

Geoffrey Sutherland (1941–1992)

The following obituary was written by the General Director of the Natal Performing Arts Council.

The unexpected death in August of Geoffrey Sutherland — NAPAC's Director of Musical Theatre and one of Natal's best known arts personalities — has left a huge gap in the creative life of the Province and of the country, because of his profound influence on the national musical scene.

Born in Britain 51 years ago, he trained in movement at the famous Laban School and first came to South Africa in 1967 to lecture in movement at the Speech and Drama Department of the University of Natal in Durban.

One of Geoffrey's first major theatrical productions in Durban was the remarkable open-air production in Mitchell Park of the danced Nativity, *Navidad Nuestra* — which, in many ways, was a perfect introduction to his work for he had not only conceived, produced and choreographed the piece but designed and danced in it as well. It incorporated what one gradually came to recognise as trademarks of a Geoffrey Sutherland production: theatricality and excitement, originality and innovation which avoided resorting to gimmickry and the courage to use simple but theatrically-valid effects. Above all, it had an infectious enthusiasm and energy that made it irresistible.

He later moved to Johannesburg where he formed his own dance group, *Kinetika*, mounted the musical *Man of la Mancha*, choreographed *The Canterbury Tales* and lectured in the Drama Department of the University of the Witwatersrand.



Mr G. Sutherland

(Photograph: NAPAC)

It was at this time that he first began working with the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal, choreographing dance sequences for opera production. However, his major breakthrough in the Transvaal was with the spectacularly successful musical *Joseph and his amazing technicolour dream-coat* which has remained one of the biggest hits in the South African musicals scene and which he revived a number of times — most recently for the Christmas season last year at The Natal Playhouse.

He later became resident producer and choreographer for PACT and created ballets and directed a number of major productions for the organisation.

He first worked for NAPAC in 1971 when he directed a new stage adaptation of the delightful A. A. Milne stories about *Winnie-the-Pooh* — and I discovered that in addition to his creativity and artistic skills, Geoffrey was one of the most meticulously well-organised persons with whom I have ever worked. His attention to detail was astonishing, his total absorption in his current project and the sheer professionalism which he brought to everything he did, was a revelation.

Over the years since then, there has been a stream of highly successful Geoffrey Sutherland productions for NAPAC; productions of a consistently high standard. Of course, there were some productions one liked or admired more than others — but I never felt that Geoffrey had let NAPAC (or himself) down by a bad production, a cheap shot or a facile approach.

When NAPAC decided to create a Musicals Department in 1986, there was no one else in South Africa that we even considered for the post. If Geoffrey Sutherland had not been interested or available, NAPAC would probably have dropped the idea.

It proved to be a mutually beneficial step in every way and Geoffrey Sutherland turned NAPAC's Musicals Theatre Department into one of the most innovative and exciting arts departments in all of the Performing Arts Councils.

Perhaps the *Trilogy* season and *Queen* productions set the final seal on his vision about what musical theatre could, and should, be: and everyone who saw those productions realised we were taking part in the making of South African theatrical history.

All who have regularly attended theatre in Natal will have memories of 'a Geoffrey Sutherland production'; shows which enriched our experience at the time and so live on in our memory. As they range across such a wide variety of styles, genres, moods, they also give some indication of the enormous versatility of the man. I must include memories of . . .

the huge, white-winged angels in *Navidad Nuestra*, as they swooped across the grass in Mitchell Park on a summer night more than 25 years ago;

Geoffrey as 'Quasimodo', clinging to the giant, clanging bell as the curtain fell slowly on his *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the closing performance by the NAPAC Ballet Company at the old Alhambra;

the simplicity and sincerity of the revue *Piaf*, which opened The Cellar;

the fun and exuberance of the hard-hat *Pirates of Penzance*, the first production in the Opera of the Natal Playhouse;

the enormous impact of the combined forces of the NPO, singers, dancers and Geoffrey's concept in a starkly dramatic *Carmina Burana* or later in his *Peer Gynt* — both at the old Alhambra;

the wonderfully-atmospheric Sondheim musical *Sweeney Todd*, which was exceptional by any standards — but even more remarkable as part of the *Trilogy* which Geoffrey conceived, put together and made;

the delightful *Joseph and his amazing technicolour dreamcoat* — in all its manifestations and revivals, productions and re-productions — which always had a light-hearted and gentle charm that made me feel good . . .

the sparkling vitality of *Ain't Misbehaving*; the charm of the under-rated *Romance, Romance*; the beautifully-staged production numbers in shows like *Fair Lady, Camelot, Seven Brides, Hello Dolly, Singin' in the Rain, Queen*;

and so many many more . . .

Geoffrey Sutherland's creativity, integrity and sense of style made his productions unique. Perhaps his greatest genius lay in his ability to conceptualise a piece of music or a whole show that was fresh, alive and inevitable.

His death is a major loss to the South African theatre as a whole, and especially to the people of Natal where he worked.

ROBERT N. CROSS