

A REVIEW

STAFFRIDER

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by Peter Strauss

There are some for whom censorship counts as one of their government's more abstract crimes against democracy; they would protest against it on principle, as if it were primarily an infringement against a philosophy, against a set of beliefs about the nature of the state. But there are others who experience censorship as an almost physical deprivation, or an attack on them personally — censorship, they know, is taking the air away that they need to breathe freely; they feel that unless the fresh air of truth is circulating they will choke, be smothered by the drugged and nauseous atmosphere of lies which all modern societies generate, but which some allow to be challenged. The banning of the first number of *Staffrider* was one of those occasions which made one feel, with particular intensity, that one belonged for better or for worse to the latter group. Or else it was merely the sudden breath of fresh air, abruptly terminated for the meantime, that had made one aware of one's appetite.

Fortunately, the second and third numbers have not been banned, and the sense of liberation, of one's country's inner life having taken on a new kind of reality through being given expression, is something one can feel again; particularly, black people feel it:

"These writers know about us. They really know what they are talking about. They **know** Soweto, and they know what we want." (Mrs B. Makau, speaking to Miriam Tlali in *Staffrider* No. 3).

As you see, *Staffrider* advertises itself as uninhibitedly as any other magazine, drawing attention to its scoops and catches, trying to make its contributors' personal existence imaginable, real. There is a 'Reader, you can become a contributor' philosophy about *Staffrider*: in a series called **Soweto Speaking**, Miriam Tlali gets residents to speak, mainly about how they make do, have established an independence; a new section, **Yesterday, Yesterday, Now** (which hasn't yet really established an identity for itself), asks for readers to contribute their memories.

The bulk of the magazine's material is chosen and sent to it by writers' groups all over the country; it is probably they and their friends who make up the hard core of the magazine's readership; consumption and production are intimately linked — those who practise the one identify with those who practise the other, the functions are inseparable, there is none of the European or American writer's fear of being out of touch with an audience, and conversely no sense of the writer being a special person. It is the most unauthoritarian magazine I know, a babble of voices, coinciding, clashing, tangling with each other. A great variety in quality and sophistication. One of the most astounding things is the sheer volume of the material, uneven though it is, that the magazine can find to print. One page carries about 1700 words (in the case of a story,

that is; poems get more space round the edges), there are about sixty pages in a number, and the magazine appears every two months. There is little sign of the stream drying out. Evidently, South Africa wants to talk. There are of course imbalances: because being white here imposes a different experience (and perhaps because I am white) I wish there were a greater range of white voices contributing — what is good is that those contributing are not felt by the reader to be out of place; I also wish that rural South Africa were getting more of a show in — our country-dwellers should draw attention to themselves, they are becoming our forgotten people. But on the whole it is true: reading this magazine is listening to a country speaking. The country is in a bit of a tangle — all the more reason for listening.

Moreover, it is a country which is learning to invent ways of speaking that have an amazing freedom and ingenuity. In the poetry, 'style' is not a strong point: language tends to be an unconscious bricolage of voices. And a good percentage of the political poems appearing return to the boring stock themes and stock vocabulary (influenced by American Negro poetry) of consciousnesses out to prove that they are 'politicized'. But there are also — and here comes the strong point — a very large number of political poems that get to the point by striking out in totally unconventional and unexpected directions; there are poets who have improvised new poetic strategies which are also new strategies of political understanding and communication. Take Jackie wa Seroke's poem **Our Points of View**:

I goofed.
You can't do anything right.
She said nothing about that.

I am argumentative.
You are belligerent.
She enjoys a lively discussion.

I am a creature of many moods.
You are temperamental.
Mama, she is real cool.

I have a healthy sense of self-esteem.
Who do you think you are, anyway.
She is not conceited.

I am unavoidably detained.
You have no consideration for other people.
She is inexcusably late.

I am 'me'.
You are 'you'.
She is Azania.

The love poems are, if anything, even more unpredictable. In fact, it is occasionally difficult to tell at first glance what a poem is about, and difficult to classify it even then:

at such times one finds the poetry has moved into a kind of abstraction, an exploration of mechanisms or structures of feelings or ideas or relationships not specifically attached to any one object. (It is good that the above poem ends with Azania, but it need not have done.)

The writers of stories are generally happier with style (linguistic style) than the poets. (Maybe prose can digest a headier montage of dialects safely — or else the prose-writers are simply more experienced.) Mtutuzeli Matshoba for instance has an amazing fertility and facility with the different masks of language, welding the biblical to the slangy, to the mock-pedantic, to the romantic. He makes a speciality of **beginning** stories. He can go on beginning a story for a full column, letting off fireworks right and left. It's almost a disappointment (after the first surprise) when he gets to the story and you find out what he's been talking about. He is a virtuoso, a natural. At the other end of the scale is Miriam Tlali who is happiest in a mode close to reportage, able to distil her tremendous humanity and commitment into that form. Her story about a police 'hi-jack' of buses setting out for Biko's funeral (in **Staff- rider** no. 1) is an unforgettable account of brutality and insult; the sense it gives of an immeasurable solidarity growing up among the oppressed is something which, in some form or the other, makes itself felt in almost all the writings that make up **Staffrider**. It is one of the things

that keep it (in spite of political realities) from being a depressing magazine.

I mentioned earlier that **Staffrider** had a 'Reader, you can become a contributor' philosophy. The photographs have a function in the whole that accords with this philosophy, though the invitation they extend is of an even broader kind. Two types of photograph may appear in a newspaper or in a magazine: the one portrays the superstar — of one kind or another — and the superstar subject is there also in the treatment, the other is the picture of the anonymous human being. The first editor of **Drum** discovered that it was the second type that held the gaze of the reader. For the reader saw the anonymous subject as himself, and this discovery of his presence in the newspaper was a confirmation of his reality. Nor is this invitation and confirmation something that the photographer confers alone. There is also the sense in which the subject of the photograph acts as unconscious contributor. That is why some of the greatest photographs have shown people looking straight into the camera: a man's attitude to being photographed (however unconscious as an attitude) is perhaps the quality of character that concerns us most when it is in a photograph that we meet him — and it is a central clue to his nature not a peripheral one. What **Drum** once understood **Staffrider** seems to understand more profoundly: each face, each silhouette, is a blend of anonymity and personality, each element in that pairing being strong. □

THE FUND-RAISING ACT

by a Lawyer

With the publication in the Gazette on the 30th June, 1978 of the Fund-Raising Act, the State's tight control over the collection of funds is one step away. Only the promulgation is still required. It is anyone's guess when this will happen, as obviously the bureaucratic machinery must be set up first.

The Act prohibits the collection of contributions by any person or organization unless authorised in terms of the Act and unless the collection takes place in accordance with the provisions of the Act.

The key words are "collect" and "contributions". "Collect" is given an all-embracing meaning in relation to contributions. It means "in any manner whatsoever, soliciting, accepting, collecting or obtaining contributions from the public or attempting to collect".

However, any contributions solicited, accepted or obtained from any person or organization outside the Republic are *deemed* to have been collected from the public in the Republic.

The definition of "contributions" is convoluted. In short, the definition of "contributions" can, for all practical purposes, be said to mean the transferring of goods and money except where there is a legally enforceable obligation (excluding gifts and donations) without a right to claim a consideration by the mere transfer. This excludes the consideration relating to competitions, contests, games and the like where a prize can be won.

Section 33 exempts the collection of contributions which are:

- (a) collected in terms of any other law;
- (b) collected by or for or on behalf of an institution managed or maintained exclusively by the State or a local authority or a hospital board established by or under any law;
- (c) collected from any person by virtue of his membership of the organization collecting the contributions;
- (d) collected by or on behalf of a religious body during a religious service or in terms of the written authority of such body and exclusively for the purpose of promoting the religious work of such body;
- (e) collected for or on behalf of any educational institution from a former student or scholar of such institution or from the parent, guardian or foster parent of a person who is or was a student or scholar of such institution;
- (f) collected for or on behalf of a political party;
- (g) collected under the supervision and control of the council of a university in the Republic or of a college of advanced technical education, and for the purposes of the development of such university or college;