

# Art must entertain, educate

**K**ENYAN television viewers have been bombarded with programmes made in the West. These have taken priority over locally made aesthetic products. It is an acknowledged fact that not all entertainment instills positive values. Western soap operas, which take a great percentage of airtime on Kenyan television, have been seen to influence behaviour, especially of the youth and children.

Undoubtedly, the culture and morals of Africans have been eroded by some soaps that glorify illicit sex, crime, violence, deception and other societal vices that do not help the African audiences.

New strategies for making both entertaining and educating soap operas were formulated in the 2003 Nairobi Soap Summit.

Good news is in the offing if recommendations made during the 2003 Nairobi Soap Operas meeting early this year are effected.

Arvind Singhal, a professor at the School of Interpersonal Communication, Ohio University, USA, gave an expert's view on making of educating-entertaining programmes at the summit.

Singhal has been conducting research on entertainment and education over the world for

Kenyans crave programmes that entertain educate, writes **Mwingirwa Kithure**

18 years now, and has authored several books on entertainment, education and social change.

The power of entertainment is phenomenal and if tapped can be useful for positive social change, he says.

People, he observes, should be involved in determining what they want to listen to and watch, and in which manner.

"The world is faced with many problems like escalating cases of suicide, murder and adultery, a new wave of incurable diseases, natural disasters, wars, terrorism, poverty, name them."

"How can entertainers make life look bearable and normal?" he poses.

Singhal observes that if used well, art can inspire people, make them laugh and forget their problems.

"There are problems in the world but overburdening people with disasters, misery and uncertainty makes them depressed and pessimistic," he explains.

This, he warns, retards their expectations of a bright future, kills their enthusiasm and aspirations to work hard.

Good movies educate and uphold the culture of the peo-

ple for whom they are intended.

Since many programmes are made to serve various sectarian interests, their interpretation differs from one viewer or country to another, says the expert.

"A song billed as a chart-buster among American, British or Russian audiences may perform disastrously in another country because it is only good for that particular market," he says.

"Not all Western programmes are bad for African viewers and listeners and vice versa."

He says that in selecting a programme to run on a public broadcaster, positive societal values and preferences should be taken into consideration, which calls for thorough research on what excites and entertains people.

The researcher's latest book, *Entertainment-Education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change*, contains eye-opening research findings. The research shows that people would be more interested in watching programmes that employ local people in the casts, use local languages and sculpture the day-to-day life-

styles of the audience.

"There is urgent need to produce affordable, entertaining and educating indigenous programmes in all countries of the world," he says.

However, Singhal is proud of movies, soap operas and comedies coming out of Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Egypt and Zimbabwe. It is a showcase of Africa's amazing talent at their best," he says.

There is no culture that is inferior to another, observes Singhal. The centuries-old folklore, village drama, school comics and traditional dances are important. If they can be modified and re-packaged to meet the changing needs of a society, they can be of great social value, he says.

The *Big Brother Africa* reality TV programme that began with 12 house mates from different African countries, is one of the programmes that Singhal lauds as promoting the continent's unity and co-existence.

"The countries with a representative in the Big Brother Africa House are following the progress of their participants keenly. That the programme is in Africa and house mates are Africans shows that Africa has great potential for meeting its own entertainment needs" he observes.



EDUCATIVE: Arvind Singhal has an elaborate plan to change the face of entertainment.