

# Press Release

26 November 2008



FREEDOM  
TO CREATE

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## Zimbabwean Artist and Imprisoned Burmese Comedian Win Inaugural Freedom to Create Prize

Winners of the First International Arts Prize to Focus on Human Rights Announced.

26 November 2008, London – A controversial playwright from Zimbabwe who has risked his life challenging the Mugabe dictatorship for over 25 years has been awarded the inaugural Freedom to Create Prize. In addition a Burmese satirist, last week imprisoned for 45 years, has been awarded The Freedom to Create Imprisoned Artist Prize. The announcement is made ahead of the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December.

Cont Mhlanga, a fierce opponent of the Mugabe regime whose political satire has been banned by the state, is the recipient of the inaugural Freedom to Create Prize, created to highlight a forgotten frontline of artists defending their freedom of expression at great personal sacrifice. The prize has been embraced by artists on the frontline, the global arts in development sector and the human rights community, with 930 entries received from 86 countries. Mhlanga will receive the US\$ 50,000 main prize. He will dedicate US\$ 25,000 towards making his work available to a wider audience, not only in Zimbabwe, but also throughout the entire Southern Africa region, and donate the remaining US\$ 25,000 to arts-based advocacy groups fighting for social justice issues in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa.

Mhlanga has been challenging and questioning state ideologies, policies, corruption, nepotism and leadership for over 25 years. He has written 21 plays, published three books and produced several television programmes and plays. His submission, a politically charged satire titled *The Good President*, presents a fictionalised account of a ruthless dictator, but closely mirrors recent and current events in Zimbabwe. In particular, the play examines the Gukurahundi (“clean out waste”) genocide in which an estimated 20,000 Ndebele people were murdered during an ethnic cleansing-style, state-sanctioned military operation in the late 1980s. Cont Mhlanga’s artistic works have stirred audiences to action and led to substantial social change, at both a local and national level. Since he began practising protest theatre in the early 1980s, he has been the target of state surveillance, intimidation, harassment, arrest and detention. The country’s secret police, together with the ruling party’s liberation war veterans and youth militias, have not only spied, harassed, banned and assaulted artists from his theatre group, Amakhosi, but they have also threatened to burn down Amakhosi Township Square and Culture Centre as well as the members’ homes.

It is also believed that Cont Mhlanga and his family are in danger of being murdered and/or beaten by state police, the standard practice against opposition party supporters in Zimbabwe. Disseminating protest theatre in such a politically volatile environment is not only challenging but also risky for Cont Mhlanga who has witnessed his fellow activists being detained, harassed, assaulted and murdered. The award-winning play shows how the “Good President” holds onto power and not only intimidates but also imprisons and tortures opposition political party leaders. Its contentious opening scenes see police chasing street protestors and highlight the country’s repressive laws which prohibit any gathering of more than five people without police clearance. Scenes depict an elected opposition leader being taken to a police station, brutally beaten until he loses consciousness and then robbed.

The police banned the play from being performed in Bulawayo City and other southern provinces where Gukurahundi took place. A High Court judge ordered Mhlanga and the police to settle out of court with an appeal now pending in the Supreme Court. This selective banning of the play violates not only the performers’ freedom of expression but also Bulawayo citizens’ rights to assemble and associate. Although the play is banned, it continues to be circulated on DVD throughout the country.

Commenting on the Prize, Cont Mhlanga said: “I am extremely humbled by the recognition of my work by the Freedom to Create Prize. This award is not just for me, it is for those artists who are victimised for working with me, and it is an award for theatre in this country. Theatre is the only tool that amplifies the people’s voice in Zimbabwe.” He added, “I would like to thank R.F. Chandler for establishing the prize, which acknowledges defenders of human rights around the world. The award comes with responsibilities and I will continue to defend human rights and share my experiences.”

Richard Chandler, Founder and Chairman of Freedom to Create Prize, said: “The Prize recognises artists on the frontlines of the developing world, in countries that are struggling with poverty, injustice and intolerance. In these societies, artists such as Cont Mhlanga play a critical role in expressing the pain of the present and the hope of tomorrow. They are the voice of a frightened and silent majority.”

The second place winner is The Belarus Free Theatre, an underground project founded in 2005 as an artistic means of resisting the censorship and pressure of the Belarusian government under President Lukashenko. Their plays often deal with taboo themes such as torture and sanctioned ‘disappearances’, and are performed in private apartments. ‘Campaign Stop Violence’ comprises of four plays and confronts the truths about government by standing up to censorship and repression. The theatre has been actively supported by Tom Stoppard and enjoyed success at London’s Soho theatre in 2008.

The third place winner is Deeyah. Billed as “The Muslim Madonna” by The Sun, Deeyah is a Pakistani-Norwegian singer and human rights activist. Since recording her first album in Oslo, aged just 14 years, Deeyah has worked with renowned musicians including Andy Summers from The Police and Bob James. Currently residing in the US, her controversial lyrics about free speech and women’s rights have outraged conservative elements in the Muslim community, and she and her family have been plagued by death threats. Despite these attacks Deeyah has continued to sing, releasing her music video ‘What Will It Be?’ to protest against the curtailment of her freedoms.

The Belarus Free Theatre will receive US\$ 15,000 (US\$ 7,500 to the group and US\$ 7,500 to nominated Belarusian advocacy organisation, Charter 97) while Deeyah will receive US\$ 10,000 (US\$ 5,000 to the artist and US\$ 5,000 to nominated organisation, International Campaign Against Honour Killings).

### **Freedom to Create Prize, Finding Light in Darkness and Courage in Truth**

The Freedom to Create Prize is not a typical art prize. More than simply judging the skill of the artist, the Prize recognises the courage of artists who stand up and alert people to the plight of others. The

Freedom to Create Prize is comprised of three categories – The Imprisoned Artist Prize, The Youth Artist Prize and The Freedom to Create Prize, carrying a total prize fund of US\$ 125,000.

### **Freedom to Create Imprisoned Artist Prize**

The Freedom to Create Imprisoned Artist Prize focuses on artists who are currently imprisoned after they used their creative talents to protest against human rights abuses and oppressive systems. It has been awarded to Burmese satirist Zarganar, sentenced last week to 45 years in prison by the military government for creating ‘disaffection towards state and government’ and for violating the Electronic Act.

Zarganar, who has been jailed in the past for his outspoken criticisms of the Burmese government, was again arrested on 4 June 2008 after he performed a satirical piece before the media during his private relief efforts to deliver aid to victims of Cyclone Nargis. Media reports say officials were outraged after he mocked an article in a state-run newspaper in which the government said cyclone survivors could exist on what they could scavenge in the countryside, rather than on chocolate bars from Western aid groups. Zarganar is Burma’s best known media figure, recognised as a comedian, actor and director, filmmaker and writer. His work is in the tradition of Burmese satire and draws inspiration from the daily struggles of the Burmese people in the grip of nearly five decades of military dictatorship. He has been banned from performing or producing any live work since 2006. Zarganar had already been arrested and jailed four times before he was taken from his home again by the authorities in June. The satirist will receive US\$ 25,000 towards supporting his family, paying legal costs and supporting advocacy efforts.

Mr Chandler, said: “The Freedom to Create Imprisoned Artist Prize is designed to celebrate the courage of artists such as Zarganar, who practise their art in the most challenging circumstances.” He added, “Where artists confront injustice, there are visible costs and less visible rewards. It is a lonely and often dangerous journey. But it is an essential journey. By raising awareness and encouraging others to stand up, artists foster freedom of expression and freedom to create. These are the foundations for building peace and prosperity for tomorrow’s world.”

### **Freedom to Create Youth Prize**

City of Rhyme City of Rhyme, a 14-strong Hip Hop collective hailing from the dangerous favelas of Recife, Northern Brazil, has been awarded the Freedom to Create Youth Prize, open to artists who are under the age of 18 with the winner receiving US\$ 25,000 (US\$ 10,000 towards an education scholarship and US\$ 15,000 to nominated advocacy group, Shine a Light, which works to give a voice to children living in the favelas).

Under the guidance of DJ Big, City of Rhyme were instructed in all areas of digital music recording and writing as well as being taught political science, mathematics and cultural studies. The final recording tells of their life in the favelas and how violence has permeated and distorted their reality. Recife is Brazil’s most violent city, with the murder of children a regular event. Tyrannical gangs control daily life and hunger and abuse is rife. The lyrics of the children’s work condemn the violence whilst appealing to the conscience of the public.

The winners of the Freedom to Create Prize will be honoured at a reception hosted in London at the Swiss Re building, 30 St Mary Axe, from 6:30 to 9:30pm on Wednesday 26 November 2008.

For more information about the Freedom to Create Prize please visit: [www.freedomtcreateprize.com](http://www.freedomtcreateprize.com).

## **About Freedom to Create:**

Freedom to Create ([www.freedomtcreate.com](http://www.freedomtcreate.com)) is an initiative that seeks to improve lives by addressing society's ability to support and sustain creativity. The initiative focuses on those societies in greatest need.

For creativity to flourish, it's critical to have certain foundations in place – things like education, trust, and freedom of expression. The Freedom to Create initiative concentrates on these foundations. Through our ArtAction arm ([www.artaction.com](http://www.artaction.com)), formerly ArtVenture, we support arts-driven projects that try to strengthen those foundations where they are weak. Through our annual Freedom to Create Prize ([www.freedomtcreateprize.com](http://www.freedomtcreateprize.com)), we celebrate artists who are beacons of inspiration for social change working in the most challenging conditions around the globe. Collectively our efforts seek to drive future prosperity by enabling creativity to flourish.

Freedom to Create is backed by R.F. Chandler ([www.rfchandler.com](http://www.rfchandler.com)), a Singapore-based private investment group with more than 20 years' experience investing in emerging markets.