

# The Tradewinds Poetry Caravan

RHEINA EPSTEIN

## Correspondent

The Tradewinds Poetry Caravan - comprising poets, a musician, journalists, and organisers - set up shop at the libraries in Atlantis, Delft, Athlone and the Cape Town City Hall at the end of October to exchange cultural wares. Part of the Tradewinds week-long Literature Festival, the Caravan had begun in Montagu, continued in the libraries and finished at the Labia cinema in Cape Town with a glorious melange of words and music - local and imported.

Tradewinds, aligned to The Hague's premier literary event, Winternachten, tries to create a true festival atmosphere around a core literary programme. This year Tradewinds brought to Cape Town four international poets from countries connected through colonial history to the Netherlands to participate in the Poetry Caravan.

They were: Jit Narain (Suriname), Sutardji Calzoum Bachri (Indonesia), Drisana Deborah Jack (from the Isle of St Martin in the Dutch Antilles), and Christine Otten from the Netherlands who was accompanied by musician Jan Klug.

With the Caravan likened to a travelling marketplace, substituting poetry for perfume and spices, the participating libraries invited poets and performers from their communities to trade their wares with those of the visiting poets.

The response was overwhelming. The audiences packed the library venues and visiting poets alternated with local poets in reading their poems in English, Afrikaans, Dutch, Indonesian and Sarnami (spoken in Suriname) - with translations for those who could not understand.

### Caravan stops

Each Caravan stop had its own distinct flavour.

Pupils from Robinvale Senior School packed the hall at Atlantis where the programme evolved into a spontaneous mixture of poetry, song (from an Idols finalist) and humorous narrative.

The Ladies Exercise Class formed the nucleus of the audience at Delft joined by schoolchildren and other adults who came to reveal their poetic talents.

At Athlone the Caravan formed part of an afternoon-long programme starting with pupils from neighbouring schools reading their poetry and finishing with veteran poet James Mathews (with a dramatic interlude from students of New Africa Theatre).

And finally a weary Caravan reached the Central Library in the City Hall at Cape Town where the response of the audience energised the visitors after a nearly 12-hour day! In the audience were a number of regulars from the monthly Central Library Poetry Circle.

### Impressions

Impressions of a demanding but intensely satisfying day were the enthusiasm and energy of the librarians who encouraged their community to submit poems to be chosen to read; the cooperation of the teachers; the response of the communities to their own and the visiting poets; the quality of the poems penned with feeling and in many cases raw emotion and, above all, the impact of the opportunity given to local writers to showcase their work. An added bonus for contributors was a chance to meet acclaimed South African poet and writer Antjie Krog who gave generously of her time and interest.

Whilst all the contributors very much wanted their poems to be heard some had to be cajoled and encouraged to get up to read by their schoolmates. One lady was so shy she had to avert her face while reading her poem about missing children. Another young woman, when asked about the disturbing content of her poem, replied that she was only writing about what she saw around her.

Tradewinds Director Mories Romkens, local co-directors Antjie Krog and Ben Williams, University of Cape Town (UCT) lecturer Alfred Schaffer, and the visiting poets declared themselves highly satisfied with the trade. And the libraries programme coordinator Rheina Epstein was over the moon. As usual, libraries came up trumps displaying the strength of their relationships with their communities.

*Note: Thanks to Katrina Kotzee and Moses Absalom at Atlantis; Ingrid Neethling at Delft; Ian Gordon and Nina de Vries at Athlone with their Athlone Library Friends (FOAL) and Kathleen Laishley and Elsa von Ballmoos at Central with their Central Friends (FOCAL). Thanks are also due to the co-operative librarians-in-charge Frances Hearn (Atlantis) and Soraya Samuels (Athlone); the local poets; the teachers and the communities for their support.*



Left: The Tradewinds Poetry Caravan

Above: Cape Town's Central Library in the City Hall was the final port of call for the weary Caravan who were energised by the response of the audience

Photographs: Ben Williams

## Moving experience

ANTHONY HOUTMAN

Attorney/Consultant

I refer to the Tradewinds Poetry Caravan to which I was invited. I found the afternoon to be a very significant and moving one and I found it to be very rewarding to be part of such a gathering. Athlone Library and its staff must be commended for its initiative in hosting this event.

In terms of giving feedback, I wanted to think about and express why the event had touched me deeply on a personal level. In many ways, I feel it is because for me, like many others who may have attended, the library has formed a significant part of my life. It is the place where I first learned to read and was introduced to other worlds and environments. The library has always meant much to me and it remains a special place. To see and experience the library being used in such a way only served to emphasise its uniqueness.

Although the community that it continues to serve may have changed, the library has remained a constant; consistently giving and nurturing its broader community. For me it was therefore very significant that Antjie Krog introduced the afternoon saying that the purpose of the initiative was to give back to places from which much had previously been taken. On a wider scale, Athlone as a community has over the years been a site of much struggle, oppression and pain - much has been taken from it and one could

never call Athlone a conventionally beautiful place. Yet, its spirit and that of its community has never died. In many ways, I suppose, the library is part of that spirit, it is a place where creativity and contemplation can be nurtured. And, as shown by the contributions of both the international and local poets it is a place that can generate things of beauty by accessing the creativity of its community and others.

In many ways, Athlone as a community has been marginalised; yet that one afternoon, in my opinion, showed that we are part of a bigger picture, a 'global community' in a sense and that it is through creative expression, in this instance poetry, that we are able to connect and interact with each other. The value of the afternoon, for me, therefore rests in that not only were we able to learn from others, but also that it gave an opportunity for local and community voices to be heard and acknowledged. In connecting with each other through poetry and other forms of creative expression we are able to begin to acknowledge the richness of our experiences and create an identity for ourselves and the broader community.

The library undoubtedly has been playing a significant role in this regard and must continue to do so - it must continue to be a place where individuals can share, learn and grow and be acknowledged while acknowledging others. The surrounding community can only but benefit from opportunities such as these.

Thank you once again for enabling such an event to occur - long may the library continue to be a place where the 'tradewinds' of creativity and learning are free to blow and spread their message to its users and the wider community.