

## ORLANDO REVISITED

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"REMEMBER the rule here," said my companion in the car: "just keep on driving. Never stop. It doesn't matter if a car's broken down, or someone's dying. Just keep on driving. It's probably the beginning of some sort of trap."

We were driving into Orlando, nine miles out of Johannesburg—the beginning of the great black metropolis that serves the white city. It had grown still bigger in the two years since I was last there: the new location of Meadowlands, next door to Orlando, which houses the families evicted from Sophiatown, had spawned right over the hill; Meadowlands, the segregator's dream, with the houses split up into groups according to tribes—a little residential Zululand, Swaziland, Basutoland, and so on—and the tall brown-coated police moving all over it, to make sure there are no strangers in the ethnic paradise.

But Orlando, the older part of the city, built in the 'thirties, is still relatively accessible, too big and untidy to be properly disciplined: whites are still to be found there from time to time. I was on my way to a party at the house of the jazz composer and commercial traveller, Todd Matshikiza.

We drove through the rocky dip that marks the beginning of Orlando—speculating vaguely on that favourite African topic: whether Orlando could be sealed off by troops if necessary, and deciding that it would be difficult—and were back once again in the vast bungalow encampment, with the little rudimentary houses, like the wooden models that you put on a monopoly board. Everything is horizontal, as if a great wind had blown off the tops of everything, leaving only the huge vertical hoardings advertising soap and cigarettes, staring over the location like big-brother placards.

We reached Todd's house, past five ditches and six boulders. The neat little room inside, with its small tables, low roof and miniature Utrillo reproductions on the walls, seemed like a scale model of a white man's room—so that when it filled up with thirty guests, lying on the floor with faces pressed close to one another and profiles looming everywhere in the flickering lamp-light, the people looked like Gullivers in Lilliput.

I was asking Todd how it was, if things were getting as bad as he said they were, that Africans were still so polite and happy-

looking in the streets of Johannesburg.

"Gee! The African Iron Mask! He says one thing, and thinks another: when he nods," said Todd, nodding wisely, "you think he's agreeing with you, when actually he's saying 'Yes, I'm hearing what you say, white man.'"

"Ya, it sometimes leads to some unfortunate misunderstandings," said a large African professor sitting on the sofa, talking very slowly. "You see the Africans don't just *like* saying no: they find it easier just to agree and avoid argument with the whites or Indians: and then, of course, they go back to their own people and say the opposite. So, of course, the other people are rather puzzled, and rather think they've been let down."

The room filled up to squeezing-point, and a noisy contingent from Sophiatown, sounding as different as Frenchmen from Swedes, arrived and introduced themselves in fulsome terms, and the whole party loosened up. Elaborate cocktail snacks were handed round and balanced on knees.

Zeke, the doyen of African writers, was leading a discussion on the floor about the need for an African artists' circle. There was some opposition to the idea. "But I find my position as a writer is so lonely, so isolated," he said in his fine deep voice, so that his loneliness seemed to echo round the room: "I know that there must be hundreds of people scribbling in backyards who don't know where to start—running like rivers in the desert."

"Ya—rivers in the desert," said Dam-Dam softly from the corner, in a black suit with huge cuff-links and a carnation buttonhole. He was the leader of the Manhattan Brothers, the most famous singing troupe in black Africa. And his approval, coming from that tall, suave body, gave finality to the idea.

"We don't just want to be writers," said Zeke, "we want to be *non-white* writers"—using the word in the proud way of people who are used to being non-everything—non-Europeans, non-voters, non-travellers, non-drinkers, non-starters.

"But not like in Russia," somebody chirped in: "we don't want to be told what to write."

"No, not like Russia," said Zeke: "like Africa."

In the corner where I was sitting, Leslie, a Coloured carpenter-intellectual inclined towards Trotsky, was telling how that morning he and Todd had gone to buy a *salami* at a shop in town. Leslie was one of that small number of Coloureds who,

fed up with the colour snobbery of their own people, prefer to go about with Africans—partly for principle, partly for fun. They wanted a big, fat *salami*: “The white girl just wouldn’t believe it,” said Leslie: “‘You don’t want *that one*,’ she screamed so that you could hear her the other side of the street, man! ‘The native boy can’t want *that one*.’”

Then Leslie became involved in an argument with the quiet round-faced teacher next to him—one of the teachers who had reluctantly accepted the new Government “Bantu Education” and was presiding at a school where house-cleaning and digging were taught as school subjects. He was a meek-seeming, very polite little man. Leslie, who had been telling a string of anecdotes about his bitter encounters with the white world, began talking about what would happen “when we have our freedom.”

“I don’t quite see how we Africans,” said the Bantu teacher, “after all the humiliations that have been heaped upon us by the white man, can allow whites to have votes in our country.”

“No, we must remain *human*,” said Leslie, dropping the “h” and giving the word an urgent stress: “Whatever happens, we must stay as *human* beings. We mustn’t treat the whites as they treat us. The most important thing we have is that we’re human beings. We mustn’t lose that in the revolution . . .”

Then, just as all the talk in the room was in danger of becoming whisked into the old vortex of race and bitterness, the little jazz pianist Salisbury Klaaste slumped to the piano in the corner and began rather drunkenly dragging his thin pointed fingers over the keys. Sal had taken his B.Mus. at the university two years before and, after refusing a job helping a white man study primitive African music, had become pianist to the “Jazz Dazzlers”. His small and nervous body, hunched forward, with his huge sad eyes staring out above his turned-up nose, seemed to fit the piano exactly, like a working model. He played with a few tunes, muttering angrily while people advised him, and then began a lurching, sentimental ditty. Immediately everyone in the room began shouting “Dam-DAM-Dam-DAM-Dam-DAM,” until the tall and elegant figure rose from the floor, scraping the ceiling, his white cuffs shining from the darkness. His huge mouth opened like a flower, curled round at the edges, so that it seemed that some bellowing sound would come out: and then very softly, in an extravagant brogue, he sang:-

“Did your mother come from Ireland?

For there’s something in you Hirish . . .”

There was tremendous applause, and then Sal, looking indignant and hurt, began playing a simple tune on single notes: "The Xhosas always economise in their notes, you see," he said, pointing a menacing thin finger at Leslie: "Just using the dominant and tonic, like this . . ."

"You're not a white lecturer: *you* don't need to economise," shouted Todd. "There's no shortage of notes *here*."

Sal, looking very cross, went on playing tribal chants for a while, and then very suddenly switched to a caricature of a wobbling Indian love-song, such as you hear coming out of the juke-boxes in the Indian part of town. At once another man stood up from the corner—Gwigwi, the saxophonist, composer of the African hit tune, "Fish and Chips." He stood very primly, gazed haughtily round the bodies draped round the room, and then abruptly, with a quick flick of his head, threw himself into a crazy Indian warble, shaking his fingers to play an imaginary snake-charmer's pipe.

After a minute Sal stopped, Gwigwi folded on to the floor with a thump, and the room shook with clapping. Then Sal and Gwigwi did a quick tour of the world, crooning a preposterous Italian lament, gurgling some Russian nonsense, and squeaking a piece of Chinese cacophany; together they romped happily over the 2,000 years of civilisation from which they are supposed to be so mysteriously excluded.

Sitting almost on top of me was a contented drunk—a veteran African double-bass player of the 'thirties. He was trying, with a good deal of dribble and splutter, to explain that this was not altogether a normal African party, and to make himself polite to the white face which was evidently conspicuous in his cloudy vision. I was brusque and uneasy with this attention; and then I noticed guiltily, when he turned his attention to an African beside him, how much more courteously and effectively he was received, his incoherencies being countered with reassuring flattery and congratulation: "That's it, Willie—have a good time, boy—quite right, boy."

Sal at the piano, conducting a fitful history of jazz, touched on a melancholy repetitive tune which sounded like the insistent questioning of a child; there were cries all over the room of "Marabi! Marabi!"—the nostalgic old backyard jazz of the 'thirties, which still emerges from crackling records in the servants' huts. Willie the drunk, at the first sound of the Marabi, raised his body from the sofa and began shuffling to and

fro, his shoulders shrugging up and down to the rhythm, and his mouth fixed in a faint and happy smile, dreaming of the days when he plucked his double bass to shuffling African dancers, up and down the cities of the Union. Almost everyone began shuffling at one another, as if they had suddenly been caught on one of those shaking platforms at a fair-ground. "Gee, those Marabi days," said Todd, whose life had been measured by jazz styles: "we just went on, boy—on and on!"

Todd, Gwigwi, Dam-Dam and the rest shuffled along, advancing and retreating like tentative courting couples, wrapped in their own memories of Marabi. We slipped away, leaving the shuffling and singing to go on through the night and all through the next Sunday morning, the party guests trapped together by the talk and music like ship-wrecked people in a boat.

As I drove out through the steep valley where the edge of the straggling location looks over the stony veld, a torch waved frantically at the car. "Remember the rule, never stop". And then I made out the tall brown helmeted figures of African police: I slowed down, looking to see if there was a white man there who could stop me. And then the black sergeant gave a grunt of "Aaaah! *Umtungu*"—white man—with that ambiguous emphasis, and waved me on to the open country beyond.

