by making them participate in inhumane and derogatory actions; the assault of a young girl by some taxi drivers at the Noord Street Taxi Rank for wearing a mini-skirt; the recent attacks perpetrated by hooligans in townships such as Tembisa, Diepsloot and Alexandra on people from our neighbouring countries who are resident in South Africa as well as attacks on South Africans; the attacks on people because of their sexual orientation and the recent murders of Zoliswa Nkonyana and Eudy Simelane, amongst others.

On behalf of our Government, our Ministry and Department of Arts and Culture, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to these latter-day martyrs and to express our heartfelt condolences to their families, relatives and friends in their sad loss. This is, indeed, a loss, not only to their families, but also to the entire nation and a sad time in our history. May their spirit and memory always be with us and may their souls rest in peace.

These and other such gruesome acts of intolerance are a clear indication that the achievement of political freedom alone does not translate into a change of mindsets or attitudes and social relations.

Tolerance (according to the 1995 UNESCO Declaration of Principles on Tolerance) is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is fostered by knowledge, openness, communication and freedom of thought, conscience and belief. It is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty; it is also a political and legal requirement. It is the responsibility that upholds human rights, pluralism (including cultural pluralism), democracy and the rule of law.

What we are learning from these shocking incidents is that the types and manifestations of intolerance are not static. We, therefore, cannot rest on our laurels because we think we have 'arrived' as a nation, so to speak. Whilst we commend the work done by GALA and other human rights institutions, it is also the responsibility of each one of us, individually, to make an effort to embrace and promote tolerance in our country for the sake of peace and the social and economic advancement of our people.

As you probably know, the vision of the Department of Arts and Culture is to develop and preserve South African culture to ensure social cohesion and nation-building. The department is the custodian of our nation's diverse cultural, artistic and linguistic heritage and is charged with the development and promotion of arts and culture in South Africa as well as the mainstreaming of the role of arts and culture in social development.

Arts and culture permeates all aspects of society and must, therefore, play a crucial role in nation-building, reconciliation and the development of a new South African identity and ethos which are reflective of our new democracy.

Central to this notion is the principle of freedom of expression. Arts, culture and heritage are the embodiment of freedom of expression and creative thought and have a vital role to play in the development and nurturing of our fledgling democracy.

This is why this exhibition and book launch is important to us as the Ministry and Department of Arts and Culture because it actually complements, to a great extent, the work we have been doing.

I am happy that the exhibition will be open until September which is the month when we celebrate our heritage and diversity. We must commend Sharon Cort, the curator, and Clive van den Berg the designer, for this exquisite and powerful

exhibition. A small role that we can play, as the Department of Arts and Culture, is to encourage more people, especially our youth, to come and view the exhibition.

The contributors to these publications we are launching today are the kind of activists who are not afraid to speak out against present-day social ills. The Civil Union Act, for example, is a result of the struggle waged by them and many other activists who refused to be intimidated and stood firm for what they believed in. The passing of this piece of legislation was a victory for our democracy.

The publication of books is a critical vehicle for giving insight and changing mindsets. Books are powerful tools for gaining knowledge and creating awareness and I am certain that this book will contribute towards the moral regeneration of our society. I have also noted that the contributors to this book are experts who have either experienced some of these atrocities first-hand and/or have done intensive research on the subject.

Most importantly, is that the contributors in this publication were prepared to share their story with South Africa and the world and I want to thank them sincerely for that.

On behalf of the Ministry and Department of Arts and Culture I would like to pledge our support for this project and I would like to encourage GALA to consider some form of collaboration with our department on various projects.

In conclusion, I would like to quote from one of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's sermons delivered in 2004 at the Southwark Cathedral in London: "The Jesus I worship is not likely to collaborate with those who vilify and persecute an already oppressed minority. I myself could not have opposed the injustice of penalising people for something about which they could do nothing – their race – and then have kept quiet as women were being penalised for something they could do nothing about – their gender, and hence my support inter alia, for the ordination of women

to the priesthood and the episcopate.” He continued to say: “And equally, I could not myself keep quiet whilst people were being penalised for something about which they could do nothing – their sexuality. For it is so improbable that any sane, normal person would deliberately choose a lifestyle exposing him or her to so much vilification, opprobrium and physical abuse, even death.”

We must, therefore, understand and accept our differences. We are all members of the human race; we have a right to our human dignity and must, therefore, embrace one another with love and compassion.

The struggle continues! Aluta continua!

I thank you