

**CITATION FOR LYNETTE MARAIS****Honorary Graduand, Rhodes University, 16 April 2009**

By Professor Paul Maylam

Just over a month ago, at a glittering ceremony in Cape Town, the prestigious Fleur du Cap theatre awards were presented to leading figures in South African theatre. The lifetime achievement Award, unanimously decided upon by a distinguished panel of judges, was conferred on Lynette Marais. Of all the award-winners, she was the only one to receive a standing ovation from the audience.

The acclaim was well deserved. As director of the Grahamstown National Arts Festival, from 1989 to 2008, she built and developed the event into the largest such festival in the southern hemisphere. It has brought to this small town established national and international arts practitioners. It has launched on the road to fame younger up-and-coming actors, playwrights, fine artists, musicians and singers. Perhaps the best example of one such career taking off at the Festival is that of Sibongile Khumalo, also to receive an honorary doctorate here in less than forty-eight hours time.

During these twenty years that Lynette has presided over the event, it is reckoned that the Grahamstown Festival has carried 9 057 productions and 32 275 performances; two-and-a-half million tickets sold, worth 54.3 million rand; the overall contribution to Grahamstown's gross domestic product during these two decades has been estimated at 688 million rand.

To sustain and expand the Festival Lynette has had to combine three major roles – creative director, fund-raiser and manager – and has performed all three superbly. She has been described as the "Google of the arts world", a walking repository of information about the key players, the up-and-coming performers – and those to steer clear of – the prima donnas, for instance, a type of person she has little time for.

Lynette Marais took over the directorship of the Festival in 1989 at a challenging time of significant political transition in South Africa. The hard-line PW Botha era was about to end, and the path to democracy to begin – a transition that would inevitably have an impact on the Festival and pose an enormous challenge for its director. She responded proactively and imaginatively. A first step was to invite Barbara Masekela to speak at the 1990 Festival – a key figure who had long headed the ANC's arts and culture desk in exile. At that same Festival three to four thousand complimentary tickets were distributed to local communities lacking the means to attend events. Lynette moved to have alternative protest theatre, art and music showcased. From 1991 the Festival Committee became more culturally diverse in its composition. The critique that the Festival was overly Eurocentric, geared towards the promotion of western high culture, became harder to sustain.

The task of fund-raising also posed its challenges – none more so than in 2002 when the Standard Bank withdrew its sole sponsorship of the event. Lynette took up the challenge, raising funds from diverse sources, keeping the Festival alive. No wonder she has been described as a "formidable negotiator".

The Grahamstown Festival has been called "one of the most efficiently run festivals in the world" – in no small measure due to Lynette. An outstanding administrator – meticulous, fair-minded, firm, dedicated, extremely hard-working, known often to leave her office, just below us here, in the middle of the night. Demanding of her staff not only

commitment, but also a sense of humour – her own raucous laughter often to be heard, perhaps easing tension in tight situations.

While Lynette has spent twenty years as Festival Director, her life in theatre goes back fifty years – to her schooldays at St Dominic’s Priory in Port Elizabeth, performing in Gilbert and Sullivan productions; then studying for a diploma in speech and drama at the University of Cape Town; touring the country as an actor for six years in the 1960s, working with well-known figures in the theatre world, like Roy Sargeant, Sandra Prinsloo and Marius Weyers, among others.

There followed eighteen years in theatre administration and management, mostly with PACT, the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal, rising from the post of assistant stage manager to become the general manager for drama. Even then her acting career was not over. In the mid-1970s PACT put on a production of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, directed by Barney Simon. The actor playing the female lead in the play became indisposed, and with little or no notice Lynette took on the role. Barney Simon always said that performance was the best show of the run.

The Fleur du Cap award is only the latest honour to be bestowed on Lynette. In 1998 there was the award for arts administration from the Arts and Culture Trust of the President; in 2003 the Eastern Cape Premier’s Award for Arts Administration. Back in 2001 there had been a Rotary Foundation Award in recognition of services rendered to Grahamstown. These services go beyond the Festival: she is president-elect of the Grahamstown Rotary Club, treasurer of the Soroptimist Club, on the board of the Grahamstown Hospice, and a dedicated member of the Cathedral congregation.

The Grahamstown Festival has become a significant feature of our national culture, as well as an important contributor to our local economy. Lynette Marais, as the mainstay of the Festival over two decades, has therefore been a key figure in that national culture and local economy. Tonight Rhodes University honours you. At the same time you have, I am sure, the full gratitude of the national community of actors, directors, writers, painters, sculptors, photographers, dancers, choreographers, musicians, singers, and many others.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer on Lynette Marais the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.