

Notes from
the South

Peter Machen

P U B L I S H E R

From South African arts writer Peter Machen, *Notes from the South* is a collection of conversations with key counter-cultural voices in the first two decades of the 21st Century. From South African superstar Brenda Fassie to American independent filmmaker Larry Clark to punk icon Patti Smith, Machen's intimate interview style allows his subjects to reveal parts of themselves that are rarely expressed in public.

While the subjects of these *Notes from the South* are remarkably diverse, they share an alternative perspective on the world, regardless of their physical proximity to the global South. In this context, Australian political writer John Pilger sits comfortably next to South African academic Njabulo Ndebele, Brazilian filmmaker Fernando Meirelles and Senegalese musician Baaba Maal, all of whom, in their own ways, are striving for a better, more humanist world.

Collectively, this polyphony of voices, as channeled through Machen's transcripts and recollections, presents a cultural and political snapshot of life in the first two decades of this still new century, one that is given additional texture by several of Machen's columns and travel pieces which are interspersed with the interviews.

Notes from
the South

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“We cannot be impartial, only intellectually honest.
Impartiality is a dream, honesty a duty.”

- Italian philosopher Gaetano Salvemini

I have been interviewing, artists, musicians, filmmakers and writers for the last 20 years. *Notes From the South* is an archive of these interviews, combined with several first-person accounts of life on the southern tip of Africa. While the subjects of the interviews are remarkably diverse, what they have in common is an alternative perspective on the world, regardless of their physical proximity to the global South.

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Brenda Fassie

All She Surveys (2003)

In 2004, South Africa's biggest musical star, Brenda Fassie, died, uniting the nations for a few brief weeks. I was fortunate to meet – and fall in love with Brenda – nine months before her death.

I am staying in room 260 of the Katherine Street City Lodge in Sandton, Johannesburg. I mention to the cleaning staff that I am going to interview Brenda Fassie.

“Oh Brenda,” they respond, with what I can only describe as serendipitous giggles. “She stayed in your room for six months. She was very naughty.”

As I start my pilgrimage to Brenda's rehearsal room, the image of the scared, unfriendly Jo'burg driver is quickly dispelled – or possibly updated. Brenda's manager, Peter Snyman, doesn't really have a clue how to get from Sandton to the backroom in Denver in which she is rehearsing, and he gives me only two street names. I find it, but not without help from a score of drivers who, without exception, roll down their windows and head me in the direction of Jules Street.

Jules Street runs through the heart of Denver, one of the

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oldest, most beautiful and most dilapidated parts of Jo'burg, but something shines through the decay, and it is still full of life. It is an apt place to find Brenda Fassie.

Denver wears its fractured beauty proudly and matter-of-factly. It looks like some cast-off street from war-torn Maputo, not quite stylish enough to inhabit the Mozambican capital but beautiful nonetheless. It is, quite obviously, a place for urban survivors, a place for those who have not been subsumed by the power of Jozi but remain on its periphery.

And here I find Ma Brrr, Ms Fassie, riot grrrl supreme. Self-confessed drug user. Prima donna. Diva to a T. And the owner of one of the most powerful voices on the planet. Tinged with the pop immediacy of Madonna at her 1980s finest, and with a depth of range and meaning to rival Nina Simone, those who have not experienced her vocal glory – because she is black and sings only occasionally in English – don't know what they're missing. When Brenda sings, time stands still.

Over the last two decades, she has used that voice to powerful effect, establishing herself as one of Africa's biggest recording stars, and creating a catalogue of astounding afro-pop albums. And also, it must be said, attracting ever so slightly more than her fair share of trouble – through her fondness for substances legal and illegal, her unconventional sexuality and her resolute determination to do things her way and on her terms.

To put it bluntly, Brenda Fassie really doesn't give a fuck. To put it more proverbially, she couldn't care two hoots what people think about her. But I'll stick with the former phrase because there is no other expression in the English language for the attitude that she constantly exudes and exacts on both herself and everyone around her. This is Brenda pure and simple. She refuses to put on an act. And she never stops performing.

BRENDA FASSIE

And that is, in a way, the entire point.

It is also completely glorious. Because she is so sweet, so vicious, so venomously loving, so unapologetically human. In the most sensational way possible, she plays the media game by simply not playing the media game.

Brenda always knew she would be famous. There was no other possible path.

When, in 1979, record producer Kolozi Lobona made the very first pilgrimage to Brenda – to the Cape township of Langa where she was then living – because he'd heard about this amazing voice, Brenda sang for him. And when she had finished singing, the 16-year-old siren turned to him and said: “So when are we going to Jo'burg?”

I walk into the rehearsal room with Brenda's manager. Peter permanently wears a look on his face that suggests he's seen it all, and my guess is that he has. Certainly, hanging with Brenda would increase the odds.

In the rehearsal room it's like nothing I've ever seen. The band is going off to the rousing pop anthem Thola Madlozi. Brenda is swirling around the room like a dervish, her impish face listening carefully to each note, each sound emerging from the musicians. Her body flails in an involuntary dance as she moves from musician to musician, a micro-conductor intent on perfection. She looks as if she is having the time of her life.

The band breaks and Peter introduces me to Brenda. I give her a t-shirt with a picture of Nefertiti on it that I got at Fashion Week and she gives me a big hug.

I meet Nathi, one of the backing singers in the backroom. Brenda introduces her as her daughter although I later learn that she is her girlfriend. She has a beautiful voice, of course, entirely different to Brenda's – sweeter, less primal. She is a strong,

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gently mature match for Brenda's eternal teenager. I tell Brenda that Nathi is the mother and she is the daughter. "Everyone says that," she responds.

Then we all end up at her house in Buccleuch – not without a short trip to the bottle store, where Brenda stocks up on an entire shopping trolley of alcohol.

I follow her around her suburban Jozi home. She shows me a bullet hole in her bedroom window, a result of her recent much-publicised burglary. My mind flashes to the newspaper article and Brenda saying: "Why would anyone want to kill me? Don't they know the whole country loves me?"

Then it's back to the music room where Bongani, Brenda's son, sits down at the keyboard. He is a classically trained pianist and the room melts into beauty as he plays the keys with his hands, body and sweet, sweet face.

Paitjie, Bongani's friend, is sitting next to me, dressed head to toe in yellow hip-hop gear. It's his birthday and Brenda sings her own, deep-deep house interpretation of Happy Birthday. Paitjie's smile almost exceeds the breadth of his face.

Later, I tell Brenda how lovely I think Bongani is. She smiles pensively. "I think he smokes *zol*," she says with a look of worry on her face. I say that it would be more surprising if a South African boy his age didn't smoke weed..

Brenda asks me for a light. She is burning *imphepho* in a small ceremonial area near her front door. This is where we conduct the actual taped interview. Though, by now, I have realised that you don't interview Brenda Fassie – you write a story about her or, ideally, a novel.

She instructs her bodyguard to bring some drinks. A Bacardi Breezer and a Smirnoff Spin arrive and then she requests an egg flip. The egg flip arrives and she slices it upwards through the

BRENDA FASSIE

air, expertly removing the top from a bottle.

One more slice through the air for the other bottle, and then her gun is requested.

A handgun is shortly delivered and she looks at it and then throws it down among her ceremonial clutter. I half expect her to point it at me, as some kind of test. I switch on the dictaphone and she says: "Have you seen my dogs? Chicco and Lesley. I named those dogs after two people I think are dogs. Chicco is my manager and Lesley was my lawyer. They got together and fucked me."

Before I have a chance to ask her a question, she breaks into song, echoing the tune emerging from speakers in the other room where her new song *Ngiki Kotola Malini* is playing.

It is spine-chillingly beautiful. Her voice starts as a wail before segueing into existential pop. As Brenda sings, she disappears into the song, into the invisible world, the place where the finest performers go when they sing.

When she finishes the song, she tells me the interview is over. I tell her that's fine, that in fact I have no questions for her. She responds that I have the answers. This is more like Zen Buddhism than an interview.

But it doesn't matter. Her presence is almost too overpowering for such simple concepts as questions and answers. Besides, during the few hours I spend with her, every time I ask her a question she responds by talking about something else entirely. And so, on my tape, I have little else but her singing and talking about her dogs and lawyers. And I will treasure it forever.

We are sitting on Brenda's bed. She asks me to try and fix her video camera. Nathi gets it down from the cupboard. The cord to the battery charger is missing. I take the whole thing away with me and promise to try and fix it. I, like everyone who

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glances against her world, am duty-bound to follow her orders. She is a queen. Despite being the size of a battle-scarred imp, she is a huge mad goddess filled with warmly psychotic power.

As I'm sitting there, I think of one of the first questions she asked me when I met her this afternoon. Looking at me in my own punked-up hairstyle and Craig Native t-shirt, she says to me, completely straight-faced: "So do you smoke cocaine?"

"It's much better than snorting it," is my hedge-betting reply. Now sitting on her bed in a state of relative calmness, I ask Brenda if she's ever had any problems with the police, being such a public drug user.

"They wouldn't dare," she says, and we talk about the secret history of cocaine in this country. She mentions no names, but the implication is that were the law to clamp down on her, she could bring a lot of important people down with her.

And then it's time for Brenda to take a bath and for me to leave, but not without a metal bracelet that she places firmly on my arm. That and the video camera. I am leaving Brenda world to go out into the big wide evening of a Jozi sky.

And I wonder if she's going to have a bath and go to sleep or whether the whole family is going to be up at two in the morning, having a party with that booze trolley. Either way, in her dreams, or in her mad lullabies of reality, she'll be wearing with ease and pride that scarred, beautiful face that has to put up with the extremely full-time job of being Brenda.

Landscapes

Skimming the 29th Parallel (2007)

I went for a drive along the 29th Parallel with a group of friends, partially retracing a journey made by former Natal Witness writer, David Robbins, two decades earlier.

Twenty years ago, *Natal Witness* writer David Robbins, set out on a journey which began in Mtunzini on the shores of the Indian Ocean and ended in Port Nolloth on the western edge of Southern Africa. Robbins chronicled his journey in a book called *The 29th Parallel*, which, although a work of non-fiction, was written with all the narrative intensity of a novel.

I wasn't aware of Robbins book when I first agreed to travel with three friends along this 29th line of latitude, which, like so many human constructs, is both imaginary and real. And unlike Robbins, who set out to explore notions of whiteness in Africa, I had no game plan. I was simply keen for a road trip, jumping at the chance to escape the city and explore the small towns of South Africa and the tarmac that binds them together.

Only a few days before we departed did I find out that our travels were to be based on Robbins' book. And given that we

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had only four days to cover as much road as possible, we weren't going to retrace Robbins' entire journey, only a section of it. So, sadly, we were barely going to make it two thirds of the way to the icy Atlantic.

We would also be doing the journey in reverse, driving solidly for a day and then turning around and slowly returning home, zigzagging along the parallel.

We drove out of Durban in the waning light, the almost full moon having just set. We followed the smoothly engineered curves of the N3 until we reached Harrismith from where we turned westward. From there, we drove through the heart of the Free State. Through Bloemfontein, Bethlehem, Kimberly, and on into the Northern Cape, stopping only for lunch, to refill the car and for the occasional photo opportunity.

Our race came to a halt, however, when we drove through the small town of Boshoff in the Northern Cape. Set against the arid scrubland which surrounds it, Boshoff is a tiny town of idiosyncratic houses and gardens fleshed with greenery. But apart from the constant attention needed to maintain such a verdant affront on the dust, what impressed us most was the diversity of design, a happy counterpoint to the generic uniformity of the cluster houses that have become South Africa's architectural currency. Boshoff was made all the more charming by the presence of what looked seemd to be a market garden on the main road, sprouting a small abundance of vegetables on a plot the size of two or three of the houses adjacent to it.

In Griqwa Town, a long drive from anywhere and the next stop after Boshoff, there was no abundance of vegetables. In fact there were hardly any vegetables at all and there didn't seem to be an abundance of anything. But it suggests something fundamental about our society that even when fresh produce

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is hard to find, a wide range of liquor is readily available. We grabbed some sixpacks from a bottle store for a night in the bush at Witsands and were about to head for the Tigers Eye bar (semi-precious stones constitute the core of Griqua Town's economy) when one of our party – the driver – pointed out that it would be prudent to get to our accommodation before the gates closed.

Before we left, I went into the local Pep store and brought myself a pair of cheap sunglasses to counter the road's glare. As I was making my purchase, I spotted a handsome, extravagantly dressed young man who would not have looked out of place in the gay districts of London or New York. "How is it to live in Griqua Town?" I asked across the checkout counter, expecting perhaps complaints about small town life. "It's magnificent," he said with a proud sashay of his head. I'm pretty sure that he wasn't being ironic, but I struggled to discern how life in the arid, dusty isolation of Griqua Town could be magnificent for such a flamboyant young man.

Part of me would rather not tell of the beauty of Witsands. And therein lies the central conflict inherent in travel writing – that in telling too many people about a place, it becomes ruined by overvisitation. But Witsands, on the South Eastern edge of the Kalahari, is so far away from anywhere that I think it's safe to describe the beauty of the dune we clambered up to reach a view of the setting sun.

We arrived at the gates of the Witsands Resort just minutes before they shut, quickly located our relatively luxurious accommodation (complete with airconditioning) and headed off for the dunes in a dying light that will always keep a place in my memories.

At the top of the dune, it looked like another planet. The

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white sand turned golden by the orange sun, a series of sand bunkers stretching into the endless horizon. I lay on the fine, powdery sand and watched the sun set behind a clump of brittle desert grass as the sand washed over my body. So relentlessly beautiful and also so far away from Eden.

We drove back to our quarters in a landscape almost metallically luminous in the moments next to nightfall, buck springing their way across the veld, occasionally following the motion of the car, their animal perfectness nudging against my soul with three quarters of my body out the window.

The next morning when we drove back through Griqua Town, filling up the car and taking a coffee-break, there was no water in the town. The town pump had broken and the water in our coffee came from a local bore-hole. And again I found myself questioning the magnificence if not the vague charm of this parched, dehydrated town. And I couldn't help but think that perhaps the magnificence about which the well-dressed young man was talking might be the magnificence of – finally – some degree of self-determination for the local Griqua community.

Departing once more from Griqua Town, we saw the river for the first time, a swathe of blue slicing its way across the countryside bleeding out its greenery wherever it went. In his book Robbins tells us that the San people thought that this river, the Orange River which flows into the Vaal, was the mother of all rivers, and, as Robbins also says, it's easy to see why. In the perpetual dryness and heat of the Northern Cape, this bounteous green does indeed look like the source of all life.

The Vaal reaches an apotheosis of greenness in the small and intriguing town of Douglas where we would sleep that night. Water is in such abundance in Douglas that in the local shopping centre – the horse shoe configuration around a large parking lot

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that most small towns have instead of malls – a fine mist is continually sprayed from under the eaves around the entire length of the building, even after most of the shops have closed. I found myself contemplating the San and their maternal river and what they might have thought of all this. And if only dust were the currency, the Platteland would be rich.

We had brunch in Douglas at a fantastic little restaurant called Die Koffie Pit which put most urban eateries to shame and which also doubled as a seller of Christian paraphernalia. The owner, who worked in the back with her staff, would have made Christ proud with her warmth, humility and desire to help. (I asked her if she could fill our water bottles for us and she returned five minutes later, the bottles filled with ice and water).

From Douglas, we headed for the so-small-it-barely-exists town of Plooyesberg near Drie Koppe Eiland, in search of images that had been engraved into a dried up riverbed by the ancient people of the region. We struggled a little to find it, stopping at a farm along the way and encountering a wizened old man with not too many of his teeth left. He spoke only Afrikaans and none of us are too good with *die taal* but after a while he worked out what we wanted. “Aah, *die tekens*,” he said, with a click of understanding on his face, and then proceeded to direct us. When he said “die tekens”, it was like a moment from a cheap thriller, the word *teken* meaning both drawing and religious sign.

We eventually found our way to *die tekens* with the help of Ben du Plessis, the farmer whose family has for generations owned the land which bears the ancient engravings. A rough-but-gentle and thoroughly generous soul, du Plessis led us down to the river and then gave us a small guided tour of the engravings. We followed him along the banks of the Orange River, my feet burning on the hot rocks and pierced by tiny thorns. He pointed



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out the abstract drawings, but being a farmer he was more interested in the detailed renderings of the animals.

I watched him with a layer of irony as he traced his walking stick along the paths of the engravings. And I thought of all the conservators who would balk at him doing so and would enthusiastically turn this into a world heritage site, complete with a tourist office and forms and permits and brochures. And I thought – selfishly – how we could never have had those moments of joy and relaxation on the rocks, had we been surrounded by snap-happy tourists, even as we were being snap-happy ourselves.

With the burning heat of the day, our attention moved to the water which still flows adjacent to the carved rocks, and which collects in a dam built by the farmer's family in the mid 1980s, before overflowing onto smooth, algae-covered rocks, swirling into a small pool and continuing on its long and wayward journey to the sea. We drank a couple of warm beers, played in the water and before we knew it the sun was once more setting.

We returned to Douglas that night, partly because I had left my shoes at Die Koffie Pit, partly because it was the closest place to Plooyesberg and partly, I suspect, because we wanted to have another wonderful breakfast. But there was no room at the inn that night. This was apparently due to the fact that many of the bed-and-breakfasts in town – and there are many for such a small town – are now being occupied by visitors who have come to stay semi-permanently. After a few phone calls courtesy of a local hotel-manager, we managed to find some accommodation in a self-catering spot a few kilometres out of town. And the less said about Vakansie Oord the better. Suffice to say that self-catering didn't include so much as a sharp knife, let alone a kettle or a fridge, but it did include a braai and the hottest, most

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airless rooms money can buy.

The next day, the river kept us company for most the day, intermittently disappearing and reappearing, taking us past Ficksberg and Fouriesberg and onto our final destination of Clarens. After a long drive through the faded gold of the free state, this lush, green valley was truly a piece of Eden and I was reminded of the hostess at Die Koffie Pit, who, when we told her that we were going to Clarens, said warmly “O ja! That’s my valley.”

We arrived at dusk and set about finding accommodation for the night, immediately falling into what seemed like love with the quaintness and hamletness of it all. Clarens at dusk looks like a 21st century version of a burgeoning 19th century American mining village as seen through the eyes of JG Ballard. We found a generous stone cottage called Sweetie Pie, complete with all the fixtures you might want after four days of driving through dust. We phoned the number on the gate and Sweetie Pie was ours for the night. But not for the following night – Friday – when hordes of Jo’burgers would arrive in the town, booking it out as they do every weekend.

We found dinner at a place called Friends which I’m certain was named after the TV show. We were still loving Clarens, despite the buffeting dust storm that covered us in a thin film of brown and which forced us to move inside when our food arrived – in the Free State there is dust even in Eden. We ate our food and moved to the bar where we proceeded to get very drunk, free from the strictures of having to drive, Clarens being small enough to comfortably walk around. Having befriended the locals, we headed off to a venue called the View Site, where we had been told there was a party happening.

When a couple of us arrived at the View Site, it was almost empty. And the handful of inhabitants didn’t exactly make us

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feel comfortable. It felt like white South Africa circa 1985 mixed with a good dose of America's Deep South. Aggression oozing onto the bar counter, racial epithets flying, even the local hippy boy from Friends telling me about how he lived with the bushman for five months and how it's a scientific fact that black people have different receptors in their brain to white people which makes them incapable of handling alcohol. My friend and I looked at each other speechless.

Downing our drinks, we left, finding the rest of our party at the bar next door, which was free from racial epithets and aggression but still felt a whole lot like a David Lynch movie set in the Deep South. I hovered between the bar, the pool table and the parking light outside, where I found myself comfortably dwarfed by the majesty of the mighty Maluti Mountains.

The evening continued and I could probably write a novel about its events, but suffice to say that in the rift between our initial infatuation with Clarens and the night's event, something soured a little – perhaps a sense of complicity, perhaps an unavoidable sense of whiteness.

The next morning we walked around what turned out to be a shopping paradise for those of the arts-and-craftsy persuasion, complete with espresso bars, restaurants and a particularly good book store. And it's easy to see how Clarens, with its quaintly constructed notions of authenticity, would appeal to those who live in the shadows of the Jo'burg malls.

Clarens is situated right on the edge of Golden Gate and it was through that gorgeous expanse of rock that we passed on our way home, stopping briefly for a roughly constructed picnic and a cigarette, before making a rain-swept and mist-enshrouded beeline home to the lushness and safety of KwaZulu-Natal.

Having completed our journey, I set about reading Robbins'

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book. Twenty years later, it's a compelling read, possibly even more so now than when it was first written. It allows us, with its careful juxtaposition of the objective and the personal, to see how much South Africa has changed, and how much it hasn't. It is filled with prophecies from ordinary South African citizens, many of which have come true, and many of which haven't. But one of the book's central premises – that it is difficult to explore our national reality in our cluttered cities – remains true. In the small towns of South Africa and the vast, mostly unpopulated spaces in between, things are somehow clearer and starker.

Another thing which weighed on our minds intermittently was something which almost certainly wasn't as much of a concern for Robbins, who, although writing after the energy crisis of the 1970s, was nonetheless writing before the term carbon footprint had been coined. I love the road – it is one of my greatest loves – but it has become tainted by the very thing that gave it its existence. Cars have become the enemy of the planet and the road trip now has a price on its head. And I dream of the solar-powered electric car that would give the road back its beauty and freedom.

But that is really a whole different story, a whole chapter in a history that has yet to happen. And I know that I will almost certainly sin once more against the planet and travel again along this line, both imaginary and real.

Guy Tillim

War, Beauty and Moral
Inconclusions
(2003)

Guy Tillim is one of South Africa's foremost photojournalists. He has freelanced all over Africa for Reuters and Agence France Presse, creating award-winning pictures in the process. I spoke to him about the things he sees.

A dog is caught between two lanes of traffic on a road in Guyana. Women avert their faces and close their eyes to a dust storm on an Angolan street. Two Civil Defence Force militia men stare into the camera on a jungle path in Sierra Leone. A young woman from a displaced family gazes out across a barren Eritrean landscape. And in Jerusalem, ancient grave-stones look like strewn rubble, cooled off and discarded by the volcano of history.

These are the images from the lens of Guy Tillim. They all share a remarkable beauty, tinged with a sense of intimate grace and aesthetic restraint. Yet the reality from which they have been plucked invariably exists in sharp contradiction to the distilled photographs which result and which often find their homes on gallery walls and in art catalogues.

A photojournalist working mostly in Africa, Tillim has spent much of his career journeying through the continent and beyond, wading through the heart-wrenching aftermaths of civil wars and their resulting political and economic disasters.

From Angola to Afghanistan, he has documented brief fragments of transcendent humanity in landscapes which have been all but completely dehumanised.

I ask Tillim about the fact that these photographs seem to be artistic objects before they are informative.

“Ja,” he responds, “That’s something I think about. In these places, where people are living, often in reduced circumstances or close to war, I’m there ostensibly as a journalist. But you’ve got to ask yourself certain questions, and one of them is why you are there. And there are no easy answers.

“You are confronted with suffering, with people who need help, and you’re there only to take pictures of them. It’s quite tough sometimes. And you wonder to what extent you can be useful at all. And then you question your motivation. Are you there in order to tell people’s stories? And if you are, how effective are you?

“And often you realise that you’re not very effective at all. Firstly, because you’re probably not up to the task. And secondly, because the world doesn’t care that much. I’m not saying it should. I mean, I wish it would, but I don’t think it does. And I don’t know how to change that and I don’t think that’s my mission. I don’t think that’s what I set out to do in the first place.”

Does he know now, after all this, after all these wars, and all these photographs, what it is that he set out to do?

“Frankly, no. But you do set yourself on a certain path. And you choose the path depending on where you come from, on what happened to you, on where you grew up and so on. And





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where we grew up – here in South Africa in the '70s and '80s – our lives were quite circumscribed. There were a lot of barriers.

“I remember taking pictures for the first time – I think it was during the mid-'80s – and I was quite conscious of the fact that the only reason I wanted to take pictures was because the camera enabled me to cross those barriers. It was only at a later point that I became interested in the pictures themselves, whatever import they might have built in my life.”

And does the work of a photojournalists ultimately have an impact on the world?

“I think it does to some extent. People become aware of wars and mayhem in distant place because of journalists. But the question is, I suppose, to what extent do they become aware, and how accurate is the information they are given.

“Yet, if there is an event or catastrophe, we wouldn't hear about it unless certain journalists – and I'm not one of them – told us what was happening.”

As photojournalism goes, Tillim's pictures are remarkably oblique. They wear neither their content nor their hearts on their sleeves. The familiar, rather direct language of African photojournalism is absent. The starving baby, the child-soldier and the voting elder are replaced for the most part with almost abstract images.

A strange decontextualisation happens, in which the image and its meaning transcend their historical specificity. And Tillim, in the process, breaches the gap between photojournalism and fine art.

In one picture, for example, we look through a cracked windscreen on to mountains in Afghanistan. In the corner of the picture a figure is walking along the same road being travelled by the photographer.

GUY TILLIM

This is, in fact, the road between Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif and the picture was taken in 1996. It is a simple and extraordinary image, the intricate cracks of the windscreen given a near religious beauty by the glinting sunlight.

As I page through the catalogue for Tillim's *Departures* show and think about my conversation with him, this cracked windscreen comes to represent a rather obvious metaphor for photographers and, specifically, for Tillim himself.

The rock – or bullet – that must have caused the damage has left a dark centre of densely fractured glass that looks like a pupil, and the cracks that radiate from it give the impression of an iris. So it is an eye – the photographer's eye – and it is also a barrier, a boundary.

After more than 20 years of using his camera to cross borders, he cannot cross that final frontier. He can visit these places but he cannot stay, will not stay. He cannot walk in the shoes of another man or woman. He cannot break through the shatterproof glass, even for the split second during which the image is snapped up. And the photograph feels like a realisation. It feels like Guy Tillim's road to Damascus.

Of course, this is my interpretation and Tillim might be irked with this reading. But regardless of actual truth, the metaphor resounds.

I ask him what emotional toll his travels and images have taken. "We are all affected by these things. We're affected by the war in the Congo, whether it's by refugees arriving in our country or by not being able to trade goods with our neighbours. And we're affected in other ways, psychologically, spiritually. And I think these have been interesting boundaries to cross, as a person. And in so doing, I might find within myself some moral courage.

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“But I’m not so sure anymore. I don’t regret anything. I don’t feel scarred. In a strange way, I feel privileged to have been allowed to see these things by the people that are undergoing them.” He says it quietly, truthfully and stresses that he is no gung-ho photographer, that he doesn’t regularly go to the centre of Africa’s hot-spots packing his camera like a revolver.

But I don’t quite believe that Tillim bears no scars from his vocation. It’s not that I think he’s lying, I just think that maybe he’s found some degree of peace with the damage and the contradictions central to his work.

“I’m a tourist in these places,” he says. “I don’t live there. And I’m struck by that gulf between me and the people who live there. And there’s really not much way of crossing that. Unless you take sides and become part of that situation. And I’ve never somehow had the inclination or, perhaps, the courage.

“I think a lot is made of journalists who move through this valley of the shadow of death. But they’re there for such short periods. And the extent to which they move through it varies enormously. I’m not a war correspondent. And I’d hate you to think that.

“You’re doing a job and there are certain parts that require some courage, yes. But it’s not that you’re ducking bullets or missiles all the time. Mostly, the worst part about these trips into places where people are having a rough time, is coping with your own doubt. About who you are, and about the situation. And that’s probably the hardest part.”

In the midst of all this uncertainty, this dearth of conclusions, I take recourse in some of Tillim’s own words in the foreword in *Departures*. “Of course, there is always this: To change what is ugly and brutal into something sublime and re-

GUY TILLIM

demptive. So I have photographs I like for reasons I have come to distrust.”

Once, we believed that cameras could capture truth. And sometimes, occasionally, almost by mistake, they do.

Hugh Masekela

Still Jivin' and Shakin'

(2002)

Hugh Masekela is one of South Africa's most enduring musical talents, his career intimately connected to the cultural and political history of South Africa. I spoke to him about the complexities of South African life and the ways in which our minds, hearts and listening habits are colonised by commercial considerations.

Possibly because he has been around for so long, and been so commercially successful, there are many who would reduce Hugh Masekela to the status of a cultural cliché, someone who has given into their own Disneyfication.

But if you've witnessed a performance from Masekela recently, the untruth of this suggestion is self-evident. Masekela on stage is a man on fire, bringing to the air the howl that US poet Alan Ginsberg used to describe the core of pain and joy as it is broadcast through the medium of jazz.

Of course, Masekela's oeuvre extends well beyond jazz, but it has at its heart the abstracted, discordant notes of truth that characterise the finest jazz musicians.

And his rough, sweet, compassionate voice is so much bigger



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than a single human being. Like his musical compatriot Miriam Makeba, Masekela has lived in the slipstream of history's river.

But while he is an icon of the 20th century, that doesn't stop him blowing his mouth off about anything and everything. When I ask him later, if he would ever enter politics as a politician, he says that he'd be taken out almost instantly. People would not be too fond of his unpalatable truth if spoken from Parliament.

On his latest album, *Time*, Masekela chastises those who have been privileged by the existence of apartheid for their uncharitable and ungenerous response to what has happened here since. Towards the end of our interview Masekela is talking about the white businesses who have benefited so much, first from apartheid, and then from liberation. "They didn't even come and say '*dankie kaffirs*'."

On a more gentle note, I asked Masekela about one of the problems facing South African music – the fact that so many young black South African kids don't want to be seen listening to what is viewed as their parents' music. So people like Masekela, and also Busi Mhlongo and Madala Kunene, so alone on their own cutting edges, aren't being listened to by the very people who most deserve that legacy.

Hugh Masekela: There is something skewed about that. I think that it's marketing's fault. Because I studied music as a kid – and I've been a musician since I was five – I still view music as a child. And I think that thing has to do with South Africa and the international markets trying to get niche markets, and marketing situations for the youth where they have to wear certain clothes, and listen to certain music, do certain drugs and have a certain language.

HUGH MASEKELA

Which I think is a bunch of poppycock. I think that music is either enjoyable to a person or not. But people shouldn't be prevented from listening to all kinds of music.

I think it's a snobbery and a kind of cultural racism to say 'I don't want to listen to this because it's for kids'.

I participate in the arts with all kinds of people. I have the most eclectic collection of music, which is international – because music is sound. And I don't hear any children who are not teenagers yet say 'I want to listen to music for children'.

I have a very big youth-and-child, – right-down-to infant – following. Because they like what I'm doing. Because I draw most of my material from the origins and traditions of this country. And it just sits naturally with everybody because they can identify with it. And I think that I transcend all that bullshit marketing.

I think people are misled, kids are misled. One of the worst things that is happening is that kids are the only people now targeted for listening to and buying music. They use their parent's money and their parents are being shunted aside. But their parents have money to spend, so from the industry's point of view, I think it's a stupid, greedy move. I think that niche marketing brings out prejudices in people that wouldn't otherwise happen.

Originally people used to listen to everything together. Music is a family thing – it should be enjoyed together as a family. My kids listen to everything. And the stuff that they play for me that I don't like, I just laugh and say 'I can't get with that'. But I don't say 'Hey! That's music for kids'.

Peter Machen: So this niche marketing is really another kind of colonialism?

HM: It's capitalism. It's like fashion. One of the reasons why this country has such low cultural self-esteem is because we've

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only been sold foreign values and we are plagued about who we are. What we should really do is appreciate everything, including our own shit. And there's a major, major market for who we are, but we're not using it. So as a result, when people come to this country, they bypass the people and go straight to the animals. The problem is that we are imitations of other people.

PM: I think that's what I meant by colonialism.

HM: Yeah. It's also economic and financial brainwashing. That's what it is really. But we can knock down these doors only if we look inward. It doesn't mean we shouldn't look outwards, but the reason why we're so consumed so much by foreign culture is because we don't have our own national mirror to compare it to.

PM: When you were in exile, in America and around Africa, did you ever worry that you might lose your roots, your sense of being South African.

HM: I couldn't. Because I was steeped in it. I was brought up as a South African and I was, like, cooked in South African culture. And not only at home – I grew up in township jazz bands – I ran with township gangsters and township babes. And I also went to the country, and learnt how to milk, and how to have cows, and how to praise my totem.

PM: What year did you leave South Africa?

HM: 1960. I was 20 years old.

PM: Did you think you would have to wait so long to return?

HM: When I graduated from Manhattan School of Music I was ready to come back. But I also had a loud mouth, as you can tell. And Harry Belafonte said to me, 'You know, Mandela and all those people are already in jail. And with a mouth like yours – nobody even knows you – they're going to kill your ass. So what you'd better try and do is make a name for yourself, and when you talk about your country, people will listen. And maybe in the

long run, you might, as an old man, go back home’.

Of course I came back when I was 51. But we didn’t think we’d ever come back because of the draconian intransigence of the last government. We didn’t think they’d ever dream of giving up. But what was ironic or paradoxical was that when they did give up, it was because of the pressure of the international arts community that had been galvanised originally by people like Miriam Makeba. And the arts community pressured its countries all over the world, saying ‘we can’t be friendly with those people’.

And then there’s Paul Simon, who was mostly criticised in this country for playing with South African musicians and didn’t come and perform here. But we played to 10-million people with him all over the world. And those 10-million people had never heard about South Africa before that. And the show that we did – *Graceland* – was a very, very radically militant show.

To a great extent the arts has a lot to do with showing to the world what was happening in South Africa. And helped the world to turn around and see South Africa. And the Afrikaner hierarchy had to say ‘listen, we want to make a deal’ – a deal that was not that advantageous to the oppressed, but shit, things are not as bad as they were.

But of course, there’s never been a time in the history of the humanity when a privileged community said ‘listen, sorry that we made so much money off your backs – here’s 500 trillion to say we’re sorry.’ And I’m not expecting that to happen. But at least we’ve got somewhere to start from.

And I think, that maybe not in my generation, but I think that your generation will probably see the beginnings of the end of the old bullshit.

But you know, people never change completely.

Matthew Herbert

Sound Doctor

(2003)

I spoke to electronic musician Matthew Herbert about the future of popular music and why his love for Missy Elliot is so unsatisfying.

I've been listening to Herbert's sublime album *Bodily Functions* for the last year or so. And I'd thought the album was a small, obscure gem that had made it through the system.

I didn't know that Matthew Herbert has been one of the most prolific musical forces of the last decade. I didn't know that he also worked under the monikers of Wish Mountain, Radioboy and Doctor Rockit, producing works on different musical fringes and selling bucketloads of albums in the process. Here is a musician who has managed to achieve substantial success without even attempting to engage in the fame game.

Herbert rejects the notion of celebrity. "What for?" is his response. He's perfectly happy to exist on the fringe, selling nearly half a million albums thus far, entirely on his own terms and his own record label. He owns the copyright to his own work and reckons that he's managed to construct a commercial career entirely free from compromise. Which, in the world of recorded



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music, is an extremely rare achievement. Additionally, although his central passion is the sampler, he never samples anybody else's tunes, insisting on always providing sounds fresh from the real world, be they the notes from a flugelhorn or the rustling of a packet of chips.

I spoke to Herbert a few days before he arrived in South Africa to perform at the North Sea Jazz Festival with musical partners in crime Phil Purnell and Danni Siciliano as well as Dave O'Higgins and Pete Wraight, all of whom will perform as the Matthew Herbert band.

Peter Machen: I'd like to know more about your aversion to using existing sounds.

Matthew Herbert: To me it's a perfectly logical thing. I don't understand why I should even consider using sounds that have been used before. When I could use any sound in the world, why would I use a sound that my next-door-neighbour has already chosen. Even if I fail, my quest is to be original and that's my starting point. If it's a sound that's already been recorded, then I'm taking five steps back before I take one step forward.

PM: Do you ever play to audiences who simply don't get what you're up to?

MH: I don't really know. You need to ask the audiences that. I did a show as Radioboy last year where I was working with McDonalds and Coca Cola and some other products of society that are destructive forces, and sort of destroying them on stage and using the sounds of a Big Mac meal to make a live piece of music. And I got asked a lot about what the audience thought about it. And to be honest, it's not really something that concerns me, in the sense that the music is obvious to me. I'm trying to go about these things in sometimes very obvious ways,

MATTHEW HERBERT

sometimes very subtle ways. And you can only do that and hope an audience understands or responds or discovers something. I mean you can't create something that's easy for an audience. You know – you don't want to dumb things down. I think that's the problem with a lot of culture.

Take Iraq, for example. George Bush is trying to simplify the situation into one or two instances, saying Saddam Hussein has ignored a particular UN resolution. And yet you look at a country like Israel and you see that Israel has ignored 30 or 40 resolutions. So it's not as simple as that. There is no simple reason for going to war with Iraq. Because it's a political war, for political reasons. So in terms of an audience, I just do what I do, and try not to make it obtuse. And just hope they get it. I mean that's all you can do really.

PM: In South Africa, you're known only as Herbert and not by your other musical nom-de plumes. You've said that the context for Herbert is house music, moving in the direction of jazz. I'm interested as to whether you think house as a genre has got any life left in it?

MH: (laughs) Well Puff Daddy's just about to release a house record, isn't he? I don't know. I still have a feeling that it's going to become important again whether we like it or not. But house music as a form – a heavy repetitive bass drum – I think that's a very cross-cultural, universal phenomenon. I think that's something that speaks to people across a whole lot of cultures.

And so I think it will always exist. Whether it's important as a political form or even as an original musical form remains to be seen. Because there is very rarely any context for house music. It's just happy to be a soundtrack to dark nights in clubs and flashing strobes. It doesn't really exist in a political or social context. There aren't any anti-war pieces of house music, for

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example, or anti-George Bush songs. It's all very "love all, let's-come-together-and-dance".

PM: So do you think we're going to see another kind of original musical movement in the next few years, or do you think we'll be subject to revisions and revivals?

MH: It's very difficult to tell. But I do think that music has got very, very stuck in its genre and it's become very commodified. Record sales are dropping off a huge amount, partly I think because records are just not as good as they should be or as they used to be.

Think about the art of an album, for example. Think about *Hunky Dory* by David Bowie or *Pet Sounds* by Bryan Wilson. Or Massive Attack, who have, in the past at least, spent a lot of time actually creating an album, a listening experience.

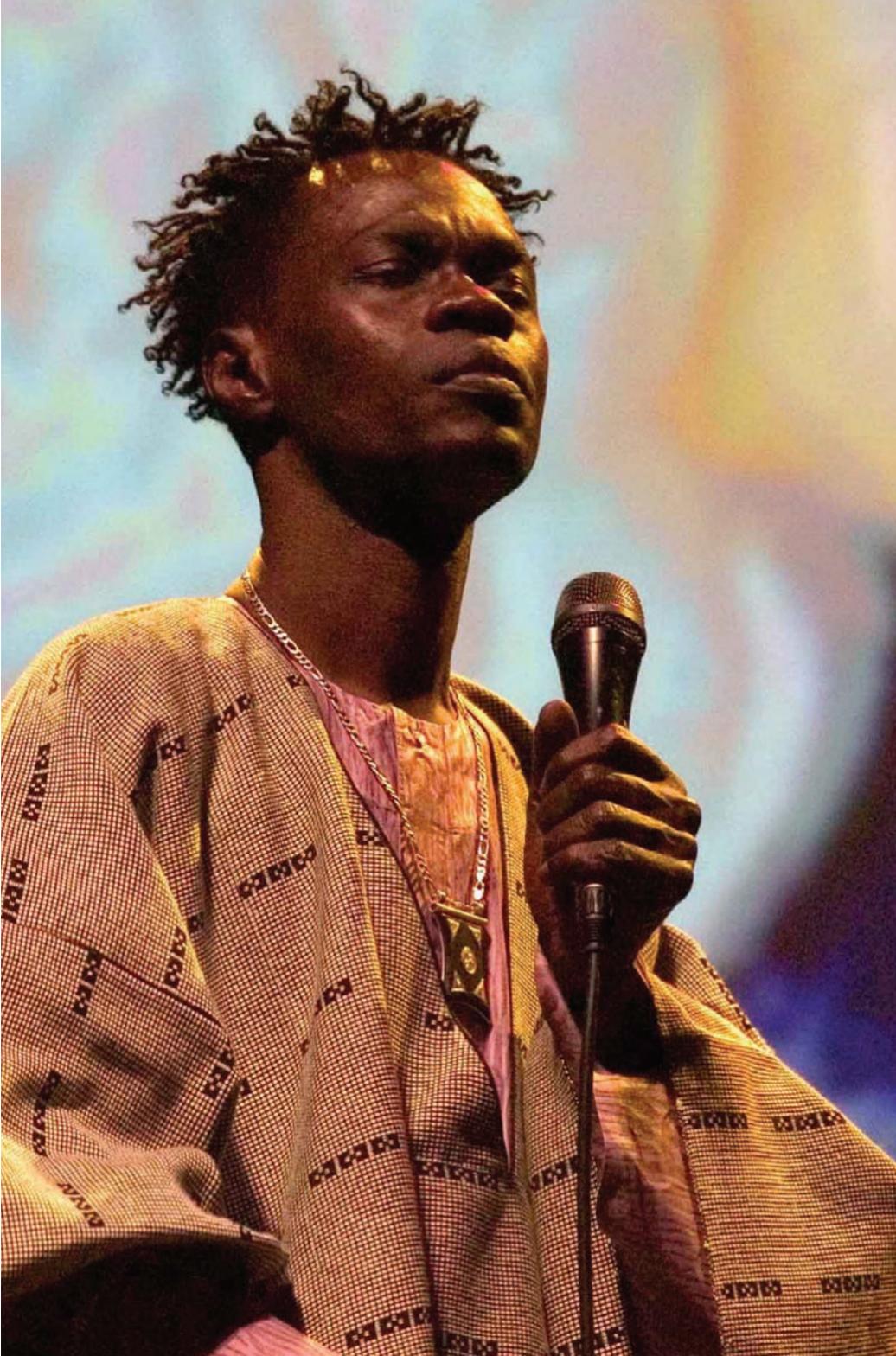
Whereas the modern way of doing things isn't as satisfying. Like R&B, like Missy Elliot, who has great singles and then the albums are just rushed through and don't have any consistency to them. And there are hip-hop albums that have got like 25, 27, 30 tracks on them. So I think there's definitely room for much more considered album work. I'd hope that that in turn would lead to more considered musical forms and new ideas. Whether that materialises or not remains to be seen.

PM: I know personally, I find it hard to find new music now. Apart from a few things that get given to me, I'm going back to a lot of old stuff simply because the new stuff isn't satisfying me.

MH: I know what you mean. I think it's the same for a lot of people. I think it's partly because music's just not saying anything these days. You listen to Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* and it's this amazing piece of music. And it's anti-war as well, it has a political message. There's nothing like that today. I love

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Missy Elliot for example. But she's saying absolutely nothing. *Get Yr Freak On*. What is that? At a time when America's becoming a new empire and using force around the world, you have a large and influential part of American culture just talking about money. I don't think that's very useful or very satisfying for the listener.



Baaba Maal

A World in a Voice

(2005)

One of Africa's most recognised musical talents, Senegalese superstar Baaba Maal has long used his voice to affect change in Africa. I spoke to him about taking his voice to the people.

“Baaba Maal! Baaba Maal!”

The occasion is the Awesome Africa music festival. One of Africa's most celebrated musical stars is being called to the stage of the Playhouse Opera by the members of his ten-piece band. There is something about the way the various musicians are placed around the stage that is reminiscent of a Shakespearean court. But when Baaba Maal arrives on stage, he isn't like a prince. He is a prince, resplendent in a purple robe and resonating imperial presence. He instantly takes command of the stage. Everything yields before him and when he opens his mouth to sing, entire worlds emerge. A new Eden, a portal to paradise, a dark star immersed in light. Although he is approaching fifty, onstage he looks half that age. And, like so many musical superstars, he is both diminutive and androgynous, broadcasting

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a mesmerising pan-sexual energy. By the time he exits the stage nearly two hours later, the room is on fire.

When I meet him in his dressing room after the concert, in the labyrinthine depths of the Playhouse backstage area, Maal is just finishing his post-gig dinner. His hands are smeared with the various greases of the mini smorgasbord prepared for him. He washes his hands and we start to talk.

And the superstar, still undoubtedly a prince, leans back into a matter-of-fact discussion, a Marlboro held intermittently in his hand. It's rare that someone this famous and this accomplished, is so relaxed and humble, particularly after such an electric performance. No axes to grind, no ego to polish, no agendas to further, Maal talks honestly and easily about the road that brought him here.

He always knew, he says, that this was to be his fate. "I tried to hide from it, but I knew." And while in print this might bear a glimmer of arrogance, for Maal it is a simple fact. He was born to do exactly what he does. And watching him on stage, you can see precisely what he means. He might be the very picture of performer-as-deity, but, as is often the case, that divinity exists because he is a conduit for something else, something that is more than human and larger than himself. So if he seems god-like on stage, it is because his very voice is suffused with divinity. And he can only say thank you when I tell him what he must have been told ten thousand times before.

Maal is a youth emissary for the United Nations. In this capacity, his chief role is to inform and educate the youth of Senegal and beyond about HIV and Aids. He had been road-tripping around the region with his band and other local musicians for some time doing exactly that, when the UN decided to piggy-back on his activities in the fight against the virus. Senegal now

has the virus under control and only a relatively small proportion of the population are infected. But rather than seeing that as a reason for complacency, Maal recognises the importance of maintaining vigilance.

I ask him if this position as an Aids educator ever brings him into conflict with his Muslim faith. He nods and raises his eyebrows in the affirmative. As well as educating the youth, he has also been helping to bring Senegal's older population into the frontline of the sexual revolution made necessary by Aids. He says that because of the respect for traditional music that has defined his career, he has the ear of many older people in his community, and so they too listen to him when he tells them about the virus.

He tells me about a meeting he was having with a group of Muslim men during his first educational tour. "I know it's not easy to talk about sex and all these things", he says. "But the first time we were doing this educational tour, I organised a meeting in the afternoon. And on the hour of going to prayer, one of them said something really interesting. They were all saying it was time to go to the Mosque to pray. And one of them said 'Listen! You have to sit down. Because what he's talking about is about trying to find a way to save lives. And what we do in the mosque is teach people to make better lives. So I think this is the same thing, and I think we should stay and listen'. And I really liked this response from them."

Maal and company still have a long way to go. There is a continent to educate, and the UN youth programme in which he is participating only comes to an end in 2015, by which time it is hoped that poverty and disease in Africa will have been substantially reduced, part-and-parcel of the broader Aids programme.

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To this end, Maal talks about the importance of reaching all those who fall outside of the global media network – people who do not understand English and who have no access to television or even radio. These are the people to whom he feels most compelled to take his musical education.

It is an education that moves beyond Aids, to discussions of the caste system, of ethnic grouping, and of how young people want to be free of all these things. When Maal sings, his audience know that as well as being submerged in beauty, they will find advice about their own lives. He says that he can't run away from the political approach he has taken.

Besides, he says, with a determined grin, "I like it. And it's very important". When you get the chance to shift the world, even if only slightly, you may as well run with it. "Music can't change the world", he says, "But at least you can make people stop and listen."

On a less vital note, many of Maal's songs have been given substantial remix treatment. I ask him how he feels about this. "I love it", he tells me. "I'm a very curious man, especially when it comes to music. I always want to know what's the next step – if someone remixes my music, I want see what's going to happen. It's like a science experiment...I like it. And for me, music is not something that stays in one place and belongs to just one community – it's for all the communities. So to see a DJ take one of my songs, I want to know exactly what he can do with it. Some people do great things, others do things that I can't stand." And he admits that he been on the dance floor and danced to remixes of his own songs. Which must be a pretty cool experience, even for the great Baaba Maal.

For Maal, these remixes don't represent a different musical world but are instead a continuum of the same thing. It's all

BAABA MAAL

music to move your body to, and it all started in Africa, as Leftfield so insistently tells us. So remixing Maal for the dance floor represents a complete cycle of history. He is currently working with hip-hop and rock band The Roots in Philadelphia on an album about which he is very enthusiastic, mixing his take on tradition with their cutting-edge freshness. This is just the latest in a series of collaborations with many of the world's finest musical talents, ranging from Brian Eno to Taj Mahal. And by the time you read this, Maal will have worked with Jabu Khanyile in Johannesburg.

He says that he'd like to work with "everyone in South Africa" and laments the fact that he's too late to work with Miriam Makeba. I suggest that Durban's own Busi Mhlongo would be an amazing counterpoint to his voice and he agrees.

We all get up and exit the dressing room. I leave Maal to make his way to back to his hotel just across the street. Tomorrow, he's going to explore Durban, something he's quite excited about. And I think of this sincere and laconic prince, with or without his entourage, with or without his purple robes, walking around this other African city for a single day, like a strangely distorted reflection of a dream.

Vusi Mahlasela

From Mamelodi with Love

(2006)

South African superstar Vusi Mahlasela is one of the planet's most compassionate and resonant musical voices. I spoke to him to about the state of the rapidly warming world.

On his latest album, 2006's *Naledi Ya Tsela*, Vusi Mahlasela cries out to the world, singing in tongues. The title means 'Guiding Star' in English, and in its mix of languages, musics and planetary concerns, it is a truly global album, giving an emphatic shift of meaning to the term 'World Music' – music of the world about the world. Recorded on "farms, in lounges and other places" with legendary producer Lloyd Ross, the album features the cream of South African musical talent, from Chris Letcher to Lesego Rampolong, Mabi Thobejane to Ladysmith Black Mambazo and Dave Matthews, with Mahlasela at the centre.

Mahlasela says that people have criticised the album as kitschy. And I know what they mean – and indeed Mahlasela also know what they mean. The album is gorgeously produced and the songs are very deeply beautiful in quite obvious ways. But immediately beneath that shimmering surface is a world of

profound substance infused with a humanity that is tangibly spiritual, both in the music and in Mahlasela's heart-breakingly beautiful voice.

And so when Vusi talks about his God and his religion, I don't take him up on the matter, because I know, from his music and from seeing him sing, that the God which he is so clearly channelling is an inclusive God, more concerned with spirituality and morality than with dogma. And I know in an unstrange way, that Vusi Mahlasela's God is also my god, despite the fact that I profess not to have one – at least not in any conventional sense.

I open our conversation by talking about the fact that, on *Naledi Ya Tsela*, like much of his music, there is a central concern with love and morality. These themes, made easily evident in the lyrics and the sleeve notes, are overriding. There's a whole lot of love. Mahlasela acknowledges this but emphasises that there are a lot of songs that have much more globally oriented messages. "So there are quite a lot of different subjects. My interest is at heart education so I want to educate in my songs." But this education remains a moral and spiritual reaffirmation, rather than a purely intellectual one, despite the fact that his morality is often expressed in the form of critiques of economic and social systems.

On 'Chamber of Justice', he sings "In the distance I hear a rumble – the fall of Rome". And in his intro notes to the CD, he talk about people being "guided by the star to bring back morality to the global village". Does he think that as a global society we have in fact lost our moral way? "Very much so," is his reponse. "Because there have been, you know, some leaders who, in the name of power, can influence other people to be like them.





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“At the same time, the global village is filled with a lot of religious beliefs in which people follow in our traditions and things like that, and also wanting to maintain their languages, their culture. We are immigrating to a global village but the question is how much do we want to belong?”

He talks about the “floods and fires, tsunamis and storms” which we are experiencing as a result of global warming, and which he says are a warning from God. “A lot of people are going to relocate, and move more livable places. This is the reality now, and it’s pushing us even more into a global village where we have to, in some way, live together. But when we live together some people say ‘you know what – we can live together, but I still want to speak my language, still want to eat my food’. So there will need to be quite a lot of compromise, you know, and we will have to learn to learn from each other and honour each other.”

I ask him if he thinks that we are going to survive as a species on this planet. Does he think that we will still be here in 100 years time? And, as many people on the planet might, he invokes prophecy. “I don’t know what’s going to happen to the human species in that time period. But I do think that there is a new world that has been prophesied from the bible, and so I see that new world appearing in the future. But I think it will take at least a million years to get to that world. So now, I think God is sort of giving us a message. There is still time for people to change. And I’m not trying to force the people into changing. I think we’ve been given grace. Given grace, in that we can change our ways and go back to morality, and try to find a way that we can find more grace and more mercy from God.”

Mahlasela thinks that if messages keep on knocking on people’s ears and they hear something about morality, it will help to

counter the dark forces on the planet. “You know, all the bad things on television, the explicit sex that you see, music videos with women dancing half naked – things like that. In some way the evil is playing around a bit and laughing, so we need to challenge the evil in that way”.

And does he really think that we are experiencing the Fall of Rome right now? “Yes, I think we are.” He stresses that changes takes place all the time, every minute, every second.

Mahlasela talks much about the glory of God. Of course on this planet there are other gods too. And so I ask him a simple question. Does he think that it’s possible to have true faith without having a religious belief?

“Very much so. If a man is thirsty, he has to go and drink water. That’s faith. And when you don’t see water around you, you’ll just go travel to look for water. That’s faith. And so everything that you believe , will come to its manifestation. Its’ like a constant prayer. So everyone has faith, in all walks of life.”

Naledi Ye Tsela feels very much to me like a global record, like a planetary record. Was that part of the intention? “Definitely so. There is that term ‘World Music’. What is world music? We are making music all the time with people everywhere, all over the world.”

But on the other hand, he says, the songs themselves were like a guiding star. “The songs chose where they wanted to go.” He says that it was supposed to be an acoustic album, but the songs invited the layered texture that is so evident in the music. And for those who miss the rawer feel of some of his earlier work, Mahlasela says, “I want my music to be accessible to every listener. I don’t want a particular audience.” His says that the different places he travels are a major influence on his work, as is the resulting poly-linguistic approach. “I don’t have a problem

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with singing in different languages, because it's a way of making my music more accessible”.

He says that he is prepared to take audiences wherever they want to go, but I think he simply takes them with him to the place that he was going anyway, which is, in a way, everywhere. And regardless of whether you understand the lyrics, the song somehow remains resonant. Importantly for Mahlasela, he invariably explains his songs, both in his CD notes and in his live performances, though stopping short of pure didacticism.

He talks about the people who invariably approach him after gigs, who say that even though they may not understand the words, they nonetheless achieve an understanding of his message. “And it's an incredible feeling – that music can do that.”

I ask whether, by this point in his career, he sees himself as an African musician or as a global musician. “Well, I don't know,” is his response. “That is not for me to judge. People like yourself can make that judgement.” Instead, he says, “music just comes to me and I can only try to do justice to that. I don't limit myself or say that I can't mix a classical piece with mbaquanga. It is how the music flows through the spirit. That's how God made me – and sometimes it has to be more like a ball of fire.”

“So I don't censor myself. Whatever comes, it can be a gospel song or whatever. Whoever says that it's kitschy, that's their problem. I reach out. And people who love my songs understand my mission.”

When I speak to Mahlasela, he is about to leave for Germany to perform at a festival there. He will be playing with musicians from the United States, as well as with Ian Herman of Tananas. He also has an 8-piece band with whom he will be performing at Awesome Africa. And he has a ten-piece band in Sweden that plays with him in Europe. He is also doing a project with

VUSI MAHLASELA

a group of musicians from Mali and the Ivory Coast in a project called Acoustic Africa. In addition he has done a number of soundtracks, both for film and television, and is currently working with filmmaker Junaid Ahmed (who also shares song writing credits on two songs on Naledi Ye Tsela) on a docu-drama called *More Than Just a Game* about soccer on Robben Island. Mahlasela says that working with such a wealth of talents feeds his own musical energy. He says, with some degree of understatement, “I don’t find myself stranded, workwise.”

But Mahlasela’s ongoing success owes virtually nothing to South African radio stations. He talks about the situation in South Africa “where radio doesn’t play our music”. “And I’m not going to worry or cry or whatever. Let them continue doing those things to our country, these ‘payola’ things. Like on the first song on the album, *Jabula*, I mention payola. I sing in Zulu “How long are you going to be paying Payola instead of *Lobola* [dowry]? When are you going to pay *lobola* because you’ve been paying payola for a long time.”

He thinks that there needs to be some kind of healthy debate about real local content on South African airwaves. He talks about a recent story in the *Daily Sun* about musicians having to pay to be played on the radio – an ongoing institutionalised bribery. “I think that it has to be out in the open. Because this is uncalled for.”

What is important to Mahlasela is that wherever he goes people love his music. And, recalling the notion of karma that appears in most religions in various guises, he says, talking about our radio stations, “At some point it will catch up them.”

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, I went, on a luminous Saturday night to the nightclub, 330, for the very first time. I was a farm boy from Hillcrest in as much as Charlize Theron was a farm girl from Benoni, and 330 may as well have been Hollywood for all the relative glamour it contained.

This was before the tidal waves of house music and its drugged up children hit these and every other shore. Back then, the intoxicants of choice were diet tablets, supplemented with the rare and occasional acid tab. And, most integrally and deliciously, a bring-your-own bar, where you may well have brought your own but were more likely to insist that that bottle of Jack behind the bar was yours, something more often than not affirmed by the barman.

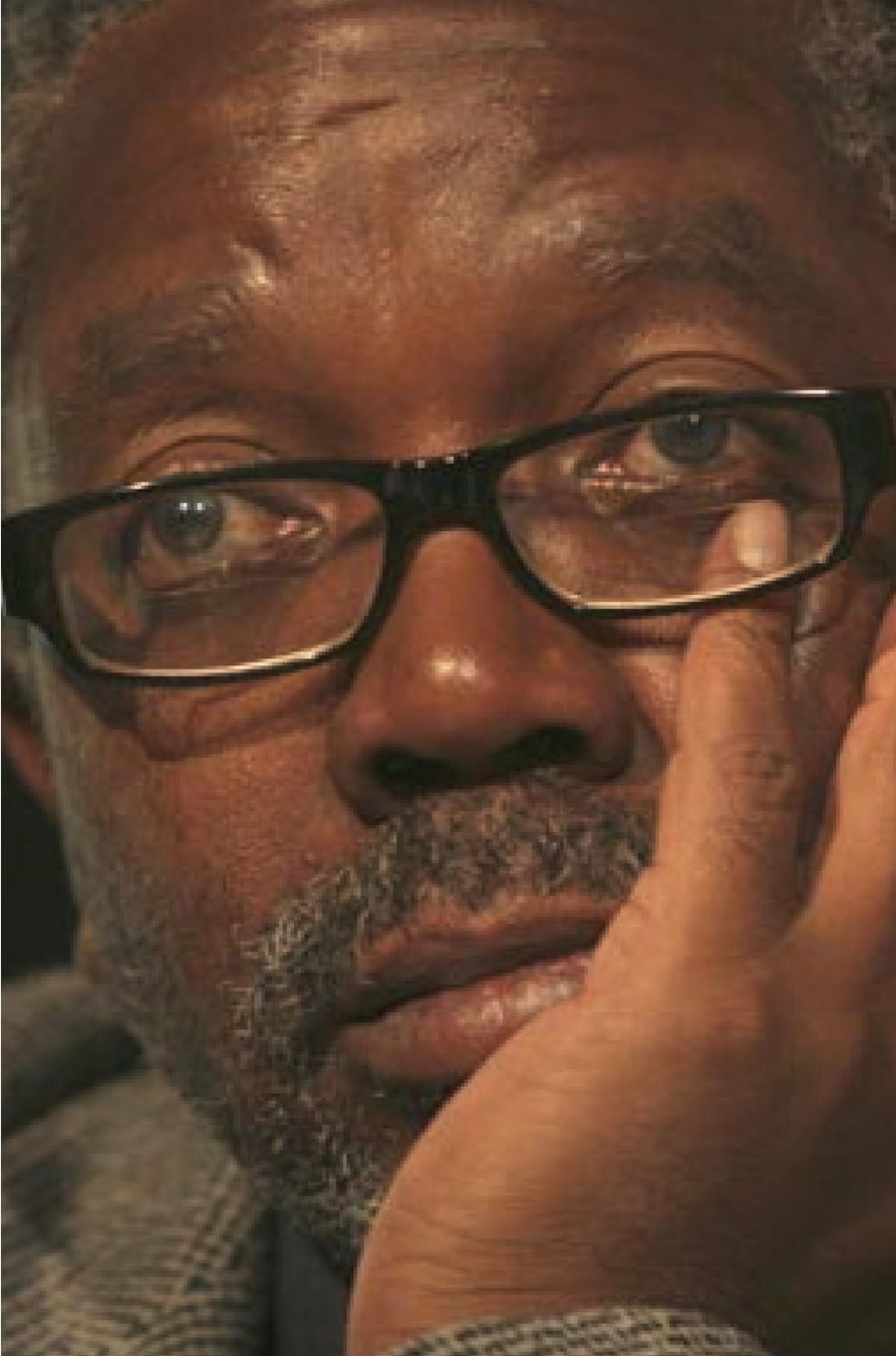
But if 330 was an epiphany, Play, the club that was housed in the same venue on Friday nights, was a revelation. Many of those very same Saturday nighters extinguished their '80s gaudiness on Friday nights in favour of archetypal coffin-kid style – any colour you like as long as it's black. And while the intoxication options were much the same as Saturday nights, the hairstyles differed. I remember one particular stout and astute Player whose head was shaved except for a bizarre Mohican around the perimeter of his scalp that was painstakingly dipped in sugarwater until it stood vertical. And the straight boys wore skirts and tartan kilts, a singular salute to '80s fashion and the one exception to the rule of black.

And at the centre of all this was a bald pixie of a man wearing winklepickers and clothes that might not actually have had the

Till the Morning Light

designs of a jester but which resembled one absolutely on a conceptual level. That man was a DJ who played some of the most beautiful sets of music I've ever heard. His name was Helge and he became – for better or for worse – godfather to an entire generation of alternative kids, and, for a time, clown prince of the Durban underground. This was the late '80s in South Africa and throughout the country, if you had the privilege of being white, simply wearing black was a sign of rebellion. Helge's colourful garb in the face of that monochrome rebellion made him even more of an icon and, in his very existence, he showed how possible it was to live outside the parameters of apartheid South Africa.

Of course all that changed. As well as apartheid's dismantling, the 1990s were also witness to the entire alternative genre going mainstream as grunge and its bedfellows went overground. But the songs that Helge played are still barely ever played on radio, despite the continual embrace of retro by mainstream music media. And while many still consign alternative music to the scrapheap of miserabilism, Helge could always find the hidden gems of absolute existential beauty and mix them into each other so that they shone like diamonds.



John Matshikiza

Living in a Compromised Reality

(2001)

The late John Matshikiza was famous for his newspaper column, 'With The Lid Off', named after the ground-breaking column his father Todd wrote in Drum magazine in the late '50s and early '60s. I spoke to Matshikiza about languages, literacy and writing in a post-apartheid South Africa.

Like thousands of others, I have read John Matshikiza's 'With The Lid Off' columns in the *Mail&Guardian* over the last few years. In that time, he has become one of my favourite columnists, someone to take seriously despite, or because of, the fact that he has never taken himself too seriously. Although the things he says are often quite revolutionary, his voice is one of honesty, not of forthrightness.

And the grace and simple, sometimes clumsy humanity contained in his journalistic voice creates a non-confrontational springboard from which we may jump into his world, which is also our world. At all times, he is remarkably balanced and maintains an extraordinary pragmatism, whether he is discussing crime, race, language, the Congo or the sprawling smorgas-

NOTES FROM THE SOUTH

board of life that calls itself Johannesburg.

Matshikiza was born in Jo'burg in 1954 and grew up in exile in Lusaka and London, where he trained in drama and worked in theatre, television and film as an actor, director and writer. In 1991, as liberation seemed to be approaching, he returned to South Africa where he worked as a writer and occasionally as a director.

With The Lid Off is also the title of a collection of writings from Matshikiza and his father, Todd Matshikiza, whose columns, also of the same name, appeared in *Drum* magazine in the late 1950s. The older Matshikiza, who died in 1968, was also a seminal figure on the South African cultural landscape. His irreverent, densely sprawling *Drum* pieces became a benchmark for free-spirited South African writing. He also composed the music for *King Kong*, the stage musical, which chronicled, in faux operatic style, the rise and fall of boxer Ezekiel 'King Kong' Dlamini.

It is this closeness to history and historic figures that is part of the fuel that feeds Matshikiza's literary fire. But this political and social viscerality would be of little use without his substantial skills. But only as I started reading *With The Lid Off* did I realise the true extent of his talents, his genius in fact. Compiled back-to-back in a single book, his short columns make compulsive reading material, each a delicate short story, the best of them as gripping and strangely elevating as Raymond Carver donning Hunter S Thompson's political hat.

Reading the book, despite all the violent and contradictory contexts in which they are written and in which we all live, brought a sweet smile to my face at the end of each piece, a small joyous wink at the things that make us human here in South Africa. This is the gift that was passed down from father

to son. And it contains a wisdom that is a gift to us all.

Interviewing Matshikiza is not such an easy task, however. For one thing, he has written so much about his own consciousness that in a sense, all questions have already been answered. And at one point, when I asked him how he felt about the amalgamation of the african national anthem, *Nkosi Sikile' iAfrika* with *Die Stem*, the national anthem of the old South Africa, I realised as I asked the question, that not only did he write a piece on it late last year, but that my very phrasing was taken almost straight from his column. It is a slightly uncomfortable moment and for a second it feels like I am brown-nosing my subject. But the fact that I can osmose his words and thought into my own consciousness is proof of how crisp and persuasive his arguments are.

Peter Machen: This whole question of literacy is a huge issue in this country. Do you think that events like Time of the Writer, where you will shortly be speaking, can have any impact on broader literacy?

John Matshikiza: I don't think they possibly can. During the last one I attended, which was last year, I was most disappointed that there were not more university students attending the main events. I was very disturbed by that. And there were a range of excuses given for that, which I think are plausible.

I did one or two school talks, and what is disturbing about that, is how few facilities the secondary school students in the townships, in KwaMashu and so on, have to access literacy. And at the same time, how interested the students are in having more access, but the infrastructure is just not there.

PM: Apart from the very obvious solution of providing resources and infrastructure, what else do you think we can do as

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individuals, as a country, to try to improve literacy levels?

JM: I can only refer you to examples in other parts of the world where there have been massive literacy programmes which have been part of the post-revolutionary obligation. And I don't think that we have that. China, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Chekoslovakia – these are all countries that had very poor infrastructure and very poor education – at the level that we are at now – and which placed education at a very high priority.

PM: That's a great phrase "post-revolutionary obligation". Do you think that those obligations have been met at all in South Africa?

JM: Well, I think that the terrible problem we have in South Africa is that we don't know if we are post-revolutionary or not. And we aren't. We've had a compromise imposed on us. And I think it's that compromise that has obliged the new ruling party to be cautious rather than adventurous.

To go back to the place I grew up in – you can't really call this a revolution. Zambia achieved its independence but there was a clear change, a clear transformation, and a clear transition from one system of government to another. Along with that – with a lot of international support – came a detailed educational policy. The same happened in Zimbabwe. For all we might say about Zimbabwe now, Zimbabweans are very educated people across a broad spectrum, compared to where we are at now in South Africa. The same is true of Tanzania, The same would be true of Kenya, for all of its faults, etc. etc. So, I really feel that we are kind of stuck in a limbo of not daring to go as far as we need to go.

PM: I remember in 1990, I very naively presumed that we would get a new police force, and a new defence force, and a new education department.

JM: Ja, ja.

PM: And nothing.

JM: We still have to fight for them. It's very hard.

PM: Can you speak or write any African languages?

JM: Uh, no.

PM: I presumed not. You left South Africa when you were 10, is that right?

JM: Five.

PM: And do you think you will ever learn Zulu, or Sotho, or Xhosa?

JM: I learn all of them every day in the street all of the time. So I can communicate to a certain degree in all of them, in some of them more than in others, because that is the nature of things. But writing is a different story, because language is very complex and very subtle. And, you know, the mere process of returning to the land of your birth 32 years later, having left at the age of five, imposes a lot of things. And my main issue has been survival, literally. And understanding the environment, and finding my own voice within that environment and dropping other voices.

African languages are very important. I think part of the compromise of the Kempton Park negotiations has been to accept that we should have 11 official languages. Which has given us a lot of question marks. I don't think there's any country in the world that has a situation like this. And, as I think I keep on saying in my pieces, we are not a unique country, but we choose unique solutions which are quite bizarre. I don't know of any country in the world which has 11 official languages. And it confuses issues. It's a very long discussion, Peter.

PM: Sure.

JM: It's true that in the urban areas, let's say in the Rand and the

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Johannesburg area, most people speak four, five, six languages. In KwaZulu-Natal, it's not the case, and in the Eastern Cape, it's not the case, and in the Western Cape, it's not the case. So, partially because of our political compromise, there's no clear decision about what should be an official language and what the official profile of South Africa should be.

For someone like myself, yes – I live in Johannesburg and I have to try and operate in at least four different languages every day. I couldn't possibly write in all of them. Which is a problem. But that also means that there is no written material that goes across all of those languages. So, you know, there are no multilingual newspapers or magazines. Publishing in vernacular languages has pretty much died since 1994, apart from goodwill from publishers. And that is for a number of reasons? Where is the reading public? The reading public is in one language, probably in English.

PM: And Afrikaans.

JM: And Afrikaans. But particularly English, across all racial groups. A country like Zambia has 72 diverse languages. I just came from Burkina Faso. There are 44 very distinct language groups. But the official language, is French. Now what are the choices? Do you reject the formerly colonial language or do you accept it as a unifying force? I don't know what to say, but I think as long as you try and give equal weight to all languages in a country, you can't really focus on what unifying the public is all about.

PM: Can I ask you about how you feel about *Die Stem* being tacked onto *Nkosi*?

JM: I'm appalled by that. *Nkosi Sikilel'* was composed by someone who we have belatedly come to recognise as a national hero, and named streets after him and so on; Enoch Sontonga. It's a

JOHN MATSHIKIZA

beautiful anthem. It might not be the right anthem for South Africa, but since 1912, it has been the anthem of the African National Congress and all of those who support it, and it articulates in a very broad way what we stand for, what we have stood for.

First of all, as the son of a composer, I'm appalled that a composer's work can be tampered with in that way. I just fundamentally feel that this is wrong. Perhaps more importantly, I think the emotion and musicality of *Nkosi Sikilel'* has a long political history.

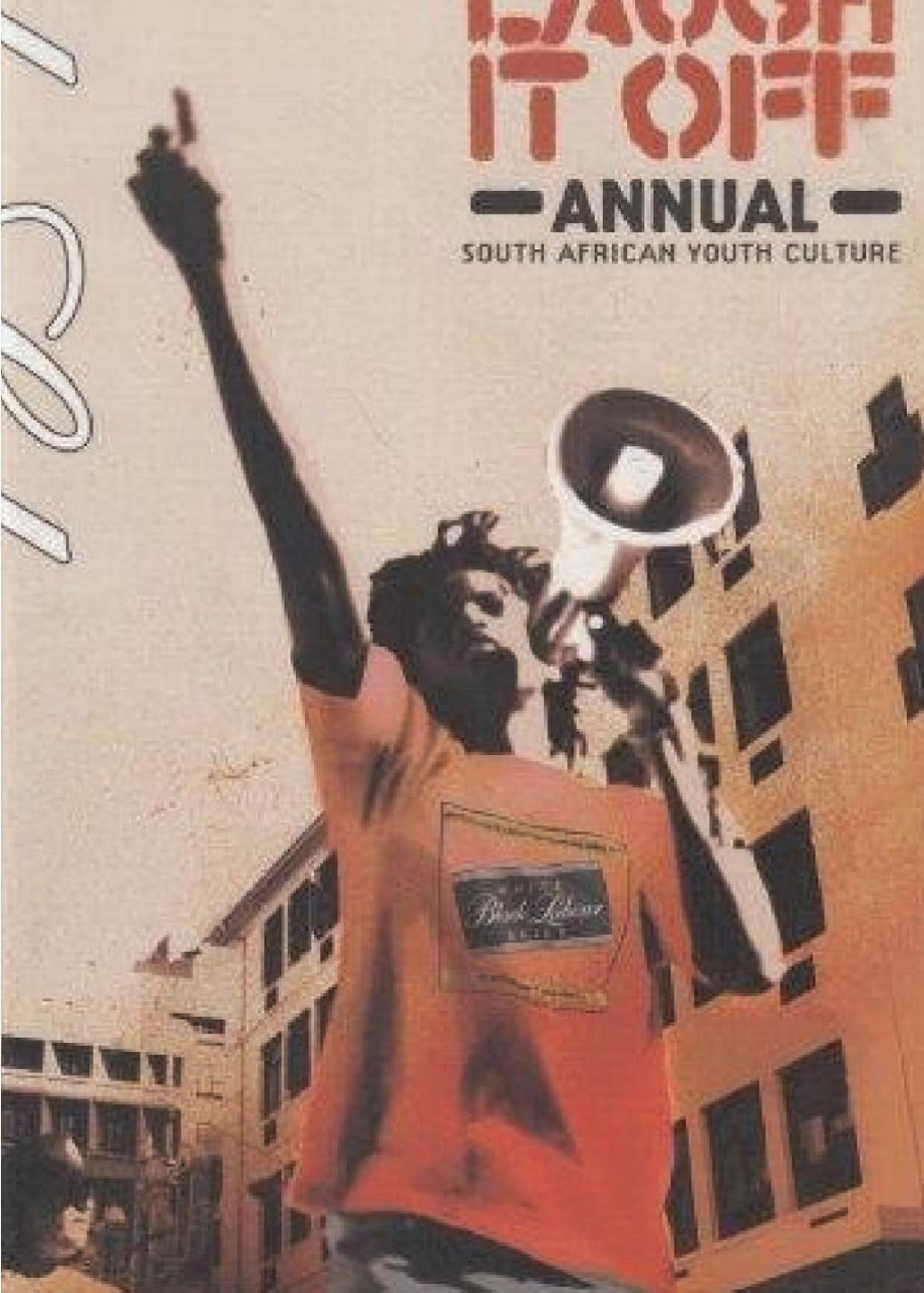
And why are we prepared to compromise that political history in order to speed a transition and a historical compromise with Afrikaans power? *Die Stem* might have its merit, but I don't know any black person who knows *Die Stem*. And again, it's a question about the country – what identity do we want to have?

I think there are so many huge compromises that have been made that there can't be a compromise regarding the importance of *Nkosi Sikilel'*.

LAUGH IT OFF

— ANNUAL —

SOUTH AFRICAN YOUTH CULTURE



Justin Nurse

Trying not to Laugh
(2003)

I speaks to cultural entrepreneur Justin Nurse, the engine behind the Laugh It Off anti-empire which took on the corporate might of South African Beverages in a landmark legal case that went all the way to the Constitutional Court.

I am a conspiracy theorist. I am walking along the sunbleached sands that line the stretch of coast between Blue Lagoon and Battery Beach in Durban. It is a breathtaking November day, one of the few properly hot days that the weather has granted us this far into the year.

I remember November days in Durban in the late 1980s. The onset of summer both promised and threatened in the slowly building heat. The humidity had not yet arrived, spring breaking its smells and colours into the air, the odour of chlorine rising up from municipal swimming pools. The sweet stench of cut grass in the air. Urban reclamations of spring rites as ancient and predictable as people.

Now, a decade and a half later, the seasons pile into each other like a motor accident, a rubik's cube of weather patterns that

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make nonsense of the notion of discrete seasons. And the worst natural disasters on record have all happened since the caring '90s opened its arms in hope and environmental awareness.

Lining the watermark on this crisp, beautiful day are scores of jelly fish. Lying flat on the sand, deprived of their fluidity, they are arranged along the high tide mark of the last waves that brought them to their end. They look like a flat, squelchy musical score.

They are also very effective at dissuading me from swimming in the viscous embrace of the Indian Ocean.

I am a conspiracy theorist. And I can't help connecting these jelly fish, whose beached numbers I had never seen until a few years ago, with the environmental damage caused by the rampant onslaught of uncontained capitalism and globalisation.

Of course, if you say these things too loudly people think you're nuts, or at least a bit odd. And while there's probably no connection between the two, what interests me is the feasibility of the notion, the fact that it is possible and that all possibilities should be entertained.

I am walking along this coastline with Justin Nurse. Nurse is the progenitor of Laugh It Off Promotions – the company that produced the famous “Black Labour White Guilt” T-shirts that instigated the ongoing SAB Miller legal fracas and which catapulted Laugh It Off into the headlines. As well as offending a whole catalogue of other brand names with his T-shirts, and incurring a small mountain of lawyers' letters, Nurse has just released the *Laugh It Off Annual*, an attempt to inject some political energy into South African youth culture. It is, as Nurse suggests, a cultural snapshot of the country's youth. A vibrant delight of a book, it is an explosive antidote to the hegemony of *You* magazine culture.

JUSTIN NURSE

It is a place to think rather than to simply absorb. Featuring contributors as diverse as Tumi Molekane, Pieter Dirk Uys, Naomi Klein, Waddy Jones, Toast Coetzee and Zapiro it tells us more about our collective soul than possibly any other single publication.

I am not really a conspiracy theorist. And neither is Nurse.

He is a rational, passionate observer and commentator whose primary medium is bastardised logos on nicely cut T-shirts. He also has the unfortunate desire to want to change the world. But despite the fact that we are both actually quite rational beings, the things that we talk about, the things that are written about in his annual, are, for the most part, usually relegated to non-publication.

I am ostensibly taking this walk with Justin to talk about the annual. This should be something of a PR exercise for him, something to accelerate sales of the substantial volume. He has, after all, been trekking around the country, introducing himself to booksellers and ensuring that his product gets good positioning and support from the merchandisers. He should similarly be working on the hard sell with me.

But we end up talking about other things, or at least other aspects of things.

When I last saw him, Justin spoke enthusiastically about the annual, about how it was going to be something that was going to blow the world, or at least the little world of middle class South Africa, right open.

Now he has completed the book, he feels a little deflated. All the joy was in the doing, he says, not in the achievement. And now that it is done, he is experiencing a classic case of anticlimax. But more than that, he has realised that this latest little barb of humanity in the face of the whirring beast of

NOTES FROM THE SOUTH

globalisation, isn't going to split the world wide open. Because nothing, it seems, can do so on that kind of scale, except capital itself. In the last decade we have seen the rise of political and economic consciousness across the globe, with protests from Seattle to Bombay. Access to information via the internet and the increasing popularity of politically expressive writers such as Arundhati Roy and Naomi Klein all fuel this awakening. And the world's mind has changed on some fundamental level. Increasing numbers of people are aware of these inequalities and try at various levels to express their discontent. And yet the beast moves on, constantly feeding the desires it has created, while failing to satisfy even the most basic needs of a large proportion of the planet's people.

This imbalance is the crux of the matter, but reading through a century of writings about political economy, from Marx to Friedman, it is always impossible to remove the thinker's own set of circumstances from the thoughts, and the world in which they were born. Justin and I are no different. The world seems even messier when you're feeling a bit down, and it is a difficult process to separate the two.

We have both recently read French writer Michel Helouabach's *Atomised*, a searing account of humanity that offers little hope for a species that cannot help but define itself by its mortality. It is one of those life-changing books, destined to become a classic. But the book's power flattened Nurse. For someone who wants to change the world, or at least wants the world to change, Helouabach's predictions for the possibilities of peace and fraternity are somewhat shattering.

And so, his work for the year done, his battle with corporate giants on hold, Nurse is planning to catch a bus to Malawi, hang onto the edges of the great lake and try to piece together

JUSTIN NURSE

those shattered pieces. Try to make some sense of this damaged world.

In the meantime, hopefully tens of thousands of consumers who are normally more circumspect will buy the *Laugh It Off Annual*. Not just because it might change their world a little, but also because it is a very fine product – a snapshot of our culture that reveals a dynamic, self-aware society that is infinitely more exciting than the visions broadcast by the bulk of the mainstream media. It's a labour of love and the love shines through.

But to return to the coastline. 'This old world won't ever change the way its been', sang '60s singer Tim Buckley. But Nurse sees one thing that might change the way that the mechanisms of capital and government work, since the protests of millions haven't managed to impact sufficiently to instigate far-reaching change. That factor is environmental damage and all the repercussions that accompany it.

So when it is too late for even the middle class to have a healthy meal on their table or to breathe cleanish air, then, to borrow from a wise old Native American, and only then, will those who run the world, realise that we can't eat money.

But, who knows, maybe we'll be eating jellyfish sushi instead. And maybe someone, somewhere will still be making a profit.

Landscapes

Jesus Saves (2010)

Lucidly drunk. On battery beach.

We have arrived here, shining and shimmering from a party in the handsome modernist building that used to house the Natal Mounted Rifles, and which gives its acronym to the stretch of road between it and the city. The sun is still hidden from us as the earth rolls towards it with subtle but relentless momentum. The dark is broken not by light but by the promise of light. The sky is the colour of pewter, turning unpolished silver as the moments pass. The day is starting to begin, beginning to breath. Slowly, quietly at first.

There are five of us, sitting at the top of the beach, twenty metres or so from the parking lot, fifty metres from the waterline. On our left is a damaged dune system, a corrugation of wind and sand inconsistently inhabited by the succulent plants that are supposed to keep the dunes in place. On our right is the city of Durban, a glistening and gritty agglomeration of concrete stories and glass hearts, people and cars, endings and beginnings and false starts. All held together by the fecund greenness that surrounds it. And by history.

As the clouds become lined not with silver but with gold, my concentration is broken by two figures writhing in the water. I leap up from my haunches, spraying damp sand in my wake as I fly down the dunes. Brendan follows me, more cold shivers of sand cascading through the air.

I sprint along the sand, fueled by the physicality of the crisp air and the grains on my feet, tiny fragments of rock and shell impregnating themselves into my soles before being shed and replaced by each subsequent stride. As the morning races towards me, I see more clearly the thing that disturbed me. Someone is not drowning. They are being drowned.

Lucidity gives way to confusion.

The ocean is calm up to the shore-break where the water churns threateningly, although only up to knee level. The water here is generous and dangerous and often deceptive. And it is warm. You can bodysurf for hours on carefree end or you can be swept away to your end in waist deep waters.

I nearly drowned on this beach. A stoned stormy day had me swimming too far out many years ago and suddenly the billowing ocean had taken me. I remember vividly the unbelieving panic, then, even more vividly, the sense of release, of giving in to the demands of the water. At which point that same water, in the form of a huge wave, returned me to shore, the lifeguards and the relieved arms of my friends.

As Brendan and I reach the drowning man, we do another double-take. The man and his drowner are both clothed in blue and white robes. They are being watched by a small circle of similarly dressed people. We immediately recognise the signifiers of religion and ritual. But this buys us no respite from the man thrashing around in the water, screaming and gasping as if in the throes of death, as he is held under the salty water by

NOTES FROM THE SOUTH

human hands. Our unease is only partially appeased by the fact that he's not actually drowning. Possibilities skip through the back of my slowmotion mind. But we hold our positions.

And gradually it dawns on me that this man is being baptised, although in a more visceral manner than I had ever witnessed in the small Anglican church I attended with intermittent reluctance as a child.

This was my introduction to africanised religion. It was the very early nineties and the colonial city of Durban had only just begun to merge with the land of eThekweni. The multicultural reality that now defines the city had yet to crystalise, and Durban was still outwardly a place of mostly uninterrupted whiteness and Englishness.

Now, in this 21st century you see Shembe and Zionist devotees all over the city. As if from another time and place – another reality, a Durban before or after so much whiteness – they gather on traffic islands and other liminal spaces where they find their buildingless temples and their infinite god. An enduring and moving testament to faith that resounds more with the words of Christ than anything the Church of England ever coughed up. And despite factions and fractiousness, these invisible churches represent the country's largest social movements.

Lucid once more, and no longer drunk, we walked back up to the top of battery beach, rays from beyond the horizon refracting through the atmosphere and reaching our tired eyes. We watched as everyone in the circle below took their turn to come close to death. And, in this particular baptism, that was very clearly the idea, although I have witnessed many far more gentle ceremonies since.

And then, with a perfectness of timing that still puzzles me, the circle dissolved and reformed in a line parallel to the water's

LANDSCAPES

edge. The devotees knelt on the sand, then prostrated themselves before the sky and their god. And slowly, in perfect synchronicity and unison, they rose with the sun.

This final element of the baptism ritual may or may not have calmed the bodies that had been so thoroughly immersed in the water. But I do know that, watching them rise, my own body became filled with an unmistakable sense of peace. And that few mornings have ever felt as new, as shiny, as full of possibility.

And as we sat there in stillness and golden light, the freshly baptised devotees gathered their belongings and walked slowly up the Sunday sand. We waved at them, and they returned the gesture, different worlds glancing against each other for the briefest of moments.

A few Saturdays ago I was sick in bed and forced to forsake my traditional weekend festivities. Waking up well rested on Sunday morning, I walked down to the chemist in Berea Centre to get some cough mixture. When I got there it was closed, so I got a cheaply efficient remedy at Pick 'n Pay instead. My spirits lifted by gulps of the pseudoephedrine-laden mixture, I decided to extend my journey.

You know, go for a solitary Sunday walk, down the escalators of Berea Centre, through the parking lot – which is always a haven of random activity – and into Acutts Road below, where metaphoric fumes waft from the clutch of the virtually 24-hour shebeens that populate the area.

Then I heard that unmistakable buzz floating through the air – the sound of music. Mmmm, I thought, in the manner of Homer Simpson, “Party!”. Some people were still going at 9.30am on a Sunday! I was well impressed – and not at all jealous, despite my abstinence. I followed the music to its source, like Hansel and Gretel picking up pebbles to find their way home.

But I found no seedy nightclub or house party. I found instead a church, the sweet, sweet strains of praise-the-lord. I leaned on the white concrete fence outside, listening to the glory, until a woman tapped me on the shoulder. “Come in,” she said. And so malleable had the tunes made me, that I had little choice but to follow her in.

Inside, it was like the first days of disco before the dark nights of overconsumption.

The air virtually shone with the light of human praise and

Till the Morning Light

celebration. And the singing went on and on, an existential counterpoint to the dreary hymns I sang when I was young.

And then the testimonies started flowing, with all the cinema of religious fervour.

When the collection plate started doing its round, I took it as my cue to continue my walk around the Berea – not as an uncharitable gesture, but simply because it seemed like the best time to leave.

So I wasn't converted (been there, done that, undone that). But my health had improved. And the 45 minutes I'd spent in church were a rave. Well, almost.

All music comes from god. It is the single most powerful expression of consciousness and awareness, and there's nothing like a good song to forget the day-to-day troubles of this world.

Which is, I suppose, what churches and night clubs have in common. When they're at their best, they both lift us off this earthly realm. And make us fly.

Landscapes

Memories are Forgotten Roads (2003)

I hadn't been down KwaZulu-Natal's South Coast for several years. I found that not much had changed – and that's not necessarily a bad thing.

The South Coast is a strange place. Apart from a dedicated band of surfers, it's a place that many of us leave behind when we leave home. It exists in the realm of drunken coastal memory and Christmas beachfront nostalgia – plastic spades and buckets, the smell of suntan lotion, sunburn and family arguments. And possibly, when we have children, we return to these things, these places. We ride those roads again.

But geography changes – or rather the marks and structures we leave upon the earth change – and something fundamental has happened to the South Coast since my childhood. That thing is called the N2, and while it might be a faster, more direct route to wherever you're going, it's the old coastal road that has mapped itself onto my heart.

For years now, I've been trying to retrace the route we would have driven as children, but have never managed to do so along its full length. So when asked to do a story on the

South Coast, it was the perfect opportunity not to be pushed back onto the N2. And driving along that slightly dilapidated road that is now named the R102, I realised why I felt such a desire in that direction. Wild and overgrown, it feels like Africa – always a great feeling. An almost dead road in the town-planning sense, it has no street lights and, between Kingsburgh and Umkomaas, shacks and houses have sprung up along the roadside next to abandoned holiday resorts.

Between Pennington and Hibberdene the road resembles parts of rural Transkei, lush and overgrown in the rainy season, beautiful, heavily populated with monkeys. I suspect few middle-class cars ever pass this way. Which in a way makes the road much safer than its freeway counterpart. Because most cars are middle-class cars, the road is virtually automobile free. And, surprisingly, there are no dangerous potholes. Driving along that road in the bright afternoon sun, it felt like we were travelling rather than just moving from one place to another. Which, again, is always a great feeling.

Our first stop was Scottburgh, a town that has barely changed in the last 20 years. Like much of the South Coast it is a sprawling little village, and like most of the towns along the way, it hasn't been subject to the gentrification and new age-iness that has spread itself around so much of the country and which ensures you can get a decent double espresso in the most unlikely of places. We couldn't, for example, find a vegetarian restaurant anywhere along the South Coast, despite the fact that even Port St Johns in the Transkei has one. When I asked for a cup of coffee at a little bar called the Hooded Thief, I was told no one had ever asked for one before.

If Scottburgh remains a small, inurbane, unrenovated seaside town, it boasts a great swimmable beach with a lagoon,

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two tidal pools, trampolines, candy floss, lifeguards, a miniature train and a Greek restaurant.

After Scottburgh, we headed a little further south to Kelso Beach. Kelso has always had delicate little stretches of hidden coastlines. When I was a kid it was the only beach that consistently gave forth shells. Now, it is virtually privatised as all the routes to the beach are owned by individual houses or commercial enterprises. We slipped through onto the wind-swept beach anyway, but not without someone shouting after us. Providing there's no wind, Kelso is the perfect place to take a book, a kiss, or an embrace.

After the irritation of Kelso's beautiful but privatised beaches, Pennington was a breath of fresh air. Walking from the parking lot to the beach, there is a fantastic little restaurant called Lynne's Place. It is one of the best-managed eateries I have ever been in, and is clearly popular with locals and holidaymakers. The service was brilliant, our salad great and the view fantastic. From Lynne's you can walk down onto a large deck that overlooks the sea and a tidal pool. And below to your right, there is a designated swimming area with lifeguards (but no shark nets). We regretted the fact we had to move along and intend to return to Lynne's to spend a lazy afternoon drinking beer and playing backgammon.

We continued along the old road, but instead of following its curve towards Hibberdene as we should have done, we ended up in Esperanza, a beautiful little piece of rural KwaZulu-Natal that's a good 25km from the sea. After circling back sheepishly through Scottburgh, we decided it was just as well we were the it's-the-journey-not-the-destination kind of people.

Margate was rocking, holidaymakers everywhere, the traffic moving only nominally more quickly than Cape Town at

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Christmas. Year-end peroxide covered boys' heads and skimpy bikinis nearly covering girls' bodies. Families everywhere trailing the streets. And every restaurant is a steak, seafood and pasta joint. We met up with our friends and stayed at a great little backpackers called, oddly enough, Margate Backpackers. Run by a Danish woman called Ulrike, it's the kind of place where the doors are left open and you take your beers from the fridge and mark them down on a piece of paper stuck to the fridge. It's good to know that even in the crass but entertaining commercialism of Margate on Holiday, there is still place for travellers who are not tourists or holidaymakers. We spent the evening at the Backline watching the inimitable outh African band Boo, who fortuitously were also in Margate.

The following morning we headed to the southern edge of Margate's Marine Drive for a quick browse around Tinker's Den, one of the most delicious junk/antique shops around. I found the original record cover from Ipi Tombi and the owner promised me he would find the record for me when I returned. And I will return. Not just to Margate. But to this whole beautiful coastline dotted with anachronistically ugly architecture, quaint holiday cottages and bizarre seaside kitsch – all trapped somewhere out of time in the tastelessness and sheer joy of being on holiday.

On our trek back home, we stopped off at Uvongo where the magnificent cliffs provide afternoon shade and illicit, but barely policed, spots for death-defying jumps into one of the South African coast's deepest lagoons. Uvongo is one of the country's sweetest commercial beaches out of season and in-season, it's still quite great – certainly the flirtiest beach we encountered. Everyone was checking everyone else out unashamedly, the joy and flouted inhibitions of naked flesh,

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summertime and holiday romances.

Our last stop on the beach marathon was St Michaels, where we had a beer at The Bite, slid down an inflatable water slide and temporarily lost our keys in the sand.

Then it was off, back onto the old road, passing by long-dead resort towns, the ghosts and memories of holidays past and abandoned curio stalls before we slowly slid past Kingsburgh, Amanzintoti and Doonside, where the R102 ends and relents to the modern giganticism of the N2.

Mira Nair

Monsoon Dreams
(2001)

Director Mira Nair's film Monsoon Wedding won the main prize at 2001's Venice Film Festival. I spoke to her during a brief break in her busy schedule while she was shooting in New York.

Mira Nair is one of contemporary global cinema's most dearly regarded talents. Her debut feature film, *Salaam Bombay*, was a sprawling view of Mumbai seen through the eyes of a street child, the greyness of poverty infused with the sparkle of childhood reality. The film reaped prizes at festivals everywhere, even garnering an acknowledgement from Hollywood with an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Picture .

Nair didn't get the Oscar, but cracked Hollywood anyway with *The Perez Family*, *Mississippi Masala* and the controversial *Karma Sutra*, all minor hits that made enough of a splash at the box office to keep the studios happy. And this year she won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival for her colourful and tender portrayal of an Indian middle-class wedding during monsoon season.

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I spoke to Nair about Bollywood and Hollywood, and also about Durban, where she lived for a year, and probably the place on the planet where those two movie-making Meccas collide most intimately.

Peter Machen: What led you to live in Durban?

Mira Nair: My husband is an academic and he was teaching at the University of Durban-Westville in 1993 for six months. He was a visiting professor, and I was being a good wife. And I had been fairly obsessed with South Africa way before – the whole struggle period and the literature and politics that accompanied it. So it was a great opportunity for me to be actually living there.

PM: And how did you find it?

MN: It was a very interesting and dramatic time. It was the year that Chris Hani was assassinated. I actually made a 10-minute fiction film about that experience, which has hardly been shown – I showed it privately a couple of times in South Africa – called *The Day the Mercedes Became a Hat*. It's a fictional documentary about what happened in Durban and South Africa on the day of the Hani funeral.

PM: Were you working on any feature films while you were living in South Africa?

MN: No, I wasn't making any features. I was writing one which was based in India, but which did not become *Monsoon Wedding*. I did make a feature – but not in South Africa, in America – called *My Own Country*, which I edited in the office in my house in Cape Town (where Nair lived for two years, again following in the wake of her husband's academic career).

PM: How do you place yourself in relation to Bollywood?

MN: Now?

PM: Now, and while you were making *Monsoon Wedding*.

MN: You know, Bollywood is an inextricable part of our culture. It's like eating and breathing. When I was growing up, I loved Bollywood classic films, like the films of Guru Dutt and Raj Kapoor. Those are the films that I have been inspired by in some way – not so much the Raj Kapoor films as the Guru Dutt films. You know who he is?

PM: No...

MN: Guru Dutt is an unusual director, sort of like Orson Welles in a way. He worked in the Bollywood mainstream yet made highly artistic pictures. They never were successful in his lifetime – he committed suicide at the age of 39 – but are deemed as classics now. Anyway, those were the films I used to love to see. But, I otherwise had a bit of snobbery about the high kitsch of Bollywood, as I looked at it, when I was growing up in the '60s and '70s.

But now Bollywood has changed enormously, and has become really slick and hip and very much part of the cultural fabric of any class of Indian life. In *Monsoon Wedding*, which is about a middle-class family much like my own, Bollywood has entered the fabric of a wedding.

So a young babe in my family would definitely imitate a Bollywood movie star on one of the nights to entertain us. That would be normal. That would not be absurd. In my young days that would never have been thought of. So definitely it has entered part of our life. Besides just going as entertainment, it's accepted in family ceremonies.

I revel in that now. It's a load of fun. *Monsoon Wedding* is a bit of a Bollywood movie in a way – but on my terms. Because I can't be a Bollywood director in that style. I mean, I can, I guess, if I put my mind to it, but...everybody's begging me to do it. And I might just do it. But only as long as they're willing to do

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it on my terms.

PM: What does Bollywood think of you? Are they fond of you?

MN: Well, now I'm a lioness of India they say (a reference to Nair winning a Golden Lion), so now the president of India calls me up, now I'm in the good books. Two years ago I wasn't. It comes and it goes.

PM: And when you made *Salaam Bombay?*

MN: Then I was first in the good books. Now I'm back.

PM: Was it the making of *Karma Sutra* that caused your fall from favour?

MN: Yes, it was basically *Karma Sutra*. You know, the sex and controversy and censorship – and the battle that I sort of won and sort of lost and sort of won.

PM: In the few years since *Karma Sutra*, do you think that India has kind of loosened up?

MN: Oh, yes. I think so. I think so.

PM: Because *Monsoon Wedding* is quite salacious. It's quite sexual in parts.

MN: It's unbelievably sort of...almost amoral. I shouldn't say that to the press, I don't mean it that way. But it's, like, free. On a certain level, what's going down in Delhi society or Bombay urban life, it almost startles me, it shocks me. But, you know Sabrina, my writer, she is much more in touch with the young. And she brought that aspect, she opened my eyes to what's really going on – she and my niece and nephew (who are also in the film). They're the ones who are telling me, "This is exactly what it's like". There is a lot of sexuality in the young.

Like the daughter having a lover and then rebounding on a marriage and all that. That we knew – but there is a level to which young men and women are, in strict terms, getting out of hand! And it is really amazing because it goes hand in hand with

an absolute love of ritual and tradition and what the family want from you and all that.

PM: Okay. From Bollywood to Hollywood: One of the things that really impresses me about you is that you manage to go there without being appropriated.

MN: Yes.

PM: Well, how did you do that? I mean I think of Lee Tamahori (who made the New Zealand box-office smash hit *Once Were Warriors* and then disappeared into diametrically opposed Hollywood action flicks).

MN: Well, I guess that I'm a fiercely independent spirit, or something. I have a healthy disrespect for authority (she laughs zealously). I can't bear it actually. I'm very open and very collaborative, so long as I'm the boss. That's very bad. But as long as I have control, really, I mean that. Because I do take the best ideas – I'm totally humble about that and I'm totally ruthless also, not sentimental at all, not territorial.

But the point is that I have to retain independence because there is a type of instinct that informs my work. Yet everybody can offer me ideas and take me much further than what I know. And that is the intention of working with such brilliant people, like Declan Quinn, the cinematographer, or Sabrina Dhawan, the writer, or Mychael Danna with music. You know I work very well with people. They're great people and they really contribute and make the film richer and richer. And that's the idea.

But I have to kind of take them on a journey, take them with me and, if I don't always know where I'm going, I have to find out where I'm going. But what I have to rely on, that distinguishes me from anybody else, is my instinct. And I think the idea in life is to keep one's mind and heart empty and open, and to respond to that instinct.





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So if I have to work with a lot of people who tell me how things have to be, it interferes with that – although sometimes it helps. Anyway, I'm not anti-Hollywood at all. It's just that I've had a couple of iffy experiences there and I'm just happier, even with the struggle of it, to do my own work.

In Hollywood, a lot depends on who you get to work with – and there are fantastic people there too. I just haven't had the good fortune of working with them yet (laughs). I've just finished something that has been a pleasure to do – an American film with Uma Thurman, Juliette Lewis and Gena Rowlands called *Hysterical Blindness*, which I'm just mixing this month. It has been a hectic year between *Monsoon Wedding* and this movie.

So I'm definitely open right now. But I'm also happy to be able to constantly have the elasticity within me to do my work. Because – you know what it is like from living in Durban – if we don't tell our stories, then nobody else is going to.

And you have to do it in a way that is inimitable, in your own way. And yet do it with the style and standard that satisfies a global audience. So that they can see that the craft of film-making is alive and well in India.

Larry Clark

For Real

(2003)

I spoke to artist and filmmaker Larry Clark, about his controversial and emotionally honest film Ken Park, as well as his broader body of work.

Larry Clark spent the '70s and '80s in a stupor of drugs and alcohol, all the while documenting the disintegrating margins of the world around him, most famously in *Tulsa*, his series of photographic essays on the teenage sub-cultures that populated the eponymous middle-American town in Oklahoma.

Now Clark is sober and one of the world's most commercially successful cutting-edge film-makers, having achieved equal parts reverence and virulent criticism for *Kids*, his portrayal of the secret world of a bunch of young adolescents moving around New York City. It was a gritty but beautifully shot slice of what some would come to call pornography.

With *Ken Park*, almost in direct response to those critics and complainers, there are no holds barred. The film is a portrait of the sexual life of a quartet of teenagers in a small Californian town, complete with vaginas, erections, threesomes, actual ejaculations and the not-always-welcome presence of adults. It

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leaves nothing to the imagination, providing none of the false romanticisations of the sexual act that cinema has made us so used to.

But for those who will insist that it is pornography, I'm going to provide a very simple rule of thumb to separate art from porn. And it is this: that you stop looking at pornography after orgasm. With art the gaze continues. The graphic imagery in Clark's films, while it might be salacious – going where the non-moral eye actually wants to go – is miles away from pornography. It is too honest, too real, too uncomfortable, too ultimately untillating.

In his films and his photography, Clark has always portrayed an uncompromised vision of the world, particularly when it comes to sex and sexual personality. He has never been afraid of what is, for some, the subconscious netherworld of sex and all its genitalia. And it's precisely because of this lack of fear that he can afford to be so uncompromisingly, unflinchingly honest. In recognising the base realness in the pelvis that runs all the way up the spine to the brain, Clark grants us a broader, more visceral humanity, adding the pieces of the jigsaw that few others in Western culture are prepared to.

Peter Machen: In *Ken Park*, for the first time in one of your films we see the substantial presence of adults, of grown-ups. Was this in any way an attempt to create causal links for the ways in which the kids in your other films behave?

Larry Clark: Well, the first film, *Kids*, was just about the kids' secret world where adults weren't allowed at all. And everyone said "Where are the parents?" And I always said, "Wait until *Ken Park*". This was actually the set of stories that I wanted to tell, that I thought would be my first film. *Ken Park* is essentially the

film that moved me into making film.

I started out as a documentary photographer and I've always been a storyteller. And these were stories I wanted to tell, but that I couldn't just go out and document – I couldn't go out and just be there when these things happened. So that's what moved me into making films, and it just took a long time to get this film made.

PM: You talk about the concept of the documentary. How much of the film is also autobiographical, an expression of yourself?

LC: Well, in a way a lot of it is, in that it's about people who I've known. Two of the stories in the film are based on stories of friends of mine. And the other two stories are composites of newspaper articles and people I've seen on television, on talk shows, talking about their lives.

So all the stories come from real life, and I think that all these things happen, and have happened in every society, every country. And they'll probably happen again and keep happening. It's a part of life, and these are stories that just don't get told often. But they're stories that I thought that were important to tell. As I say, this could well have been my first film.

PM: Despite the cultural differences, I grew up in a place where events were not that dissimilar to *Ken Park*. And I think a lot of people do, regardless of whether they want to acknowledge it or not. But that kind of truth is usually ignored and made unreal. Why do you think that people seem not to be able to cope with actual sexuality and a graphic portrayal of it?

LC: (laughs) That's the 64 000 dollar question...you know I think people can deal with it. I think that audiences are underestimated. I mean, when I see the response to this film, most of the responses, and I'm not exaggerating, most of the responses





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have been so positive. People have really appreciated the film and thought that it was a good film. We were dealing with real-life situations that were kind of important to tell, at least once in a while. I think that with society, with all the rules that are put up about what one can see and what one can't see, there's this preconceived thinking that people can't see things like this, and I don't think it's true.

Plus, this is a special film. It's really well done. I've been making images all my life, for over 40 years. And I'm really comfortable with making images. And so I think it's just a culmination of all my experience, all my work, you know, to do something really accomplished. I look at the film and I see it, in my body of work, as a very mature work. I think it's very accomplished. And maybe that's it; maybe it's just well done.

PM: And brave. Maybe not for you, but within broader society.

LC: I guess it is, I guess it is brave, yeah. But you know, I didn't start out as a film-maker. I didn't start out in that world. I've always been an artist. And the role of the artist is different. It's about breaking new ground. It's about not having a set of rules and not thinking in a set way. You don't think about what you can and can't do. It just doesn't come up. If you had showed these images in an art gallery, nobody would have blinked. But when you're making a film for such a large audience, maybe it is thought of as brave. But for me, it's just that these were the stories I always wanted to tell, and I needed to be visually honest and emotionally honest. So many times you see films that just aren't visually honest because people just simply don't realise that you can be.

After the film was finished, I thought to myself, "Film-makers are going to see this film and say, 'gee I didn't know you could do that.'" Because people are so programmed that they

think with making films that there are things you can do and things you can't do. And it just doesn't come up for me. That said, I am realistic. I knew that there would probably be problems with distribution. But that's just business.

PM: How do you feel about the effective censorship your films have experienced?

LC: Its almost 'knee-jerk' – the fact that these are things you can't do. But I think audiences have been so underestimated, as I said earlier. I don't think anyone's been damaged by seeing this film. And people are responding to it, and I think this kind of blanket censorship certainly doesn't apply to this film. The danger is that by breaking new ground – which I've done in my work for a long time – is that you're going to get a lot of people trying to work without all the boundaries and the work's not going to be so good. It does open it up to some crummy work.

PM: On a more personal note, are you still living quite a wild life, or are you focusing most of your energy into film-making, or are you managing to do both?

LC: No, I'm very calm now. I'm not the wild man I used to be. At all.

PM: Do you think that wildness has been purged through your art?

LC: No, I had a lot of things that I had to get past. I had drug addiction and alcoholism and all that kind of stuff, and I'm luckily still alive. I have a lot of gratitude that I'm still here, and healthy and happy, and working.

The last three films I've made, I've been completely clean, no drugs of any kind. And I think the work shows that. I think the work's better, and clearer. I'm really one of the luckiest people in the world, to have made it through all that shit.

PM: Do you think that in the end you can get addicted to sobri-

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ety as its own high?

LC: Absolutely, absolutely. I'm certainly not missing anything. And I'm probably happier than I've ever been in my life. I'm very happy now.

Todd Solondz

From Happiness to Wartime
(2011)

Todd Solondz is one of contemporary America's most significant film directors. I spoke to him about Life During Wartime, his sequel of sorts to the groundbreaking 1998 film Happiness.

Director Todd Solondz has the reputation of being the enfant terrible of American cinema. But this must surely be linked to his provocative style of film-making rather than his personality, because in conversation he is unfailingly nice, polite to a fault, and entirely without arrogance.

His films, on the other hand, are not polite, although the many viewers who think that they're sick and perverted, are really, really not getting the point. Much of which is precisely that the films ride ramshod over the veneer of politeness and manners that coats middle-class life in order to get to the raw emotional reality of his characters who, like so many human beings, don't always behave terribly well.

Solondz, who had nearly given up on film-making after a well received student film and an unhappy studio experience which left him very unsatisfied with the process, found major critical





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success with two breakout films, *Welcome to the Dollhouse* in 1996 and *Happiness* in 1998. *Dollhouse* tells the story of an unattractive 7th grader as she struggles to cope with her adolescent world, while *Happiness* was an interlocking multiple narrative, which together with Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia*, provided the blueprint for an entire genre of contemporary film, both commercial and independent. But most people seem to remember *Happiness* for its portrayal of a child molester who Solondz allowed to remain human, and which many indignant commentators have described as 'sympathetic'.

Solondz makes films that are extremely gentle in their execution but brutally unflinching in the exploration of their characters' private lives and interior realities. And so we see a lot of bad behaviour, often masquerading, as it does, as politeness. Another thing that defines his films is that in his bluntly honest exploration of human interaction, he grants a full complexity to his young characters. This simple approach has revolutionised American cinema, paving the way for a cavalcade of independent films, many of which have been far more commercial than Solondz' work.

I spoke to the director about his latest film *Life During Wartime*, which returns to the characters that populated *Happiness*, except that this time round, they're not only a decade older but played by an entirely different set of actors.

Peter Machen: Todd, your films are often described – or written off – as perverted and sick, but for me they are very moral films – a call for a kinder, gentler world. Is there any truth to my reading?

Todd Solondz: The movies are all fraught with ambiguity. They're very sorrowful – heartbreaking really – comedies. But

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because things aren't delineated in sharp blacks and whites, people may perhaps fail to see that there is a moral anchoring, a moral centre, to this world. I understand how, clinically, people may describe the characters as perverted or sick, but I don't look at them through that lens. I see them as all struggling with conflicts, with afflictions, with the struggle to connect. And this is I think what binds them.

PM: Do you love your characters?

TS: You know, some characters more, and some characters less. It really depends on which character, and also on the way in which I love them. But of course I could never invest what I do in my movies if I didn't have such strong feelings, emotionally speaking. If I didn't take them seriously, if they weren't close to my heart, I wouldn't be able to put myself through this process. That said, that doesn't mean I agree all the time with my characters. They don't always say what I would like them to say, or do what I would like them to do. But I try to be truthful to the reality that I've set up, and I accept them with all their flaws, and so forth.

PM: Do you feel that they have a life that is, in a way, independent of you?

TS: Well, I think that's got to be the aim. You know, my personal life is of little consequence. What matters is the way in which this world and these characters can penetrate other people's consciousness, the way in which they connect with others, the interplay that takes place in theatres. With movies, you are always trying to articulate the inner lives of your characters, to articulate things that are very difficult for us to talk about in real life. And I think that's one of the beautiful things that movies can do.

PM: In the United States, as far as I could work out, this film

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was actually released in theatres and on VOD (video on demand) at the same time. Is that true?

TS: I think they did that in the UK. But it opens in New York on July 23rd, and it will open simultaneously in theatres and VOD.

PM: And how do you feel about that?

TS: Well, maybe I'm a little bit of an anachronism, I don't know. I like to go the movie theatre. I like the big dark room and the screen with a projected film, even if I'm the only one who shows up to the 3 o'clock matinee. It's a very special place for me – it's what movies are about for me. The only time I watch movies on DVD is for work – if I have to check on an actor, or check on a cinematographer. It's really only for homework that I would actually watch a DVD on TV like that. For pleasure, I have to go to the movie theatre. But I think a lot of other people are not quite so fastidious as I am.

PM: Back to *Life During Wartime*. Was your decision to use an entirely different cast in any way influenced by your film *Palindromes* (in which the same character is played by actors of radically different physicality and even gender)?

TS: Um, I don't know consciously. But I do know that maybe it gave me a little bit more courage having done that. If had I cast the same actors in these parts it would have been a very different movie. One of the things that happens when you do that is that there's always this very powerful subliminal message about mortality. Now that's something that's very special, but it's not really what I wanted to pursue here. I was much more interested in freeing myself from the constraints of the literalness of what I had established in my earlier work, so that I could feel free to reinvent and reshape the characters, something that I could never do using the same actors.

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PM: *Palindromes* got quite a lukewarm reception. I watched it again last night and I thought it was magnificent. And I get the impression that you were very fond of the film when making it. Were you upset by the critical response?

TS: Well, you know, I have a weak character. If people like the movie, I feel better and happy. And if they don't, I feel a little bit sad. But I loved the film, and that makes me more protective of it. There were champions of the film. It had many people who spoke very vociferously on its behalf, very passionately. But I think a lot of people, at the same time, were very put off – by the content, the way it was handled. And you know, I can never anticipate how others will respond. I can only put out there what I can stand by and take pride in, and hope for the best.

Mike Figgis

The Edge of Cinema (2003)

Mike Figgis is the radically innovative director of Leaving Las Vegas, Time Code and Hotel. I spoke to him about experimental film and new ways of seeing in the 21st century.

Mike Figgis is best known for *Leaving Las Vegas*, a highly sensitive and emotionally wrenching account of the romance between a sex worker and an alcoholic. While that film was fuelled by an honest, gritty reality that informed both the story and the film's techniques, Figgis has moved on to even more experimental film-making.

In 1998's *Time Code*, the screen is split into four quadrants for the full length of the film. The four narratives are all elements of the same extended story and intersect with each other – often there is more than one view of the same room. The viewer's focus is controlled by shifts in volume between the quadrants. Initially demanding, once you give in to its structure, the film becomes hypnotic and, even on video, it's not difficult to follow. - though you'll probably have to put down your knitting.

It only hit me the second time I watched it that there are

no cuts in the film. Each quadrant is one continuous pan, shot in real time. The film was shot in precisely the time it takes to watch it, although of course there were months of rehearsals. The released version of *Time Code* is, in fact, the 15th version that was shot.

This year's *Hotel* uses the split-screen technique to a more limited degree, but is even more experimental in too many ways to mention. Like *Time Code*, the film makes use of multiple narratives, as well as various split-screen permutations, digital layering, digital editing and night-vision cameras. At times the actors couldn't even see each other.

The miraculous thing about these films is not so much the revolutionary digital technology involved, but the fact that Figgis manages to hold it all together. *Time Code*, in particular, is an astounding technical feat. The fact that it works at all is a testament to the genius of Figgis, both as a conceptual thinker and as a director.

I spoke to this very busy man at the end of yet another busy day spent dancing on the very edge of cinema.

Peter Machen: Movies such as *Time Code* and *Hotel* don't just produce new forms of cinema. They also demand a new kind of viewer-ness. The gaze of the audience is altered, and shifted with the use of sound. Do you think that the generations that have grown up with multi-textured MTV might find your filmic techniques more accessible than, say, my 50-something parents?

Mike Figgis: I suppose the newer cinema demands more concentration than generic cinema. It's been my experience that people of all ages who have a real passion for cinema will respond to new ideas. On a superficial level, younger audiences are used to multi-tasking – but they also suffer from attention

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deficit disorder and tend to lose interest if their oversaturated nerve endings are not regularly bombarded with loud noises and bright colours.

PM: You have achieved both critical and commercial success with a number of films, particularly *Leaving Las Vegas*. What made you go in the direction of experimental film at the height of your career, rather than do the whole Hollywood thing?

MF: The irony is that *Leaving Las Vegas* was my big attempt to get away from Hollywood and do a very independent film – super 16, 3-week shoot, depressing subject matter etc etc. It gave me the confidence to carry on and do more experimental work with the idea that there was a potential audience for this kind of cinema.

PM: In *Hotel*, you make great use of motion blur and digital time-lapse photography. Do you think that in some ways, a blurred, non-photorealistic reality, is a more accurate reflection of our experience of reality?

MF: Let me put it this way – cinema has become obsessed with the idea of clinical reproduction of “reality”. It’s the only art form that is so obsessed with “reality”. I think of it as a poetic medium, within which the use of abstracting techniques is just as valid as those which reproduce approximations of what the eye sees.

PM: In *Hotel* the vampires are not only vampires, they are also human and they are also cannibals. You, David Lynch and even Woody Allen have all made recent reference to the film industry devouring itself. Do you think this kind of self-inspection is ever going to reach the core of what is now Euro-Hollywood moviemaking? Do you think the big-budget formula bubble is ever going to burst? Do you think that the accessibility of digital media can prick that bubble?

MF: Yes I do – but not immediately – it will take some time to replace the system of distribution, which is the key to the control of the film industry. The revolution will perhaps be quieter and more insidious than I'd hoped – I was wanting something a bit faster and more exciting. The film industry has no real desire to change – there are too many cushy salaries and perks to motivate change.

PM: In *Hotel*, your use of the quad split screen, is relatively limited. Do you think it is a feasible device for film-makers in general? Do you think that there could ever be a genre of time-code films (it strikes me as the kind of thing that might emerge from Japan). Do you intend making another film in the exact format of *Timecode*?

MF: The success of the television series *24* slightly pissed me off – much talk of revolutionary TV blah blah blah. I think it clearly is a rich vein to be mined and, yes, I intend to make more films in this genre.

PM: Do you think that the splitscreen technique is as effective on video, or does it need the physical scope of a cinema screen? And also, how do you dub or subtitle something like *Time Code* or *Hotel* for foreign markets? How have these films been received in non-English speaking countries?

MF: Yes it's very effective on DVD or video – most people have large enough screens to read the detail. It's easy to subtitle but impossible to dub. It's been well received in non-English speaking territories but Sony seem reluctant to push the film and haven't really bothered to do so, despite interest in many territories. They haven't even bothered to release the DVD in the UK.

PM: Which other directors, currently working, do you admire?

MF: Lynch (a lot). Godard (always).

PM: What are you currently working on? What projects in the





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future?

MF: I'm making a feature for Disney in Canada – it's a very frightening thriller called *The Devil's Throat*. Next year I'm doing an installation at the Valencia Bienalle, I've just completed a 90-minute documentary on the history of the UK blues scene. I'm doing a book of photographs taken from digital filming, plus a book of photographs taken since I was nine.

PM: And finally, since they were both shot digitally, I'm interested to know how much *Time Code* and *Hotel* cost to make? I Hope it's not too personal a question!

MF: Probably more than they should have. *Time Code*, was a studio film and cost four or five million dollars, *Hotel* was about two and a half – shooting with 35 actors in Venice was the main cost.

PM: Thank you very much Mike. I'll hopefully speak to you again at some point in the future.

Fernando Meirelles

The streets of Brazil

(2002)

I spoke to director Fernando Meirelles about his extraordinary action film City of God.

The multi-award winning film *City of God* chronicles the lives of Brazilian street children living in a sprawling housing settlement on the outskirts of Rio, named the City of God by its residents. It is an extraordinary film, an instant classic that stretches the limits of cinema while at all times being just as engaging as say *Pulp Fiction* or *Terminator 2*. Based on the 600-page novel of the same name by Paulo Lins, the book follows the lives of more than 250 protagonists until each life is snuffed, a victim of the drug-based gang warfare that constitutes the pulse of a sub-city that has been forgotten by the society that created it. But *City of God* doesn't explore the social construction or political nature of the settlement of street children. It simply plays out the lives of the characters until their inevitable end, the devaluation and desecration of human life a vastly ample critique of whatever society created it. I spoke to director Fernando Meirelles about the process of making this remarkable film.

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Peter Machen: Hi Fernando. Let's dive straight in! Apparently you weren't that interested in the City of God project initially, but by the time you were halfway through the book, you were convinced that you wanted to make a film of it?

Fernando Meirelles: Yes, but I had no idea how to do a movie about it. I finished the book and I was really amazed by it. The images and the characters kept coming back and so I had to do something. But I had no idea what. So I first bought the rights and called my friend Brulio, who was a writer, and I said, "read this and tell me how can I take a film from this thing". It's a huge book with more than 250 characters. And then we worked for about two years on it.

PM: Does the super-realism of the film come from the book?

FM: Actually the book is very episodic. There's no structure. There's no storyline. It just presents a character and follows this guy and then presents this guy dying. And then he introduces another one and then he dies. And that's how he goes through more than 600 pages. It's really a lot of characters and a lot of situations. But all of the stories are real stories that Paulo Lins heard. For eight years he was writing this book, living in the City of God. So every day he was reading newspapers and talking to people and getting all those stories. That's how he wrote the book. It's very realistic because it's all based on true stories. And the way he writes is really poetic. Sometimes it becomes almost poetry – that's also what gets you.

PM: And is the City of God in reality as racially mixed as it is in the film?

FM: Yeah, yeah.

PM: Brazilian society is like that?

FM: Yeah. Like you can see in the poster, there's a white girl with a black boy. This is very usual. Nobody cares. I think there's

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a social apartheid, but there's no racial separation. It's really mixed.

PM: That's what's starting to happen here. The racial divisions are disappearing and becoming economic ones. Brazil and South Africa have very similar economies in many ways. They both have the biggest wealth discrepancies in the world.

FM: I know. I know. And I can tell by walking around here. Going out in these streets you have these incredible, beautiful mansions and then you see so many squatter camps. It's like Brazil.

PM: But what there isn't in the film are glances at the super rich. There's no contrast between the incredible poverty on the one hand and then the super wealthy on the other.

FM: I know. Because the film is about *City of God* and it's a story told by somebody from *City of God*. And people that live there don't go to other places, they have only that perspective. He believes in that place and that's what he sees. That's his world. And I've been criticised by some Brazilian critics – well, I've been criticised for so many reasons – but this was one of the reasons. People saying that I was not showing the whole society and I was not explaining how and why this situation exists and all that. And my point is that what I like about the film – and this was my starting point with the film – is that this is a story that a 15-year-old boy is telling to us. So he doesn't know about government, or things like that. He just sees what he sees. He's telling what he sees.

PM: And I do think that film is very powerful for having done that.

FM: And having just this point of view. I don't need to try to explain. In Brazil, a lot of films and books involve the middle class talking about and trying to explain social problems. I see this a lot. And the original thing about this film is not having to





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explain. It's not my opinion. You don't know what I think.

PM: There's no lecturing in the film.

FM: Yeah. That's why I decided to work with no professionals. So I could use the boys' expertise and not my own. I really tried to stay out of the film as much as I could.

PM: Are you a fan of Larry Clarke?

FM: Yeah, yeah. I like *Kids* very much. *Kids* is really an amazing film

PM: Your film reminded me a lot of *Kids* in a way. Although they're completely different films.

FM: No, no. I think they have a lot in common. Using non-professional actors, the way he prepared the actors – and letting the boys do whatever they want to do. The camera's like a documentary camera. He creates a happening and the camera goes there and tries to show as much as it can – like a documentary. And that's also how I've done it.

PM: You talk elsewhere about the idea of the non-photographs, which I also associate quite strongly with Clark and his photographic work.

FM: Well, this is really what I'm talking about. When you do a film you get a perfect frame and a perfect composition. Non-photography means you just do what ever you do and I'll try to do my best. I'm not worried if the light or the shade is going to be this way or that way, or whatever, just go.

PM: Now that you've made the film, do you think that there's hope for the City of God and for all the other Cities of God around the planet?

FM: I do. But I really think that it will take a long time, 25 years at least. Because even if we begin to do something now, there's a generation, boys of 11, 12, who are already involved in crime and who use guns. And it is very expensive to convince one of

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those boys to give back his gun and go to school. It's really very expensive. It's more possible to convince 8 or 9-year-old boys to avoid getting into crime. That's much, much easier than getting a 14-year-old boy out. And I think the only way to solve this problem is investing in social inclusion, bringing these people into our society. Because every time I hear governors and everybody talking about fighting against violence, there are always people saying how they're going to invest in repression. We're buying four new helicopters and we're going to buy 35 new cars and the police are buying guns and all kinds of thing. But instead of investing in repression they should do the opposite. You've got to bring those marginalised people in. And provide schools, and sports, and culture.

Landscapes

An Afrikaans Heart

(1999)

The Klien Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees in Oudtshoorn is an arts festival that celebrates Afrikaans culture and the Afrikaans language. I added a dash of interrogation to the celebration.

Oudtshoorn, the site of the Klien Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (Small Karoo National Arts Festival) is, at least for a few days a year, the kitschest place on earth. The mainstream Afrikaans aesthetic centralises and the epicentre of this kitschness is the fleamarket. Ostrich legs ashtrays jostle with handpainted crockery. Decoupage is in! So are fake faberge eggs and a thousand overly enthusiastic variations of the CD rack. Looking down from chocolate-box posters, pipe player Roberto competes with popular singer Patricia Lewis for audience and multicoloured feather dusters are everywhere. This is not the kitsch of outlandish, self aware expression but the kitsch of anachronous sentiment and it all got a bit nauseous after a while. And never have I seen so much calamari for sale. Everywhere you looked, calamari safari, calamari safari. Needless to say, vegetarian fare was very thin on the ground and safari suits and veldskoene

were in abundance. And I had a fucking party.

The Klein Karoo Kunstefees in Oudtshoorn has the unfortunate acronym of KKNK. Doubly unfortunate due to the racial slurs which have haunted the festival's organisation since its inception five years ago. In 1997 African diva Miriam Makeba was pelted with missiles with cries of "kry die kaffir meid van die verhoog af" ("get the kaffir girl off the stage"). Officially the N in KKNK stands for *nationale* but many people I spoke to, took it to mean *nationaliste*. Amid the festivities and fully multiracial carnival atmosphere there was the sense of ideological battles being waged everywhere. A National Party election poster sits on the same pole as posters advertising festival attractions. A beautifully religious poster advertises a show by the predominantly coloured Nu Vision Mass Choir entitled 'Revolution?'. A few shops down from the poster, a group of legally striking shop workers are holding placards protesting against miserable wages. And, most potently of all, twice a day, there is a silent parade of three placard-carrying protesters down the main street.

In a riot of postmodernism and with absolute poise, the demonstrators alternated between traditional tribal outfits and voortrekker costumes while proclaiming the need for a homeland and, subtextually, for more extensive representation of all shades of Afrikaans speakers at the festival. For much as the festival tries to hide behind the facade of language, there was little evidence to suggest that the organisers might be concerned with the dialects of Afrikaans spoken on the Cape Flats or elsewhere in South Africa outside the strongholds of Afrikanerdom. Unless it's in the uneasy stereotyping of the coon carnival that was flown down for the festival or the pubescent 'tribal' dancers that at times extended their repertoire to particularly engaging and well rehearsed street theatre. (It's rumoured that uncontracted

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buskers were not allowed to perform in the streets).

Which takes us to another corner of the ideological battlefield. There was a vague sense of enforced restraint on the more contemporary side of the visual arts and a strong aesthetic divide between the installation-based art and the stodgier, more traditional painting which occupied the mainstream at the festival.

The two main alternative exhibitions were 'Bloedlyn' (Bloodline) and 'Oos Wes Tuis Bes' (East West, Home is Best) and they both stood out like sore thumbs in relations to all the fleamarket art. 'Bloodline', curated by Lien Botha, brought together ten artists and ten writers in an attempt to explode the metaphor of the title. Veronica Malherbe felt compelled to camouflage a photo of an erect penis in a test tube with her own breast milk. Mark Coetzee gets away with his bloody genitals but they are almost unrecognizable in their explicitness. and Andrew Putter's semen-stained tissues in 'Oos Wes'? well, not everyone would presume it to be semen. But the artists did face the possibility of censorship should an artwork be deemed too offensive/unacceptable. When I asked Coetzee, co-curator of 'Oos Wes' who exactly it is who is doing the prescribing/proscribing, although he hinted towards the organisers, he acknowledged that these parameters are based in the broader culture in which the festival and the artists operate.

"You can't even come in here without reading that whole thing! It's steeped in discourse." said the boy to his girlfriend as she was about to step inside the small prefabricated house filled with mothballs and letters to artist Bridget Baker. The small housing unit is a component of 'Oos Wes' which consisted of fourteen such structures that had been converted by the invited artists into their interpretation of the title. So Baker's letters

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in mothballs, separated from the viewer by a crocheted screen, comments on the degree of privacy an artist allows herself to maintain. She lets us into the threshold of her personal space but no further. Andrew Putter fills a room with two months worth of personal rubbish that he would otherwise have thrown away. Club flyers. A Cosmopolitan desk calendar. Naked photographs with penises cut out. (He was cutting out the penises for another project). Old fruit juice bottles. The aforementioned semen-stained tissues. And so on. In his introductory piece Putter refers to an old woman who didn't have a rubbish bin. For her there was no place called 'away' where things could be thrown.

The most obviously beautiful piece on display and, after some consideration, possibly the most powerful, was Matthew Haresnape's piece. Entitled 'House of God', it had been reduced to its basic steel framework, given the steeple and cock of a church and tarred and feathered. Inside hung an old flag and a new flag at right angles to each other, both constructed from textured glass of varying opacity. The blunt but beautiful symbolism wasn't nearly so blunt as I supposed. Several festival goers thought that this meant that the church was going to be the mechanism which would heal the divide between the old and the new South Africa.

Haresnape's piece was also the sight of my most spectacular visual moment of the festival. I was playing a game of tag inside the wall-less church with a little coloured boy and at one point I stepped backwards out of the structure. He stood behind the transparent new South African flag with his head and a plastic watergun poking around the front, with the sodium tinged night sky of Oudtshoorn as his backdrop.

Despite the carnivalesque and thoroughly easy going atmosphere of the festival, it felt at times like a defense of Afrikaans

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rather than a celebration of it. Also evident was the insecurity of a language that is only a hundred years old and will almost certainly not survive in its current form for another century. But at the same time the use of text and language throughout the festival illustrates how much of a lingua franca we have in Afrikaans. And although Afrikaans is unlikely to remain anything resembling a 'pure' language, it has injected/inseminated so much of itself into other South African cultures and languages that most non-Afrikaans speakers understand good chunks of it. If ever a real common language emerges from our linguistic chaos of 11 official languages, it will be heavily influenced by Afrikaans.

This kind of linguistic fluidity is resonantly expressed in the texts from one of the bloodline collaborations 'enshrouded' by artist Mark Coetzee and writer Karin Cronje: "I am the earth. I am loved by those I house. *Bloed, so baie*, ah, a celebration, a visible membrane of life. *Die ligam hier, skitterrooi, die vrug van 'n lewe.*" ("Blood, so plentiful....The body here, brilliant red, the fruit of a life").

Indeed, underneath all the great art and the protests and the boerewors rolls and the half-baked art and the half-arsed tra-peze artists and the layers and layers of complexity and irony, underneath all this stuff was the heat and the dust, the arid desolation of the Karoo. And underneath the baking heat was an undeniable link to this land and the impact its sheer physicality has had on Afrikaans and South African consciousness.

To finish I should discuss a little town about 10 kilometres outside Oudtshoorn. Volmoed means 'full of courage' and it is the name of the site where Oudtshoorn was supposed to be built. The settlers of the time had other plans, however, and as a result, Volmoed has a church, a river, a few buildings and not

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much else. It is one of those extremely poor rural areas where the dirt roads constitute the only social space. It is also intensely beautiful in the harsh, vast and unforgiving way to which only the Karoo can lay claim. In the sand and gravel church garden the word 'volmoed' is constructed out of aloes, cacti and gravel. A metre high maybe and ten metres long. And somehow that stupid, martyred sentiment, out there in the loneliness, said more about Afrikaans than any work of art I've seen.

Pieter-Dirk Uys

Love and Penises

(2001)

I am not alone in viewing comedian Pieter-Dirk Uys and his alter-ego Evita Bezuïdenhout as one of the unofficial patron saints of South African life. Having been a thorn in the side of the National Party government in apartheid South Africa, Uys and Bezuïdenhout have continued to poke critical and well-intentioned fun at the ANC government. I spoke to him about his relationship with power.

“Don’t prove anything. Go for a walk in the snow. Don’t climb things. Don’t step off the path because you might fall through a crevice. Sit down. And listen to silence you’ve never heard before.”

Pieter-Dirk Uys is talking about a recent trip he made to Antarctica – which he says he needed to see before it melted away. And such silence sounds delicious, particularly in relation to the noisy, ranty political landscape with which Uys will shortly be engaging in his stage show Elections and Erections, his latest attempt at consciousness raising (“If I irritate people enough, eventually they start thinking for themselves”). Antarctica. Just think. No Julius Malema. No Karl Niehaus. No Tokyo Sexwale

mouthed off about how Cope are a bunch of witchdoctors – which is as dangerous as anything Malema has said. Just silence and Pieter-Dirk Uys. Doesn't it sound lovely?

But Uys also knows how to make a noise, metaphorically speaking, and there's little doubt that his alter ego Evita Bezuidenhout, who shares the role of mother of the nation with Winnie Mandela, has, in the course of her career, mouthed many more inflammatory remarks than young Julius. But the fictional former ambassador to a fictional former homeland always has that knowing looking in her eye, even when she is pretending not to. Malema, on the other hand, is devoid of the particular awareness needed for irony. And the two will no doubt be squared off against each other somewhere amid the madness and hysteria of Elections and Erections which opened in Durban on Tuesday night.

It's one of the sadnesses of life in contemporary South Africa that the multiple voices of Pieter-Dirk Uys, like the singular voice of Desmond Tutu, remain urgently relevant. Uys has spoken many times about how he and the rest of the country's comedians got a great big fright when apartheid ended because their core subject matter had disappeared overnight. But the absurd tragi-comedy of the National Party was very quickly replaced by that of the new ruling party. And the laughs, as it turns out, did not deviate fundamentally. What, after all, is the difference between an apartheid-built house and an RDP house? (There probably is a difference. Answers on a postcard to Pieter-Dirk Uys, Darling. And I'm not being a theatre queen. That's his address.)

The Winnie Mandela reference above is cogent. For Uys strongly believes that it is she who should be president. The middle classes are always a little shocked by this but it's not a





laugh line. Because if you look past the intense penchant for shoes and can truly handle the concept of a female revolutionary in a dehumanising war, which for many South Africans continues as you read these words, you'll recognise the resonance of the term "mother of the nation". Like Jacob Zuma, Mandela has always acknowledged the poor of South Africa. Unlike Zuma, who merely courts the poor but has done little for them, she has always held their interests close to her heart. Of course, she's a little cooked from years of fighting. But then we put up with Thabo Mbeki and his strangely slanted reality for nearly a decade. And at least Mandela's idiosyncracies come from her closeness to the ground, not her distance from it.

While Mandela is almost certainly not spent as a major political force, she is not connected to this year's election ballot. Evita Bezuidenhout is, however, having launched Evita's People's Party in 2008. Except she's not really going the full political hog. Instead, Bezuidenhout will be using Evita's People's Party as a voter education mechanism. Which is great but also unfortunate. For many years, people have been calling for Evita Bezuidenhout/Pieter-Dirk Uys to run for president and I'm sure I'm not alone when I say that I'd vote for him/her in half a second, something I can't comfortably say about a single contemporary South African politician.

"But why doesn't she run?" I say to Uys, aware of the pleading in my voice. "Well", he says, "the party who want to be government or opposition have to put down a R350 000 deposit. But the money's not the issue. For me the issue is the vote. I don't know if I want to fuck around with the seriousness of the vote. If I'm going to spend so much time telling people to be serious about the vote, am I now going to put Evita, who doesn't exist, into a position where people will vote for her?"

Then there's me. I take the buck. I registered the party”.

But he's skirting the issue and he knows it. Why doesn't he take it to the max and use Evita to get inside the political system? The answer is simple. “Because I don't want to go to fucking parliament and sit there like an arsehole, listening to these third rate people with fourth rate problems. They work for me. I don't work for them”.

And that's one of the problem with politics. Those whose skills and compassions we could really use in our political processes tend to find the whole thing anathema, not the least because they recognise the extreme difficulty of institutional change and the hugely bureaucratic nature of such things. And in South African politics, as in so many other countries, there are many, many things that need changing. It's a monolithic challenge that many prefer to challenge from other angles. And it's fully possible that Uys, who, realistically, wouldn't automatically be president if he were to enter the electoral system, might make more difference on-stage than in parliament.

But there remains a slim possibility that Evita will join the 2009 election ballot. Uys, says he can afford it, and that he is going to wait and see what the feeling is in the next few months. “But”, he says, “what she would say to voters is this: ‘Find the party you want as your government and the party you want as your opposition. And that vote – because it's your vote, because you're committed to it – will be a vote for me. You will be voting for *Tannie* because Tannie doesn't need your vote because Tannie is in charge anyway’.”

Andrew Verster

The Gods of Small Hands

(2003)

I spoke to Durban artist Andrew Verster about his exhibition Mendhi, his tribute to the ancient art of henna painting.

“In a way all the drawings are the same. But so is a prayer that has been said every day for five thousand years in a million different voices, always the same, but always different.”

Our hands and our prayers are inextricably linked. Our mind might dream of the temple but without our hands we cannot build it. They are the thing that makes us the most God-like. They give us the power of creation, the power to challenge or complement the divine.

And decorated in mendhi, they become even more powerful. I remember the first time I saw a woman’s hands covered in the dark red henna. I found them intensely beautiful and presumed that the designs were permanent, some kind of marriage tattoo. At the time I was too polite to ask. But now, many years later mendhi has been put through the trend machine and reflections of it are everywhere.

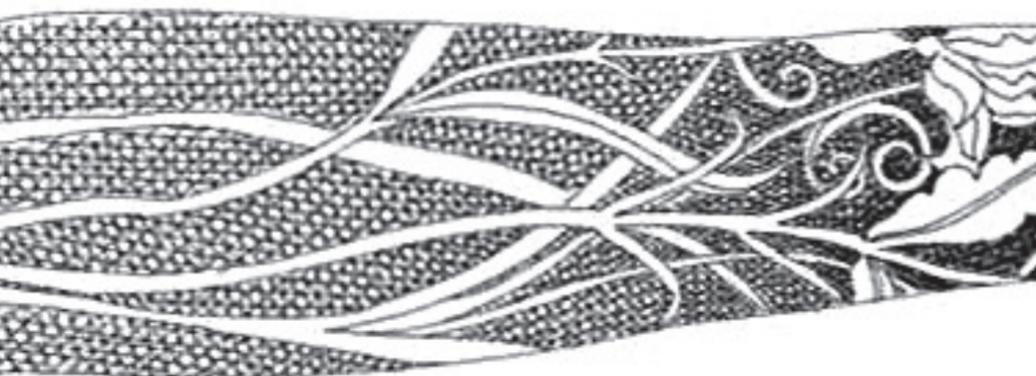
But in few places, bar the flesh of Indian women, are they as exquisite as in Verster's latest exhibition, simply entitled 'Mendhi', and consisting of drawings of mendhied hands, many of them set against an equally complex and delicate background. A whole gallery of them, each a pool of soundless thought in black ink on white paper. All profoundly similar, all profoundly different.

For many years now, Verster's art has been linked to India and its culture. But he has more than a outsider's interest in all of this. As well as living in Durban, with its large Indian population, and having visited India several times, he is involved with two friends, Marklyn Govender and Clint Singh, who dress brides and organise all aspects of the various marriage ceremonies during the week of celebrations. Over the years he has collected hundreds of photographs of the different brides they have worked with.

These photographs became a starting point for the drawings which, says Verster, allude to other forms of body decoration, such as tattooing and scarification, although as gallery goddess Linda Givon pointed out at the exhibition's opening, such forms of expression often end up as uniforms rather than individual expressions.

Similar hands appear in the backdrop of a set model that Verster has built for a production of *La Traviata* he will be involved in next year.

What is instructive about the photographs he shows me of the mock set, is that the hands, with the trick of scale performed by the model, look like the hands of God, the hands of creation in fact. And that, for me, is the key. Specifically in the images where the hands bleed into their blossoming background, there is an unveiling of the mechanisms of the universe, a contem-





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platively quiet study of creation itself. These countless marks of pen on paper reflect the building blocks of reality. The patterns that surround us, the patterns we cannot escape. Then there is also the dissolution of the gulf between the world and the self that accompanies such profound meditation.

I ask Verster if he's ever meditated without a brush or a pen, and he says no, that he's tried but has never managed the technique. "I want to. I really want to learn."

But these delicate, patient drawings are obvious spiritual experiences for the artist, revealing in a calming, quiet way a direct link with that thing called god, spelt with a small but all-pervasive 'g'. They are the voice of the jazz diva, spring rain hitting winter bark, the fur of the cat. They are messages in the branches of trees. The trapped beams of light that constitute matter.

And while Verster sticks strictly to his ardour for Moulin Rouge as a benchmark for what he's doing, I counter that these hands transcend the kitsch to provide a place of absolute stillness, a place where all the colour reduces, in crystalline form, to the white light of which it is composed.

Or, as Verster more moderately says, "it's more than just the superkitsch idea. It's important that they're not just idle decoration, like wallpaper, that they become something. After they're made, they each take on a kind of flavour, almost of celebration, a kind of a spirit. They're celebrating something which is not nominally what they are about. They stop just being hands." And become the world.

This reflection of organic reality is extended when Verster talks about the mistakes he made while drawing. He didn't destroy any of the drawings when they started to go astray, rather mutating the mistakes into dominant patterns, as in the evolutionary process. As a result, all the drawings survived, to sublime

effect, in one shape or form. And you'd be hard-pressed to decide which strokes are deliberate and which are compensatory.

"Some, I thought, had actually gone slightly too far in their disguise. But then I thought that was all right. You know there's room for that in life as well. You've got to put up with all these different people. You've got to be tolerant."

Verster talks about the appropriately monastic process that produced this body of work. "I'd get up in the morning," he says, "and I'd start working more-or-less as it got light. And I'd work right through the day ñ with a break for coffee or something to eat – right through until 11 at night. And it was 13, 14, 15 hours a day. And it became quite hypnotic. Because until you get an area covered, you can't see what it looks like because there's still a patch of white. And it's curious because you can have patches of white and areas where nothing is happening if they're meant to be.

"But if they're not meant to be and they're just broken space that hasn't been filled, you can't get an idea of the whole. If you're making an area of grey from thin strands, those strands must be the same distance apart, and if they get closer, you get too great a density and if they actually touch, you're lost. And that's really living dangerously. And I want that.

"Metaphorically, and almost physically, I hold my breath, And when I get to the end I exhale. I made it!

"I can imagine people running marathons, almost. These drawings were done very intensively – just over six weeks for 55 drawings – which when you look back on it, is quite astonishing because there's a lot of work involved.

"But in a sense, that wasn't bad, it was a nice way of working. And they were hypnotic in the sense that I didn't want to give up, didn't want to stop."

And Everything Turned Itself Inside Out

24 very short stories
about Andrew Verster
(2008)

1. Yellow. Afternoon light streaming in through the window. Andrew Verster sitting in his kitchen. The wall is painted bright yellow, gently mottled, suggesting ochre. It looks as if it has always been that colour, as if no other colour would do. We talk between the silences.

2. Cacophony. Outside Andrew's house in Musgrave Road, the sky goes mad at dusk. It is the specific sound of birds in trees near shopping centres, a high pitched metallic shriek of a million voices – somehow more cacophonous, more disturbed, than the same sound in the bushveld.

3. Talking with Hands. The stars are laughing tears into Andrew's sometimes paisley heart. I am thinking of his images of hands and arms and feet and bodies. Paintings and drawings which contain the world, whole universes. Now all stories belong to all people.

4. Musgrave Centre. It somehow makes perfect sense that An-

drew Verster lives opposite Musgrave Centre in Durban. He is the very antithesis of mall culture. Still, I can easily picture him walking through the milling crowd. I imagine his gait to reflect restrained impatience.

5. Studio. Skylights provide the benchmark of colour. Paintings are everywhere. On the floor, the overflow of everything is diffracted into countless tiny splatters of paint, multicoloured constellations. This is the painted space in which the residues of Andrew Verster and Aidan Walsh's work processes accrete. It is in a sense a true marriage of true brushes.

6. Tattoos. I am still waiting for Andrew to get a tattoo. It seems inevitable. Which probably means it will never happen.

7. Aidan Walsh. Aidan is Andrew's life partner and best friend who lives with him in their double story Edwardian house. An acclaimed painter of landscapes, his work lays claim to a hyper-reality in which time layers itself upon itself in perfect big sky blues. He and Andrew have not had an exhibition together in 40 years. This year, breaking the pattern, they exhibited work in the same gallery – the KNZSA in Durban – at the same time.

8. Mocha Pot. A talk with Andrew always includes a pot of coffee. It is always made in an old school Italian mocha pot and often decanted into another pot. The grounds that accumulate on the bottom of the filter and around the seal are not washed away. The result is a metallic tang in the coffee notes that is tuned to the metallic clash of bird-tongue outside.

9. Process. For Andrew the process of painting remains a pro-

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cess of discovery, even after decades of engaging with the canvas. The finished work is never completely premeditated, as he allows the universe to show him things he didn't know he knew.

10. Seventy-One. Andrew is turning seventy-one this year. This seems absurd.

11. The Visible Spectrum. Andrew increasingly uses colours that are about to slide off the visible spectrum, colours that hum and vibrate. The result is often that our sense of depth and dimension is interrupted.

12. Orientation. I have interviewed Andrew many times and spoken more casually many more. We have never devoted much conversation to matters of sexuality. We both agree that we don't think it matters much. At the same, I can't help thinking that it informs everything we do.

13. Swimming pool. Between the yellow of the kitchen and the white of the studio is the shimmering blue, a flag of water, a swimming pool. The water is not separate from the light which it reflects. As Verster paints – every day, all day – the water's ripples accompany him, fluid, chaotic order, the waving matters that defines all of reality.

14. Openings. Andrew is nearly always at exhibition openings. His gaze is both supportive and properly critical. He is not a hobnobber and usually arrives early and disappears early.

15. Hinduism. Faith, cosmology and history – we bind them up together, tell ourselves what is true. Andrew professes his

ANDREW VERSTER

religious belief to be Hinduism, with its full-spectrum acknowledgement of the everything. In recent years, it has become almost impossible to separate his work from his Hinduism. The overflowing cornucopia of the universe seems to be his major concern, and even when it is invisible, the Hindu pantheon of infinity is always present.

16. Durban. The city in which Andrew Verster lives. A place, it seems, that is his halfway house between birth and India. Not only because of its obvious Indian connections, but because it is a city that is a visual, spiritual and cultural polyphony. It is also a place that artists often leave, despite the fact that it is one of this country's most fecund pools of talent. They leave for bigger things, for foreign narratives, and because it difficult for young talent to sell work in Durban.

17. Theatre. Andrew is a persistent patron of good theatre. When he is particularly impressed with a play, he sends me an email, telling me why I should see it.

18. Multidisciplinary. Andrew Verster walking through walls that he doesn't even know are there.

19. Priest. There is something both priest-like and highly secular about Andrew. Evangelical and sceptical. Pragmatic and pure. He takes joy in life's contradictions and understands the difference between distance and cynicism. I once referred to him in print as Durban's patron saint of the arts. For that he thanked me.

20. The Eraser Story. Andrew tells me the story of a young Chinese schoolboy who had got into trouble for making holes in

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his eraser. When it came to eraser inspection at the boy's school, he was severely castigated for the object's Swiss-cheese disposition. Andrew thinks he should have been celebrated for his difference.

21. *Indian Delights*. I sat and talked to Andrew for some hours one day, recording our words onto magnetic tape. Later that day I was at Impress Printers in Springfield Park, where the factories have congregated in slight disguise, pretending not to be factories but slick corporate headquarters. I was checking the colour on a print job and I couldn't help noticing some A0 sheets impositioned with pages from the local culinary classic *Indian Delights* for which Andrew did the illustrations. They are printers' test sheets, and have been re-used between plates to clean the print rollers. The result is layers of words, recipes and images superimposed on each other. The sheets are beautiful, perfectly redolent of everything. I tell the technician how beautiful they are. He lets me take two sheets. One for Andrew. One for me.

22. Blue. An antechamber between Andrew's lounge and his kitchen is painted a deep blue that chooses not to pulsate. It is the colour of night swimming, of star-strewn skies lightened by moonlight.

23. Departure. When I leave Andrew's house I know I will return. When we leave this world, I think we might return.

24. Everything. Stories about everything and nothing make us what we are, provide the illusions we need to exist. But just because they are illusions does not mean that they are not beautiful.

William Kentridge

Occupational Therapy

(2004)

William Kentridge is South Africa's most well-known artistic export. He remains most famous for his short animated films. I spoke to him about these shorts, which are now collected as 9 Films and are prefaced by a more complex animation called Journey to the Moon, which incorporates non-drawn material.

William Kentridge's primary medium is charcoal on paper. Unlike most animators, he does not use thousands of different cels but instead draws onto a piece of paper, takes a photograph or two of the image, erases the element he is animating, redraws the next frame and takes another photograph. And so on, until eventually there are thousands of photographs that constitute a film. But each erasure is imperfect and so images leave behind traces of their history.

This is one of the most primitive forms of cinema, and Kentridge is its master. It is an extremely laborious process, one that the artist himself admits is "perilously close to occupational therapy". A week's worth of drawings will give him 40 seconds of footage.





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Sheer volume of time aside, it is a remarkably efficient and compact process compared to the extravaganza involved in making normal cinema or animation. Kentridge might use 20 pieces of paper to make an eight-minute film, as opposed to the thousands of individually drawn frames that are used for a conventional cartoon.

This erasure technique is used by Kentridge in a series of short films he made since 1989. In these films, which explore the world of mining magnate Soho Eckstein, Kentridge's alter ego, Felix Teitlebaum, and Mrs Eckstein, the woman who connects them to each other on the artificial landscape of early 1970s Johannesburg, the technique itself becomes a reflexive element of a society that is erasing the past.

When Kentridge first started using the technique, he had no idea that it would have such metaphoric significance or endurance. In fact, he says, he viewed it more as a mistake that he could only execute an imperfect erasure. And only after he'd completed several films, did he understand that the erasure and the trace of the marks was part of the meaning of the films as well.

In Durban's City Hall on Friday, Kentridge will be showing the nine films, with the Sontonga Quartet performing the soundtrack. Partly a tribute to the first days of cinema, when silent movies were accompanied by live scored performances, Kentridge says that viewing the films on a large scale with live musicians is "a different experience".

"And it's a double vision – you see the film and below the screen you see the performers making the music. A lot of people who'd heard the music before very many times suddenly said that they heard it in a very different way."

In the catalogue for one of Kentridge's shows, one of the

writers refers to Adorno's assertion that after Auschwitz, it would be barbaric to write poetry. Likewise, Kentridge himself talks about the impossibility for himself personally of creating utopian landscapes in the manner of the expressionists. The lyrical and the poetic are seen as too great a luxury in such a broken landscape as Johannesburg's.

Yet, at the same time, the poetic, Arcadian images Kentridge professes not to be able to draw without descending into kitsch are about loss – and, if not about loss, he acknowledges, at least about uncomplicated desire.

Conversely, his short films, while they walk the line between hope and darkness, are also deeply lyrical and poetic in a far more 20th century manner, and contain an iridescent but deeply embedded set of desires.

But, says Kentridge, that's really something that a viewer would see more clearly than he ever would or could. "I'm working on them frame by frame", he says, "sequence by sequence, in the hope that they'll add up to something coherent. If there is a smoothness or a lyricism in it, then that's great but that's not an aim or an objective. But I think the way they're structured and the way that they work from the inside out may have more to do with the way one would write a poem than the way one would write a paragraph of prose."

And the films do feel like incredibly dense literary works, despite the fact that they are very short stories.

The preface to the *9 Films, Journey to the Moon*, is Kentridge's tribute to the pioneers of film. Combining "live" animation in his studio with charcoal animations and more experimental techniques, it is a very beautiful piece of cinema that explores the artistic process itself.

Omar Badsha

Small World

(2009)

The work of activist photographer Omar Badsha has been central to the photographic life of South Africa. I spoke to him about the cultural and political life of South Africa.

Omar Badsha has lived an extraordinarily productive life. The overused phrase “renaissance man” barely begins to describe the scope of his activities over the last forty years. A self-taught artist and photographer, Badsha is also a cultural and political activist, a former trade union leader and an historian. All these things flow together, however, and from the beginnings in the 1960s when Badsha was at high school, his political activism and his artistic output have been two sides of the same coin

In the '70s, he was part of a small group of people who were instrumental in reviving the progressive trade union movement in South Africa. He was involved in a precursor the Council of South Africa Trade Unions (Cosatu), and in 1974 became the secretary of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union. In the '80s he worked as the photographic co-ordinator for the Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development. During this period, he

also established both the Centre for Documentary Photography at the University of Cape Town, and the influential photographer's collective Afrapix with Paul Weinberg.

And yet his own work as a photographer has had a substantial impact on the cultural and political life of South Africa. He has been critically acclaimed as a documentary photographer, exhibiting around the country and the world. His work has won him a string of awards and been published in series of book, ranging from *Letter to Farzānah* in 1976 (which was banned at the time), to *Imperial Ghetto* in 2002. He currently lives in Pretoria and is the founder and director of SA History online, one of the largest websites to cover local history and culture.

His exhibition currently on show at the Durban Art Gallery, 'A World of Small Things' reflects the work of a photographer whose content is both an extension of his life's work, and a portrait of communities around the country and around the world. From casually intimate snaps of the life and times of Grey Street to a chronicle of the trade union and non-racism movements in South Africa, to explorations of the hippy community in Christiania outside Copenhagen and the communities in Gujarat, Badsha's work is a testament to the perseverance and determination of the many communities around the world that exist on the global margins of a small planet. In the process, he fundamentally redefines notions of centre and periphery.

I spoke to him about just a few of the issues that that are raised in the extensive retrospective of his work on the walls of the Durban Art Gallery.

Peter Machen: Since I first arrived in Durban in 1989, Grey Streets and its adjacent streets and alleys have been my favourite part of the city. Part of me has grown up in those streets, and





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continues to do so on an almost daily basis. So it is doubly fascinating for me to see those same streets occupied by another reality that is nonetheless linked to my own. I'm interested on your thoughts and feelings on the names changes to the streets that are mentioned every now and then, but which never seem to come to pass.

Omar Badsha: Grey Street, from its earliest days, was a very mixed community. The bottom section was changed to Broad Street after whites objected. The African markets, businesses, trade union and political offices were very much part of Grey Street – but this all began changing after the 1950s. I have no problem with the proposed name changes. They are a necessary part of addressing the cultural biases of our past.

PM: Do you think that the limits imposed on South African photographers during the decades of apartheid lead to the production of more interesting and perhaps more challenging images?

OB: Yes – they did, because we had to grapple with the issue of representing a view of our world to counter a view in which we were portrayed either as victims, people practicing strange customs, or people happy with our lot under apartheid.

It is interesting to note that, while white photographers went out into black worlds and were welcomed, black photographers did not have the same access. This created a one sided-view and limited our scope to tell the South African story as freely as white photographers.

PM: In your book *Imperial Ghetto*, you wrote, “Now at the beginning of the 21st century, the city and its new ghettos lie awake, ill prepared and stubborn in their dealing with the new economic and political refugees from the African and Asian countryside”. You continue by saying, “these new immigrants carry

new narratives of their long journey and hopefully new energy.” My sense of things is very much that the immigrants that line the streets of inner Durban have much to offer our society on many levels. Yet most of them live on the very margins, constantly in fear of deportation and holding cells, and it certainly seems that the hand that was held out to South Africa during its darkest years by the rest of the continent has not been returned, except perhaps on a diplomatic level. How do you think we can counter the rising xenophobia in South Africa? And do you think that there are political motivations on a national level for not doing so?

OB: Like all immigrants they have to struggle to make themselves seen and heard. It’s a long struggle – they must develop their capacity to make themselves seen. To do that requires at least a decade. In the interim we need to embrace them. This will begin to happen as soon as many of these immigrants settle down, have children and commit themselves to staying.

PM: Many of the images in ‘A World of Small Things’ chronicle the growth of trade unions and political protest in general. In post-1994 South Africa, the position of trade unions has become both more complex and less central in the political landscape. And of course, protests have begun anew, and we have once more seen gatherings broken up by police and rubber bullets, although less brutally than in the past. There are no images in the gallery of this new wave of protest. Have you been documenting this continuing struggle?

OB: No – unfortunately I have not had the time to do much work. Age, health and other photographic concerns take up my time.

PM: In the exhibition, you chronicle your experience of both Copenhagen and Gujarat in the 90s. I was struck by the dif-

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ferences in the images, not merely the obvious differences that came from the places themselves, but also the differences that came from within you as a person and a photographer, differences that I can only describe in terms of tone and feeling. Am I speaking out of turn, or is this something that you have contemplated before?

OB: I am sure that there are differences – they are two different societies, and in both I had to grapple with trying to understand them, to decode what I was seeing.

PM: Do you ever feel conflicts between truthful documentation and aesthetic decisions?

OB: Yes – it is in the tensions between these two that one grows, artistically.

PM: You are, among other things, an artist, a photographer, an activist and an historian. Has it been important for you to do all these different things and occupy all these different roles, or has it just been how things have happened?

OB: I like to see all these roles as part of a continuum. These roles came naturally to me as someone who grew up under apartheid, and was lucky to have been sensitised at a young age to a world view that demanded that if you needed to be free, then you first had to learn to free your self from racism, which meant that you needed to critically engage with the world around you. I always saw myself as part of a broad community – and not purely as an individual – but those who know me know that I value my independence and am not afraid to take on the establishment, no matter the class or colour of the persons concerned.

PM: You have spoken before about how the control of imagery was central to the mechanisms of both apartheid and the resistance movement. And the same is true today in terms of the

wars in Palestine and Iraq, (the second Gulf War being perhaps the world's first art-directed war). Except, now the internet has become another variable, a conduit into a more pluralistic way of seeing. What do you think of the net as a publishing medium for documentary photographers? And what do you think of this new phenomenon in which civilians in war-torn countries are becoming documenters of their own realities?

OB: I believe that the internet and the convergence of the multimedia forms that are now imbedded into the internet provide us with new challenges and freedoms to begin addressing the key issues of the day.

PM: Finally, you have been an agent of history in many ways, not least starting the Afrapix collective with Paul Weinberg, which spawned so much talent. Do you see a new generation of photographers rising to document the challenges and textures of contemporary South Africa?

OB: Yes – each generation learns from the past – there is no clear break. South African documentary photographers, writers and artists have always been central to shaping our times. We have been forced to engage with fundamental issues of identity, exploitation, poverty and a strong belief that we can change. We have the capacity to change and not just be victims. The challenges we faced of poverty and inequality, of building awareness etc, are still with us. In fact the world has become a harsher place for the majority of our people, and yes, a new generation has begun to deal with some of those issues.

I have, in the past, driven a range of people mad in my quest not only to stick out the party until the first rays of the sun, but also to find the very best spot at which to witness their entry into the brand newness of the day. There have been mornings when I've made my sisters and brothers drive me all over town for a time-lagged sequence of glorious sunrises.

I have too many memories of leaving a club well into day-break. While most of the other 36-hour party people were cursing the brightness of the light, this little ring-eyed vampire was only too happy to see the constellations of morning clouds and to bear witness to the existential crispness of the light and the possibilities of a new day – despite the fact that my physical body was often begging for relief.

But instead of a sensible sleep, we would head down to Battery Beach and sit on the dunes as the planet slowly rolled forward into the sun. On momentous mornings we were privy to the strangely moving spectacle of a complete Shembe ceremony, the near-death experience of a different kind of Christian baptism, with the Shembes lying exhausted prostrate on the ground, their torsos and arms lifting in perfect harmony as the sun drifts slowly over the horizon, killing star by silver star.

Or we might have found ourselves a little further south, at Riptides, underneath the old Sand Pebbles night club. Riptides opens up onto the beach and I remember drinking very bad black coffee on the balcony one broken morning with my boyfriend-at-the-time. Next to us stood a man whose face wore the effects of a probable lifetime of alcoholic mornings, afternoons

Till the Morning Light

and evenings.

As he lifted his draught to his lips – most of it sloshing straight back out of the corners of his mouth – he did one of those drunken neck-rolls. Then he raised his index finger to the horizon and drawled: “Where’s it gonna come up? Over there, or over there, or over there?”

He moved his finger from point to point. “Where’s it gonna come up? Motherfucking mother of us all. Where’s it gonna come up?”

Now that last little profanity might offend your ears, but it was one of the most profound statements I’ve heard, from any drunkard or teetotaler. It was a two-minute movie, bathed in truth, elegant in its clumsiness.

Night is where we lose ourselves. But morning finds us every time and puts us in our place.

John Pilger

The Wars that Wage
(2010)

John Pilger is a war correspondent in the broadest sense. Since the early '60s he has been covering the wars waged against humanity around the planet.

These wars have been waged with napalm and firebombs, scud missiles and AK47s, chemical warfare and child soldiers. But the horrors of what we consider to be “conventional” warfare is equally matched by the horrors executed in economic terms by Western powers and multinational corporations – the decimation of national economies in the name of structural adjustment and the human suffering and loss of life that results, the systematic stripping of the physical and human resources of the third world, the economic totalitarianism that has so often been made a condition of the “independence” of third world countries from their colonial masters.

Our minds and heart recoil when we think of the Jewish holocaust or the holocaust of the slave trade, and yet we manage to live in a global society which manages to absorb – without a single front page headline – a holocaust of nearly ten million children dying every year from malnutrition, as Pilger points out below.



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Through Pilger's films and writings – which spans more than four decades, and includes more than 50 documentaries and countless newspaper and magazine features, many of which have been collected in his books – the confluence of all this violence is revealed. The war promulgated by Margaret Thatcher against British miners in the '80s is seen to be part of the same systematic onslaught of the powerful against the powerless that includes the American invasion of Iraq, the battles of the landless peoples in South Africa and around the world, and a global military complex that is largely controlled and supplied by the West, with supercapitalist profit as its guiding principle, what Pilger calls the economic “supercult” of neoliberalism.

In a sobering interview, I chatted to Pilger about these seemingly endless wars, the rising world consciousness that exists in the face of this aggression, and about how we can respond personally to an increasingly unequal world.

Peter Machen: In the introduction to *Hidden Agendas* (1998), you wrote about the beacons of hope which shine light onto the imperial darkness: the heroic individuals and organisations – ordinary people all over the world – who are fighting for all of us to maintain our humanity.

I wrote a short column about the same time as your book was published, with the same theme and expressing a similar sentiment of hope for the future. But a decade later it seems that even as activists around the world have become more determined, and western citizens more aware of the vast inequalities and the grossness and emptiness of a system that exists in their name, the mechanism of state-sponsored global capital has become ever more vigorous, more controlling, more violent. Do you think that we, the people, can win this war?

John Pilger: It's around a decade since you wrote that column, and that's a very short time. Look at the previous decade. Would you have predicted the collapse of apartheid in your own country? Perhaps you did predict it. Many didn't. That said, we have to be patient with history. Think how long it took to win the war against slavery and for democratic rights for women. Yes, these days are often dark times – the regime in Washington is dangerous and rampant – and yet I have never known a time when people are more aware, especially of the often subtle ways great power touches their lives. It's this consciousness that will force its way past the militarists and those who promote superculcs in the name of rational economics. The most recent, singular achievement of the last decade is that the largest nation in the Middle East, Iran, has not been attacked by the United States. Why? Because of popular opposition around the world and in the United States. Taking your broad question, I don't know if "people can win this war", but I do know that people are never still, and that there is always "a seed beneath the snow". That's the lesson of history.

PM: The strength of the phrase "they are few, we are many" seems diminished when it is "they" who have most of the weapons of war, and who control virtually everything. I am starting to feel, like so many others, helpless and often depressed (a thousand page of Pilger didn't make me feel better, but it made me angrier). Are my notes of defeatism simply part of "their" plan?

JP: Yes, your sense of "defeatism", as you put it, is part of "their" plan. Persuading people that they can do nothing to change their lives, to bring decency and justice into human affairs and that they are isolated – in other words, persuading them to believe that history has ended – is a constant theme of

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today's media. Understanding this is the first step to overcoming it. And people who take action to overcome it have little time to be "depressed".

PM: I studied economics for too many years for my own mental health. And the core of it, from high school to honours level, was devoted to justifying neoliberalism – in almost exclusively theoretical terms and ignoring most of history. A tiny proportion of seven years of study was devoted to alternative economic models, models that often make more intuitive sense and bear more relation to reality. Do you think that the academics bear much blame for the state of the world which you depict in your writing and filmmaking?

JP: I do believe the academics bear much blame for instilling into students that there is only one way to organise our economic lives. Disseminating the propaganda of so-called neo-liberalism, an anti-human super-cult that makes no sense except for those who make huge profits from its imposition, has made a mockery of so much scholarship, with its corporate training disguised as education.

PM: Like an increasing proportion of consumers, I try to use my economic power responsibly – boycotting multinationals wherever possible, trying to buy products that have been produced locally and non-exploitatively, helping those around me whenever I can. While this means that my own complicity in an oppressive system is reduced (although I still drive a car, I still pay my water-bill and the payments on my house to multinational corporations), I can't help but feel as if I'm farting against thunder. At the same time we could close down irresponsible corporates such as McDonalds and Nike tomorrow simply by not buying their products. I understand also that having such economic choices is usually a middle-class luxury. Do you think

that such actions are ultimately of much use?

JP: A suggestion – try not to describe yourself as a “consumer”. That’s the jargon of the propaganda we’re discussing. Yes, some boycotts are ineffective; but many are not. For example, the boycott of South African goods during the latter years of apartheid contributed to bringing down the regime. Multinationals were driven out of Burma because of boycotts in the United States. In some of its Indonesian factories, Nike was forced to accede to workers’ demands for improved conditions because of the threat of boycotts. However, boycotts only work when, as in South Africa, they are part of a wider political action

PM: Western aggression is often justified as defending a threat to “our way of life”. Of course, the great irony is that it is governments and capital which have consistently been the great threat to our ways of life. The beginning of my own sense of activism was founded not only in the fate of others, but also in the intrusion of the state and capital into my own middle-class life, both during apartheid and after its apparent demise.

Constant surveillance, the destruction of public space, the control of the banking system, the loss of freedoms of assembly, the enormous cost of private healthcare, the colonisation of our physical and emotional life by marketing: these things drive me mad at times. The terrible things that happen to far less fortunate others drive me to the edge of sanity. And yet so many middle-class people seem fine with it all.

How do you think people manage to absorb all of this stuff and still feel fine? And how you cope on an emotional level with your super-awareness of the ongoing atrocities on the planet? Do you ever get depressed? Is that a stupid question?

JP: Yes, I sometimes get depressed. I’ve noticed the word “depressed” keeps cropping up in your questions. The kind of de-

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spair you're alluding to is blown away by bold, direct action.

PM: Do you think that in political terms psychopaths tend to rise to the top, or is it the process of rising to the top that induces psychopathy? I use this word, because I can't think of another word to describe the minds that can allow countless thousands to die in the pursuit of economic and political power. How did we allow them to get to this point? I think also of Robert Mugabe who gave his people health and education but is now taking everything away.

JP: No, I don't believe psychopaths necessarily rise to the top, but an unaccountable system almost guarantees that sociopaths do – the list is long. That's why totalitarianism is defeated and democracy is only true when everyone is accountable.

PM: Do you think that the endless expansion of empire and multinationals is part of a broad plan, or is it just a relentless tendency, the mechanisms of history playing themselves out?

JP: I don't know what you mean by "the mechanisms of history playing themselves out". This suggests that everything is pre-ordered, almost pre-ordained, and that we might as well retire to the nearest monastery. The opposite is true, in my view. I also believe that it's clear to most people – particularly those who are at the heel-end of great power's boot – that decent humanity has nothing in common with a system that has caused the greatest divisions in our history. There are different names for this system, and different versions on display, but basically it's the same thing

PM: Do you think, given the available resources and technology, that it is possible to provide for the needs and comfort of all the earth's people?

JP: Yes, I do. The evidence is abundant. Indeed, it's ridiculous, given the resources and technology available, that 26 000 chil-

dren die every day from the effects of poverty. No child should die for want of basic nourishment. Nothing is more absurd.

PM: One thing that I simply fail to understand is why these people at the top need so much power, such an infinity of wealth. What do you think it does for them? Do you think that they are people like you and me who have simply sacrificed their souls for lucre? Because it almost seems darker than that, it almost feels – and I am being allegorical – that we are being colonised by another species, one that cares nothing for the profoundly beautiful experience of being human.

JP: I agree with you. I don't understand why certain people "at the top" need so much wealth. But "need" is not a word in their vocabulary, because they never have to use it. Their affliction is known as "greed" – and the greedier they are, the more they believe it's their divine right to have more. They must be very tedious company.

PM: Finally, I know that you're a reporter, not an adviser to the world, but what can ordinary people, people reading this interview, for example, do to fight this war against inequality? How can they make a difference?

JP: First of all, people have to want to "fight this war against inequality". That's the first step. When they take that first step, and like people all over the world who have fought, often literally for their freedom, they won't need to be told what to do next.

PM: John, thank you so much for this interview, and also for your lack of moral relativism, your insistence that there are unarguable truths to be found in this world.



Raj Patel

Turning the tables on food,
politics and economics
(2010)

Peter Machen talks to writer and economist Raj Patel about his two books Stuffed&Starved and The Value of Nothing.

Raj Patel is the author of two books about the construction of the modern world. In *Stuffed&Starved*, Patel shows us the true nature of the global food system, and how the concerns of both producers and consumers of foods have no relevance in a system which is geared exclusively towards extracting profit. In *The Value of Nothing*, he similarly shows how the pricing mechanisms of the global marketplace bring little benefit to anyone other than corporations. Although these path-breaking books are essentially about economics, Patel's deals with the world not in terms of economic theory, but through the course of historic and contemporary reality. Without a note of conspiracy, he shows us the simple but incredible truths about the structures and institutions that attempt to rule our lives, fairly successfully for the most part. I spoke to him about these two remarkable books.

Peter Machen: Hi Raj. Thanks for talking to me. In both *The Value of Nothing* and *Stuffed & Starved*, you talk about the need not only for the global North to cancel the debt of the global South, but also for reparation payments from the North to the South, as compensation for colonialism, post-colonial imperialism and the impact of climate change which has largely been created by the actions of the North. I completely agree with your position that such reparations are just and would help to improve global equality, but do you think that there's any kind of chance that reparations would ever happen?

Raj Patel: Is it easy to imagine that governments responsible for slavery and colonialism will ever open their wallets and say 'sorry'? No. But everyone agrees that it's wrong to profit from crimes, and it's hard to think of anything more profitable or violent than colonisation. To demand reparation is to demand justice from empire. Che Guevara had a line about 'fighting for the revolution that you will never see' and it's worth remembering that no matter how unlikely they are to succeed, the demand for reparations remains a just cause.

There's also an instrumental reason to persist: demanding justice for empire's past crimes makes it easier to demand justice for its present ones. Climate change is an on-going harm – 300 000 people die every year from it. A vigorous push for reparations makes it easier to organize and achieve victories for today's victims.

PM: The failure of modern democracies to look after the interests of their citizens is a central theme that runs through both of your books. And one of the suggestions you make, based on examples from around the world, is that much greater participatory democracy needs to take place at a local or municipal level. But one of the things that often needs to happen for this to take

place is that apathy needs to be displaced. Do you think that this apathy, where it exists, is a result of people's alienation and isolation from real political processes? Or could it be something more intrinsic to human behaviour?

RP: I think we're living through a time that reminds us quite how global, and fundamental to human nature, is the yearning to govern ourselves. From South Africa to Libya to the US to China to India, you can find protests in which people are anything but apathetic. More than taking to the streets for a couple of weeks, people are ready for the long haul too. In North America, where it seems like indolence toward government reigns supreme, over 200 cities have food policy councils, in which ordinary people are working together to make sure no one goes hungry in their municipalities ever again. What needs to be plucked out is not apathy, but the far more powerful illusion that we are impotent in the face of our governments. Luckily, there's something in the air right now that reminds us quite how powerful we can be.

PM: In *Stuffed & Starved*, you talk a little about the conscientised consumer and the limits faced in the range of actions made available to them. For example, you refer to yourself as supporting fair trade products but also recognise the limits of fair-trade in challenging the systemic inequalities in the global food system. Do you think that there is an authentic place in the globalised marketplace for the conscious consumer? Or do you think that direct action is the only way to make a real and lasting difference?

RP: I think we can all agree that ethical and thoughtful consumerism is better than wicked and thoughtless consumerism. And there's a gamut of things that lie between 'smarter' shopping and throwing a brick through a McDonald's window. In San Francisco, for instance, we mobilized health professionals, small

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businesses and concerned parents to pass a health ordinance that prevented McDonald's from putting toys in their Happy Meals. It was a small but significant victory – it meant that we were able to beat back, just a little, the wave of inducements our children face to consume junk food. Of course, the American Pediatric Association points out that advertising anything to kids under the age of 8 is unconscionable – kids can't tell the difference between advertising and lies. It's why more children trust Ronald McDonald than they do their high school science teacher.

Our small legislative victory in San Francisco made us just a little bit freer, as parents and citizens, to encourage our kids to do the right thing. True, the playing field is still tilted toward the fast food giants – for every dollar spent persuading kids to eat the right thing, \$500 is spent persuading them to eat things that are harmful to them. That's why we're also taking on everything from the quality of school meals to the availability of gardens to low wages to ensure that everyone in our city has the freedom, time and money to eat well. All of this happens through direct action, and none of it happens through ethical shopping.

PM: At the same time, the linguistic act of talking about ourselves as consumers, conscious and enlightened or not, keeps us within the discourse of the food system. Can you think of a more appropriate term than 'consumer'?

RP: You're absolutely right. I think it's important for us to recognize our many selves – citizens, friends, lovers, community members. The Italian Slow Food movement encourages us to think of ourselves as 'co-producers' of food, as collaborators in the great chain of growing and eating. Thinking of ourselves as human beings with rich social connections, rather than utility-maximising individuals, is vital if we're to take on some of

the powerful institutions and groups that take away our freedom in the food system, or anywhere else for that matter.

PM: It's possible that one of the reasons that middle class people who care about such things are reluctant to participate in direct action is because such action invariably induce a violent response from the state. All around the world, from Durban to Rio to London to Beijing, such protests usually get met with police batons and rubber bullets – if not real bullets. And if the middle-classes deign to join the protests, their class status offers them no protection from police brutality (although it will no doubt help them get out of jail more quickly if they get arrested). But while it might sounds like paranoia to many, for me this is ample proof of the fact that we live in a global police state, which allows our freedoms to exist within very defined parameters. Do you think that this is an accurate reading? Or am I indeed paranoid?

RP: It certainly appears as if we've the right to free speech just so long as we don't actually try to exercise it. Especially after the terrorist attacks in the US in 2001, governments around the world used the opportunity to ratchet up surveillance of citizens, lumping together dissidents under the banner of 'terrorists'. Protests these days are all too often militarized and scary affairs. But it's not always true that the police are mere jackbooted thugs. In Wisconsin, for instance, police were called upon to arrest the pro-union protesters. Not only did the police refuse to haul the citizens away, some police even joined the protest.

PM: Towards the end of *Stuffed & Starved*, you write about food corporations acquiring medical product lines which sell products to counter the obesity caused by their primary products. The increasing consolidation and co-operative behaviour between drug companies, chemical companies, seed companies

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and the food industry, suggests to many on both the right and left a conspiracy in which the same companies that are making you sick with their subnutritious food are selling you the medicine to make you better. Do they have a point?

RP: Most of the most pernicious behaviour in modern capitalism isn't a conspiracy – it happens in plain sight. So: Nestle, the world's largest chocolate vendor, is also the owner of the Jenny Craig weight loss brand. Unilever owns Ben and Jerry's ice cream, and Slimfast. All the major food companies are interested in 'nutraceuticals' – foods that have some sort of pharmacological health benefit associated with them.

None of this is a conspiracy – it's just good business. We oughtn't to be surprised that corporations commit capitalist acts. Companies are legally bound to generate profit for shareholders, and, if they don't, their officers will be fired. But that's why we need to be suspicious of corporations offering 'win-win' solutions like Diet Coke Plus – Coca Cola's attempt to eliminate the need for a good diet by bundling a dose of vitamins with its zero calorie drink. If the issue is that people are working too hard and aren't rich enough to afford the time to enjoy decent nutritious food, then the problem really isn't that their diet cola lacks nutrition. These quick fixes prevent us from tackling the deeper problems of inequity and injustice in our food system, often caused by the very companies peddling snake oiled solutions.

PM: At home, I grow all my own salad ingredients, and, to a less successful extent, vegetables. I often seek growing advice from websites and what I find very interesting about these websites and forums is that most people who are involved in small-scale farming of any kind recognise it as a political or anti-corporate act, while people who are solely supermarket consumers seldom

recognise the political nature of food in any great magnitude. Is it possible that the simple act of growing your own food is both a political act and a politicising act?

RP: I think you've hit at one of the most important ideas here, Peter. Ask an American ten-year-old where tomatoes come from, and they'll say 'supermarkets'. Most kids in the US have no ideas where their food comes from, and I fear a similar trend in South Africa. The saddest thing is that kids have no idea that growing food can be almost as pleasurable as eating it.

I work in support of an 'Edible Schoolyard' near my home, where low-income children learn how to grow food, and then learn how to cook it, and then learn how to eat it around a table without the TV on. And kids start engaging with one another, they act out less, and they teach their parents how to cook too. One of the most important parts of the food movement these days is that it recognizes that pleasure can be a political rocket fuel, that pleasure is something that needs to be democratized. That means organizing so that everyone can grow food, so that everyone has the land, knowledge, time and money to do it. It's a living embodiment of the old Emma Goldman line, 'I don't want to join your revolution if I can't dance.' Growing your own food can certainly be part of a delicious revolution.

PM: Raj, thanks for talking to me.

RP: Thank you, Peter. Looking forward to sharing a salad when I'm in Durban.



Ishtiyaq Shukri

A History of Terror
(2005)

UK-based South African writer Ishtiyak Shukri won the EU Literary Award for his book The Silent Minaret, a wide-ranging novel whose highly personal narrative runs parallel to continuing narrative of empire and its endless atrocities. In a wide-ranging interview, I spoke to Shukri about power, politics and literature.

Peter Machen: Hi Ishtiyaq, thanks for agreeing to do this interview. Congratulations on *The Silent Minaret*, not just for the European Union Literary Award but for the fact that you've managed to produce such a unique and engaging book that covers such a breadth of human history.

Ishtiyak Shukri: Well... Thank you very much.

PM: I finished it about two weeks ago and it has stayed with me since then. I sit on my balcony at night and wonder where Issa is, what happened after he left his table. But I'm still not sure what his disappearance means to me. Does the ultimate recognition of the patterns of history show a path to freedom from conflict, or does it suggest that these things never leave us, that colonialism continues ad infinitum until it destroys us all?

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IS: Perhaps I should start by saying that I wonder too what happened to Issa... the novel leaves me with that question too. If I knew the answer, I think I would have written it. But I don't, so, like the reader I am also left with the loss of a character only ever glimpsed. What may have become of Issa haunts me too. He never revealed himself, even to me. As regards the patterns of history... I think the novel tries to grapple with some of them, to demonstrate the cycle of conflict and, as Issa postulates in his thesis, the perpetuation of colonialism and imperialism.

Now whether in the end, as you ask, that cycle destroys us all... I don't know. That would seem to me a rather defeatist view. Colonialism and imperialism can, and have been resisted. And, I suspect, would hope, will continue to be, if not resisted or defeated, then, at the very least, demystified, identified and named.

PM: The book unfolds in many ways like a detective novel, but what is investigated is not only Issa's disappearance but also the broader history of colonialism and terror. Was this an intentional mechanism or did it develop as the novel grew?

IS: A detective novel without the detective... a missing detective. I don't know... it is hard for me now to untangle the investigation of Issa's disappearance from the investigation of colonialism and terror. I think, as Issa's thesis demonstrates, both were central. It is Issa-the-missing who in his thesis most intently investigates colonialism and its processes. So no, I don't think it was an intentional mechanism, more a matter of, as you suggest, something that developed as the story grew.

PM: Is Issa based on someone you know? Or is he a fictitious amalgam of yourself? And the other characters? Kagiso, Katin-ka, Frances? Are they based on people you know?

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IS: The autobiographical question! Was waiting for that one. Well, the easy answer is no. Fiction is not autobiography – they are very different genres. The more complex answer of course, is yes, by which I mean that one writes best, I think, if one writes about what one knows and has observed.

As Hanif Kureishi has said, writers observe the world around them and then translate it into fictional words, sentences and paragraphs. And even then, in trying to write about what one presumably knows, one soon realises that knowledge of other people is only ever partial, which would perhaps go some way towards explaining the partial representation of all the characters. They are all only ever glimpsed. Who can claim to know anybody entirely?

PM: The stateless moment when the old South African flag comes down and the new one has not yet been hoisted is for me one the most beautiful scenes in the book, the one that brings tears to my eyes.

IS: Gosh, well... I don't know. The power of the pen to move, I suppose. I particularly struggled with capturing that moment – a very precious one to all South African's I think, and rightly so. Not many countries have the benefit of such intense moments of reinvention – Britain could do with one – a moment when you see the old dying and the new being born there, right in front of your eyes.

So it is not easy to stand back from such a moment and be critical of it. But this has a lot to do with the mysterious process of writing because, in the end, I don't think that I captured that moment. Katinka did. There is, I think, some truth to the adage that characters write themselves. And so I mean to say that of all the novel's moments, I am myself... moved... that that is the one that touched you.

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PM: Yes, I dream of a world without borders, without passports, one where the word ‘foreign’ has disappeared from our language, where monoculture and nationhood have given way to difference and diversity not in an advertising image but in a visceral sense.

IS: I dream that dream too, the difference between us is where we dream it. You dream yours in South Africa, which at the moment is celebrating its differences. I dream it in Europe, which is straining to contain difference. This is so well demonstrated in the General Deflection Campaign in the UK at the moment – where the Benetton ads stand in sharp contrast with the shrill Tory campaign posters with their hideous caption lamenting immigration, which I’ll refrain from quoting because no publicity is bad publicity.

PM: As a person I want nothing more than for all identity to dissolve, and yet as a writer I feel a responsibility to help build this new South Africa and I feel something akin to patriotism.

IS: Patriotism. The very word makes me shudder.

PM: But is South African patriotism different because at its best, South Africa is a celebration of difference and commonality? (And then there is also a patriotism being built that is hugely xenophobic and fills me with sadness).

IS: Patriotism is by definition xenophobic, parochial and, at its Greek root, patriarchal – of the fatherland. And we all know where that one has led us. So no, I don’t think any form of patriotism is any different to any other form of patriotism. And to me the danger of patriotism is most demonstrated in its opposite – to be unpatriotic – and the stigma and potential punishment reserved by the State for dealing with those it deems unpatriotic.

Let me say this about one particular manifestation of patri-

otism, which I have observed in South Africa – the prominent display of the national flag – the only other country in which I have seen the national flag more displayed is the United States, a country which also claims to celebrate difference and commonality. When did we become Americans?

PM: I really loved the characters of Ma Gloria and Ma Vasinthe. They provided a centre of calm, rationality and compassion and their relationship was just so real. They also provided the feminine alternative of love and nurturing in contrast to the masculine expression of war and oppression. I've always thought that the world's problem could be solved simply by putting women in charge. Of course the structure of power are not going to let that happen, but do you think this is a ridiculously naïve position?

IS: Yes. And no. I felt it too. When I saw the footage of those planes flying into the World Trade Centre in New York, I thought it too – that men have ruined the world. I felt that even more with the retaliation that ensued and felt very strongly that the time had come to call a halt to the world and the way in which it does its business, and that the first thing men should do is acknowledge that they have wrecked the world and that they should hand the reigns over to women.

But then, Condoleezza Rice is a woman. Madeleine Albright who, when asked whether the half a million Iraqi children who died under sanctions was worth it and replied, “We think it worth it,” is a woman. “Blair’s babes” are women and there are women in the British cabinet who support the war. Thatcher is a woman and Britain is still reeling in the wake of her appalling legacy. Benazir Bhutto is a woman and so was Indira Gandhi who, when charged with electoral fraud, responded by declaring a state of emergency in which... well, in South Afri-

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ca we know well the power the State reserves for itself when it declares an “emergency.”

PM: Do you see a light at the end of this tunnel for the planet? Do you think that the forces of global apartheid and war and violence and economic oppression are ever going to end?

IS: *The Silent Minaret* concludes rather bleakly on this matter, though Katinka, ever brave, offers hope. Much has been made of Issa – perhaps because we want heroes. Less has been made of Katinka – perhaps because we seldom contemplate female heroes. But at the moment I’m reading a paper by Issa Shivji, Professor of Law at the University of Dar es Salaam in which he concludes that racists and imperialists and, by my extension, warmongers and unfair traders, are primitive animals doomed to extinction. I hope Shivji is right. But whether these forces end or not, it is true that they will always find resistance.

PM: The ever-increasing disjuncture between reality and that thing called western morality is one of many things that is fragmenting Western consciousness. When I fill up my car at the petrol station I am linked in some way to the war in Iraq. It is almost impossible to remove oneself from the global context, and yet most people manage to live lives that tolerate or ignore all these things.

When the war started, a huge proportion of the planet stood up and shouted that it was wrong. Yet it happened and continues to happen with no end in sight. Does your own sense of outrage and powerlessness in the face of all this violence ever become too much for you?

IS: I would argue that it is not, as you say, almost impossible to remove oneself from the global context. It is impossible, and the example of the petrol station is a good one – we South Africans love our cars. The war happened and continues to happen

not because people opposed it, but more because corrupt and powerful leaders willed it. I think the people across the world who demonstrated against the war in Iraq still feel strongly about it – across Europe many thousands marched in protest again on the second anniversary of the invasion of Iraq.

I think the difference for some, especially in those countries that have troops serving in Iraq, the difference now for some is that “their patriotic [– that word again –] duty is to support their troops” so that patriotism in effect muffles resistance. And I think Chomsky astutely identified the real question: not whether we support our troops, but whether we support our government. In this duplicitous climate, I think it admirable that the families of those British servicemen killed in Iraq debunked that patriotic mythology by taking their legal petition right to Prime Minister Blair’s front door this very day.

Yes, it is easy to be overwhelmed and to feel powerless in the face of so much extreme violence, but I would also offer that there are many ways of staying involved. For a start, just Google “stop the war” and follow the links. Much easier and no less significant than writing a book.

PM: To end, I know its up to the reader to decide, but as a hypothetical reader of your own book, do you think that Issa disappeared into the night to disappear as a person, to remove himself from this whole human mess, or to join what Blair would call ‘the forces of terror’, to become once more an active revolutionary in a world where violence is sometimes the only response to violence?

IS: A very hypothetical reader, indeed – I cannot read the book. But your question cuts to the heart of the matter – the role of the activist, the revolutionary, today. How does one oppose an arrogant supremacist ultimatum, which posits one of two op-

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tions – for or against?

I picked up the pen. Yet nothing is simple – my companions who have reached for the sword argue, very eloquently, as persons of action often do, that my weapon assumes literacy and speaks only to the privileged. The truth is, as I've said, Issa never revealed himself or his intentions to me so that, like any reader of the book, I can only speculate. But as its writer, my speculation will perhaps take precedence, and that I cannot allow. Writers are dead remember.

Arundhati Roy

The Riches We Hold

(2003)

I spoke to author and activist Arundhati Roy about writing, politics and the weight of the world.

Made famous by one of the last great novels of the 20th century, Arundhati Roy didn't quite expect the celebrity that came with the commercial and critical success of *The God of Small Things*. But she has singularly used that success as a distinctly political tool to shine a light on the machinations of the powerful against the powerless.

She has done so in numerous essays, in public appearances, in travels across the globe and, importantly, by sharing the rewards of her financial success; not in destructive blanket donations, but in small, carefully considered injections into resistance movements around the globe.

Now she is sitting in the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre, Durban, on one of the first days of the city's summer. She is an angelic imp with calm, wild eyes, her head shorn — so different from the publicity photograph that accompanied *The God of Small Things*. A haircut carrying whispers of catharsis and comfort



and shades of effortless Coco Chanel

But we're not supposed to notice when writers cut their hair, least of all when they are radically intelligent social commentators. Such observations should be reserved for rock stars and supermodels and David Beckham.

The cult of celebrity is pervasive and Roy knows that, much as she rejects the position of celebrity activist. She is a writer and it is her words, not her beautiful face, that have brought attention to the plights of millions. Before entering the political battlegrounds she now occupies, she wrote an extremely sad, exceedingly beautiful book that virtually everybody loved.

Through that success, she acquired a platform to tell the world other stories. They were about nuclear warheads; massive, people-displacing, environmentally disastrous dams; monolithic nationalisms; and the multinationals that form a central thread in her almost real-time narrative.

When you are a successful, popular novelist writing about such things, all kinds of people demand that you talk about the things you write about. So talk she does, tirelessly, and with seemingly infinite charm and patience. To video cameras, to radio microphones, to audiences around the world. To me.

After our interview I wonder if Roy (who is 40 and looks 10 years younger) has always been this gracious, this contained, this at peace with herself, even as she wages with focused rage a war on the very fabric of the "aching, broken world" to which she wakes up each morning. Because this rage has somehow not made her bitter, has not skewed her arguments into the realm of moral propaganda.

These are simple facts, simple thoughts, simple things. No complex arguments need to be invoked. She also talks about how much of life contains joy and beauty. And underneath

all her energy and focus and determination, I sense that it is this hugely positive take on life that drives her. Her dream of a better world that exists on different principles, away from the monolithic religion of capitalism and its super-rich apostles of the boardroom.

I ask Roy to what extent her personal spirituality informs her political activism. “In any situation of conflict,” she says, “you do have to think very deeply about your own body — and when I say body, I mean everything. I think that it’s very important to realise that the greater the conflicts which are public, which are political, the more you need to have almost the opposite in your own life.”

“It’s like you need to prove that what you’re fighting for is something beautiful. You need to have proof of that beauty: in your relationships, in the lack of smallness and pettiness and meanness and all that. And in freedom. And in refusing to play by the pre-set rules of the games.” At the same time, she says, when you’re as deeply critical of a place as she is of both India and the planet, it also must come from love. “What’s the use of fighting,” she asks, “if there’s nothing to preserve? What’s the use if there’s no beauty, there’s no grace, there’s no tenderness, there’s no gentleness?”

But, she says, her personal quest isn’t a search for the pristine. Rather, it’s a “search for a sort of integrity which only you can recognise. There are conflicts and contradictions in all of that, and given that, what is the honest place to be?”

Roy talks about being rewarded for the success of her novel in material terms that are, in her words, “completely out of line”. “I don’t think that there’s anything that one can do for which you need to be rewarded like this. It’s a symptom that there’s something terribly wrong in the world. But what do you

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do with that? How do you manage it? After all, it's so very destructive to go splashing money around, and giving it away as charity. It destroys. So you hold it like you hold a nuclear weapon. And you can't put it down."

"And you don't necessarily always have the right answers. But you just have to try. You can't just say 'I don't know' and 'I'm just giving up on this'."

But sometimes, surely, we all feel like doing so. Does she ever feel the temptation to just walk away from the world, from all the pain and all the suffering and all the pressure?

"I think everyone feels those feelings," she says. "And it's not that I don't. I do." And here, she places an almost painful emphasis on the word "do".

"I do walk away in my head — very often, you know. You have to. And I think one of the things about spirituality of any kind is to understand that it's a very delicate balance between your consequentiality and your inconsequentiality (laughs). So you also have to know that you can't do everything. You can't be everything. You can only think 'what am I effective at? What am I best at?'"

"And I'm not best at living in a village and wearing traditional clothes and being an activist. I'm not good at that. Because I'm in conflict even culturally with a lot of people whose struggle I support. As a woman, I'm not going to play into the hands of a traditional Indian farmer because he's been displaced by a dam. But I know I am effective as a writer. I am effective as somebody who is one of the few people in the world, I suppose, who has the privilege of spanning the range from a village in central India where open-cast miners are organised, to speaking in Riverside Church in New York. And that is a great range. And I'm one of those lucky people who do span it."



Tom McCarthy

Looking for the Real Tintin
(2009)

*British author on the rise, Tom McCarthy, was in South Africa recently. He spoke to Peter Machen about his two books: the novel *Remainder* and the non-fiction work *Tintin and the Secret of Literature*.*

Tom McCarthy is pulling on his wetsuit. He and his sister Melissa are about to go surfing on Dairy Beach, just in front of the Surf Shop from where they have hired their boards. It is a brisk and blustery day and the surf is choppy. Neither Tom nor Melissa are what you would call experienced surfers, and we watch them almost-surfing, letting out whoops every time they and their board coincide successfully with the water's movement. Behind them, someone who is clearly more practised than them zigzags through the water. And behind the well-practiced surfer, several kitesurfers race through the water, performing impressive aerobatic feats every now and then with the luminous kites dancing through the sky like silk jellyfish rendered airborne and free.

McCarthy is a British author whose debut novel *Remainder* has achieved wide-spread critical acclaim and, after struggling ini-

tially to find a publisher, has become something of a best-seller. He is also the author of a fascinating book entitled *Tintin and the Secret of Literature*, which deconstructs the world of Tintin, and, in doing so, illustrates how literature “works”.

I don't speak to McCarthy about his writing on this beachy day, however, since he is off to lunch at Ushaka and I have a million things to do. And when we do eventually discuss his two books we do it by email. But having met him in the context of the grey blue Indian ocean, with the parade of kitesurfers in the background, it is certainly easier to connect with him. Had I not met him in the flesh, I would have felt a little too intimidated by his rigorous and informed intelligence. But the wetsuit took the edge off. Sorry Tom.

But the surfing anecdote has another relevance. It is often suggested, both by surfers and those who mythologise and poeticise them, that the act of surfing is a pure experience, one unmediated by our figurative construction of the world. In other words it is an authentic experience, one that is not compromised by translation. Both of McCarthy's books deal with this notion of authentic experience.

In *Remainder*, the book's nameless protagonist is crushed by an object falling from the sky. He is left physically fractured and comatose and unable to successfully recall his past. For his suffering, he is rewarded with a ludicrously large settlement on condition that he never speak of the details of his accident. After discounting the conventional options faced by people who suddenly find themselves in possession of large quantities of money, he spends massive amounts of cash re-enacting moments (or memories of moments) in which he felt, even if only for a second, real. These re-enactments take place on the scale of large budget film productions, and the protagonist is relent-

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less in his search for the feeling of pure existence.

Tintin and the Secret of Literature, on the other hand, deconstructs Belgian author/artist Herge's beautifully drawn world. At the same time it explores the process of "making reality" through literature, gradually revealing the mechanisms by which fiction is constructed, and showing how literature always fails to render true reality. Writing can never be real. It is always, no matter how "true" a false attempt; a fakery; an illusion.

Behaving much like Herge's eternally youthful protégé, McCarthy moves through the Tintin books with a fine tooth comb, illustrating the endless web of double-meaning that take place in Herge's world, a world that is far less fantastic than many might suppose, and far more related to the concerns of Herge's time, and also to his own secret family history, as McCarthy reveals over the course of the book.

McCarthy invokes all the old favourites. Even if you haven't read the Tintin books in decades, you'll find that these character pop straight back into your head. Captain Haddock plays a major role, as does Professor Calculus and Mme Castafiore, all of whom, through both Herge and McCarthy, gradually build a complex web whose threads are metaphor, metaphysics, economics, desire, classicism, poetry, art, and so on and so on, as an entire world forms. Along the way, McCarthy consults with everyone from Plato to Derrida, from Shakespeare to Balzac (whose novella *La Zambinella* forms an integral part of *Tintin and the Secret of Literature*). And rather than getting lost in this web, McCarthy makes it easy reading.

Peter Machen: I'm not sure, if it's a wilful desire of mine to blend the two books together into a single story, but it does seem to me that *Remainder* and *Tintin and the Secret of Literature*

are both in a sense about the same thing. In the novel the protagonist searches endlessly for moments of authenticity, for the feeling of being seamlessly in the moment. In the Tintin book, the reader is taken on a journey to which we might call the “truth” of literature. Both books are endlessly concerned with the notions of replication and duplication in order to arrive at an unreachable notion of truth. Can you comment on this reading?

Tom McCarthy: Yes, you’re right. I wrote *Remainder* first, in 2001, and *Tintin and the Secret of Literature* in 2005, and both are concerned with questions of forgery, the real versus the fake, as is the novel I’ve got coming out here in the UK right now, *Men in Space*, which I actually wrote before *Remainder*. What was interesting about writing the Tintin book was that, as it was in ‘essay’ rather than ‘novel’ mode, I was able to work through lots of the themes of the novels in a more analytical way. The chapter on Baudelaire/Paul de Man and irony, for example, could serve as a reading of *Remainder*.

PM: The Tintin book, with its gradual unravelling of both Tintin’s themes and your revealing of the secret of literature, feels oddly like a novel itself. Was this your intention?

TM: I think that ‘essayistic’ writing can, and ideally should, be as creative as ‘novelistic’ writing. Look at the work of Derrida, for example: his readings of Genet, Ponge and Leiris are more dynamic and creative than any of the fiction of his (Derrida’s) contemporaries. Or look at the sheer poetry of Heidegger’s of Nietzsche’s philosophical prose. Language and thought are full of slippages and ambiguities, and good non-fiction has to understand that, which tilts it in the direction of fiction itself..

PM: Earlier on in the Tintin book, you point out that Tintin is not literature because its comic-book format does not consti-

tute literature. The medium of comic book art, as you suggest, is both less than and more than literature. And yet you have used that same medium in a sense. Although there are only nominal visuals in your book, anyone who has read the Tintin comic books will have far more similar visuals in their head than if they were reading a discourse on conventional literature. Do you think that this addition of Herge's visual language to the text makes it easier for you to take to readers with you on your voyage of literary discovery.

TM: Probably. Like William Burroughs says, the word is a virus carrying images – so in a way comics cut right to the chase. I'm reading an amazing French graphic novel right now called *Partie de Chasse*, whose images of snowy Polish landscapes seem like the richest prose – or rather, seem to make rich prose evoking snowy landscapes unnecessary...

PM: And if Tintin is not literature, is it fine art? You treat it as such, but never name it as such.

TM: What interests me about the cartoon form, of which Hergé was a pioneer, is that it's neither, properly speaking, literature nor fine art, but occupies a no-man's land between the two – and I think that in-betweenness is productive and doesn't need recuperating by either literature nor art.

PM: You are a writer, and also an artist. Do you view these as discretely separate careers or are they part of a creative continuum?

TM: The latter. For example, in London's Institute of Contemporary Art a couple of years ago I had a Transmission Room with forty assistants cutting up and projecting fragments of text onto the walls, which were then read out over the radio and transmitted around the city on FM. It was a putting-into-play of Burroughs's notion of cut-ups, plus an attempt to construct

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a kind of ‘crypt’ space, like Antigone’s. It was a very ‘literary’ exercise – but it was hosted by an art institution. In the UK right now, the art world is much more literate than the publishing world. Most publishers have never heard of Burroughs or Antigone...

PM: *Remainder*’s search for the moment of feeling real, in the moment, reflects a contemporary quest for authentic experience in an increasingly plastic and mediated reality. But do you think that this search for “authentic” experience is indeed a modern social condition, or do you think that it is endogenous to humankind’s construction of the world and has been around since we first started transcribing out reality into words? (Certainly, as you point out in the Tintin book, artists, poets and writers have been concerned with this from the outset).

TM: *Remainder* is often read as a take on the modern, or ‘post-modern’, world. But for me it’s a very traditional theme. Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* is a guy who goes around re-enacting scenes from novels in an attempt to be more ‘real’. Plato dedicates half his oeuvre to the question of the real versus its simulacrum. It goes right to the heart of the experience of art and culture – and, I’d argue, to the heart of experience *tout court*.

PM: *Remainder* is incredibly detailed in its accounts of the various re-enactments maintained by its protagonist. Was it an effort for you to maintain consistency of the locations that you built up?

TM: I’d walk around them with a dictaphone and camera, then transcribe my monologue and pin the pictures to the wall – almost like in a police operations room. It’s amazing what a simple space will yield: the angle of bollards, the position of cigarette butts, what puddles’ surfaces do to the letters of shop-signage, turning them around and making them seem like

ciphers, rich encryptions...

PM: How do you think that the re-enactments that take place in the novel relate to the culture of forensic re-enactment that fills so much late-night television.

TM: Very much. Those Police-Camera-Action style programmes, for all their cheesy and reactionary nature, are quite fascinating. You get the car-chase or whatever replayed from surveillance footage, cutting between car and helicopter, and you also get the policemen variously commentating on how nervous they were and re-enacting sequences of their own action. It's very complex if you think about it: three time-scales, three modes of experience, rolled into one. *Remainder* has a very similar logic.

PM: In *Tintin and the Secret of Literature* you quote Eliot as saying "bad writers imitate. Good writers steal". And you also talk about the fact that, from its very beginning, literature is constantly stealing from itself and recycling itself. When you wrote *Remainder*, and in fact when you write generally, do you write expecting people to get the allusions and references. To what extent do you plan your construction of things before you write, and to what extent do things just unfurl as you write and you come to understand them retroactively?

TM: It doesn't matter whether people get the references; they're not what makes the novel work or not. For example, the building the hero of *Remainder* commandeers to re-enact his memories in is called Madlyn mansions, like the memory-madeleine in Proust – but if you haven't read that bit of Proust it shouldn't make any difference. Good writing has to turn its influences into active, primary forces, not just list them. To answer the second half of your question, I plan in advance, but I come to understand stuff retroactively. I still don't really understand *Remainder*. Crit-

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ics keep coming up with new readings, like ‘the hero’s dead right from the outset’ or ‘it’s a take on US foreign policy post-9/11’ and I think: ‘Oh yeah, could be, I never thought of that..’

PM: It seems to me that the unreachable blind space that you talk about in the Tintin book is the same space that is being searched for in *Remainder*. In the West, Zen and post-modernism might both occupy positions in the same contemporary landscape but they are hardly bedfellows. But I often think that the blind spots of philosophy, the point at which it fails to arrive, is suggested most effectively by Eastern non-sequiturs such as Zen koans. Any thoughts?

TM: I’m suspicious of what Nietzsche calls ‘European Buddhism’. I think blind spaces are brilliantly mapped out in the work of Blanchot, Beckett, Conrad, Melville and so on – or Lewis Carroll with his white-on-white map in *The Hunting of the Snark*. I’m dismissive not of Eastern philosophy, about which I know nothing, but of Western appropriations or assimilations of it. Like the girl in Dennis Hopper’s film *Out of the Blue* says: ‘Kill all hippies.’

Njabulo Ndebele

Waiting for Winnie Mandela

(2003)

Njabulo Ndebele, is vice-chancellor of UCT and author of several fiction and non-fiction books including the classic collection of short stories, Fools and Other Stories, and Rediscovery of the Ordinary, a collection of critical essays. I spoke to Ndebele about his latest novel The Cry of Winnie Mandela.

The moment I heard about *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, I thought it was a brilliant idea. Incorporating Winnie Mandela, so ungraspable in the realm of normal reportage, into the safety of fiction is a beautiful literary conceit. But the book is only nominally about the former Mrs Mandela, and more centrally about black African women who wait for their men, of whom Winnie Mandela is only one.

Ndebele details the lives of four African women, Deliswe S'khosana, Patience Letlala, Manette Mofolo and Marara Joyce Baloyi. Four women who have ended up single and alone after having spent most of their lives waiting for their men. Men who have left the homestead as a result of exile, studying, migrant labour, poverty and just for no reason at all.



NJABULO NDEBELE

These four women meet at regular *ibandlas* where they share in the solidarity of having been left. In the course of their conversations, the subject of Winnie Mandela comes up. They talk about Winnie – Winifred Nomzamo Zanyiwe Mandela – who waited so publicly and for so long for a man whose bed she did not end up sharing. And they come up with the idea of each entering into a conversation with her at their *ibandlas*.

Through the human ether, Mandela somehow hears the voices of the four women, and after they have all told their tales, she tells hers. Here Ndebele blurs fact and fiction, as Mandela recounts her pain and her love. And behind Mandela, behind the four women, lurks the shadow of Penelope, the archetypal women-who-waited, Penelope who waited 13 years for her husband Odysseus to return, only for him to destroy the life to which he was returning. And then there is Quesalid, the Indian shaman who set out to unmask the shamans and ended up becoming one . . .

I spoke to Ndebele about this remarkable book and about his views on Africa, women and the future.

Peter Machen: The story of Penelope is thousands of years old, and yet women all over the world and particularly in Africa are still waiting for their men and also for equality. Do you think the time will come when women get a fair deal?

Njabulo Ndebele: I think that this is suggested at the end of the novel when Penelope appears as a backpacker and says she's been travelling for a thousand years, taking the message to women all over the world, wherever, in her view, there has been a significant increase in the freedom of women. And that this has a lot to do with what she calls the growth of the world's consciousness, and so it is an unfolding human process. And I

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think that we should be able to judge the evolution of human society for the better to the extent that freedoms of people, women, children, and so on, are increasing all the time. So it is an unfolding process. And I hope the world gets better the more these freedoms increase.

PM: That is also kind of my personal spiritual belief, this growth of consciousness. That is also a very personal thing for you?

NN: Yes indeed. I once did an essay; I don't know if you saw the article, I think it was in the *Sunday Times*. This particular article was on the gay question. And there was this hullabaloo over a gay bishop in the United States. And the angle of my article was precisely that – the gay issue is also an instance of the growth of consciousness. There are so many other things about the world. The way we solve the problems of Iraq has to do with that. I think the United States governance systems have gone as far as they can in promoting human freedom and they cannot go beyond themselves. What we need is a different vision of world governance which does not depend on one big country. And ja, that's what it is really.

PM: Regarding *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, do you have any personal relationship with Winnie?

NN: No, I don't.

PM: Do you know if she has read the book?

NN: I have no idea. It's a challenge for South African journalists. I am surprised that no one has asked her?

PM: Ja, I'd love to talk to her about it. Do you think there is still life in Winnie Mandela in terms of party politics as opposed to extra-party politics?

NN: I'm afraid I don't know. I think that the book does not deal with that. The novel is exploring a different dimension of

experience and not essentially a political one.

PM: But it does show the place where the two overlap?

NN: Yeah, I'm sure it does. I would suspect that, for Winnie, the two planes of reality, as a human being on the one hand, and as political leader on the other hand, exist in a state of tension. And part of that tension means that you will never fully say that you have summed her up. There is no telling what next she might do, that either elevates her, or disappoints people. So she remains an interesting person that we are highly unlikely to lose interest in (we both laugh).

PM: Would I be correct in surmising from the book that you hold a good deal of abstracted affection for Winnie?

NN: I think I have a sympathetic approach to her. And in the same way that I have a great deal of affection for the other fictional characters in the book, I have affection for the fictional Winnie as well (more laughter).

PM: That's very interesting, because you are also quite blunt regarding her, the fictional Winnie. Was this in any way a difficult book to write, in terms of that?

NN: Ja, there were parts that were not easy to write. But you know, the most important thing about the book in response to that question is that it sets out to be a work of art. It does not set out to be a feminist story, nor does it set out to be a political assessment of Winnie. This does not mean that feminism and politics and power are not central themes of the book. They're definitely there. But I think the book sets out to be a work of art. And so, to the extent to which I had to deal with difficulty, it was basically to solve artistic problems.

PM: The book is also a fictional historical text, if I can call it that. And lying at the heart of Winnie Mandela, both the fictional one and the real one are a lot of unpalatable truths. Do

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you think that the South African public can cope with these untold truths?

NN: I think more than ever that our society can cope with them. Because we're still going through the stage in our democracy of putting issues on the table. We're probably going to be doing that for the next two decades. It's a maturation process. We can't mature without putting these things on the table. And we've been doing so for the last 10 years. These things test our resolve, our democratic resolve; they test our institutions of democracy to the extent that they can cope with them; they test the constitutional court; they test our universities, our churches and all that. I think it's wonderful. I think our society can handle those things.

Now, another thing in relation to the very last question before this one, is that it would have been difficult to talk about Winnie alone, without the other women. In a sense they prepare the ground for Winnie's own story. And she's very conscious of that in the book when she starts. She can see from the testimonies of the other women that she can open herself up because they have opened themselves up to scrutiny. She feels confident that an attempt is being made to understand, not to judge. And I think the Truth and Reconciliation committee did set the stage for all sorts of issues to be put on the table and not necessarily for judgment. And that deepens the ethical imperative.

PM: I remember very vividly that famous day when Winnie appeared before the TRC, with Tutu egging her on. Do you think back then that it was possible for Winnie to tell the complete truth to the TRC.

NN: I don't think it was possible. I don't think she could open herself up completely because she was still distrustful of the

reconciliation process herself. The fictional Winnie says in the book that “reconciliation demands my extinction’ and so she’s inherently suspicious. And still there’s a side of her that wants a total solution, the total transfer of power, the eradication of poverty and so on. And so, to the extent that we went for a negotiated settlement, she remains one part of the dialectical poem that reminds us that we didn’t have a complete revolution. And, to that extent, voices such as hers are a reminder of unfinished business. So I don’t see that she would then just have gone out there, and confessed like everybody else.

PM: One final question. As vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, you are in a position of extreme privilege. Do you ever feel a conflict between your position and the position of the women in the book?

NN: It’s an interesting question. I seldom experience my position as a position of privilege, it’s a position of constant hard work (laughs). I seldom think of the job in that way. I think that there is a constant conflict between my desire to be an artist and my responsibilities towards being a manager and an administrator. There are different kinds of demands.

And I would suspect that the artist in me always ensures that I do my job in a compassionate and imaginative way. The possibilities of exercising the imagination are all over the world, wherever you are. So I’m more readily, more easily, able to put myself in the shoes of many people in situations of dire stress. It is not difficult for me, having grown up in a township in a relatively middle class environment with working class culture all over. I have grown up with the flexibility to move in and out of all kinds of situations and be relatively comfortable in them. Which I guess explains why I never really thought of my job as a privileged one.

Last weekend I forsook the bright lights of the medium-sized city for the cows, the woodsmoke and the contained majesty of the Underberg.

Two of my playmates and I headed for the hills early on Saturday morning – well twelve o'clock actually but we really tried to leave early.

Eventually, with old tapes in hand and cigarettes in mouth we made it to the N3. And it was an absolute pleasure to drive through an almost unrecognisably dry version of the midlands listening to the rural acid folk of the palace brothers "You will miss me when I burn" and the expansive spiritual journey of REM's Green. To our eternal shame, we offloaded the Blind Melon/Pearl Jam tape on to some poor unsuspecting street kid, along with a packet of chips.

Taking the odd, obligatory detour, we arrived at the little town of Bulwer, where our accommodation, The Mountain Park Hotel, seems to be the main source of entertainment for the locals. We eschewed the anachronous grunge of the murder mystery hotel, though, and stayed in a small cottage on the property, thus not confining ourselves to the timetables and conventions of other guests and allowing us to make as much noise as we wanted.

And the fun we had! Walking in the fenced off, dilapidated orchards filled with small, rotting oranges, incinerated trees and cowpats everywhere. The smoking mountain in the background reminded me of the famed combustibility of cow pats, and of course we had to try. Giving off a rich, unoffensive aroma, the

Till the Morning Light

thing burnt for ages before sensible Liz poured the remains of my hot chocolate over it, thus cutting off the possibility of a fiery apocalypse.

That night the mountain was ablaze. And it wasn't us. Strips of orange devouring the grass, still short from the last fire. And while the inevitable death of millions of small insects and animals sits somewhere in my consciousness, the fiery glow on the mountaintop invoked something much more primal, something almost encoded in my genetic memory. Sitting around a fire with another fire in the distance – although we weren't sitting around a fire, we were playing Scrabble in the half light – but still something went off in my soul. The next morning we took a horse ride through the charred landscape, all black and silver, still smoking here and there and in the distance the shimmer of heat leaving the earth, like dancers leaving a club, evaporating into the light of day.

Guy Tillim

Johannesburg
(2005)

I spoke to photographer Guy Tillim about his Johannesburg series, which documents the social realities of one of Africa's most vital cities with equal parts compassion and restraint.

Guy Tillim is no ordinary war photographer. And while it would be inhuman, or at least vastly pessimistic, to even suggest that any photographs of wars can ever be called ordinary, there is nonetheless something extraordinary about the photographs that Tillim takes.

For one thing, they tend to follow in the aftermaths of wars, focussing on the physical residue and psychic ghosts that haunt the broken African landscapes of countries such as Rwanda, Eritrea and Angola. For another, they are often intensely beautiful. But it is to Tillim's eternal credit that the content of his work is never subservient to its artistic intention or execution.

In the last few years, Tillim has been recognised by some, if not all, of the fine-art establishment as an artist, crossing the divide between media, the lone photographer and the gallery. And while there are those who object to the possibly anaesthe-

tising context of the gallery for documentary work, Tillim is more than happy for his images to find a home in such spaces, particularly since the kind of pictures he takes seldom find their way into newspapers.

Despite his lack of commercial sensibility, Tillim has been rewarded for his work in other ways, and was last year awarded the DaimlerChrysler Award for South African Photography, for which he was required to produce a body of work. He chose to both shift and narrow his focus, and set about documenting the life of people and buildings in downtown Johannesburg. Included in the images on display in the Durban Art Gallery is a town-planning map of central Johannesburg, with different coloured drawing-pins indicating buildings in varying states of decay. Many of these buildings are marked with black pins, indicating buildings whose residents are scheduled for mass eviction. Lawyers working for these residents claim these actions are unconstitutional since the municipality is not providing alternative accommodation.

When people write about Tillim's photographs, it is often suggested that a profound thread of hope runs through his images. And while that sense of hope is intangibly self-evident in his many of his pictures, I've struggled for a while to work out from where exactly it emerges in the scarred and damaged places he documents.

And then it hit me like a cartoon lightbulb above my right shoulder. The answer is obvious, so sadly obvious. That sense of hope which lingers at the back of his images, and which shines through damaged eyes, and which appears almost religious at times, exists simply, I think, because war is over. Guy Tillim is, for the most part, a post-war photographer. Whether Tillim's series of photographs of inner Johannesburg also con-

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tain this element of hope is as yet unclear to me, but I do know that its subjects are victims of a war on the poor that seems never to end.

Peter Machen: For this DaimlerChrysler exhibition, you have chosen to document the lives of people and buildings in inner-city Johannesburg. You are a photojournalist who has spent much of your career documenting the aftermath and residue of war. With these shots of Jozi, I'd like to suggest that you are continuing to do the same thing. Do you agree with this?

Guy Tillim: This is obviously not a war in the conventional sense, but in the sense of a war between the haves and have nots, undoubtedly. The Jo'burg images are not of the aftermath then, but the war in progress (as you suggest in your second question). Or perhaps even a prelude, though this is a dark and unfocussed thought. Maybe I am doing the same thing here as in my broader body of work; these are simply places that exist on the boundaries of my imaginary realm, places that affect quite profoundly the place I am from, places I feel for some reason bound to explore.

PM: I was thinking about the difference between these images and those which catalogue the violences in the rest of Africa, and I was trying to determine for myself whether there is a fundamental difference between them. And I came upon the notion that while conventional wars always end, this war, a war between the poor and powerless and a set of power structures that they can barely identify, is a war that is never going to end. And it is a war that is echoed all over the planet in different intensities from Rio to New York, from Johannesburg to Lagos. Of course, with the recent liberation of South Africa (supposedly the liberation of working class South Africa), these images

have a particular resonance. So my question is: do you think that this war between the poor and the power structures that define their lives is one that will ever end, ever be resolved?

GT: It may not ever be resolved, but in Joburg's case I think there are opportunities to tackle the problem in novel ways. For a start the constitutionality of evictions without provision of alternative accommodation is being challenged. There are attempts at government-subsidised sectional title schemes. To some extent, both the government and private developers see the possibility of a new order whereby the poor are not simply got rid of and where Joburg doesn't revert to being a city of exclusion.

PM: And then, I'd also like to know if you think that 'conventional' wars do actually end in the wake of peace treaties and negotiated settlements. Or does their residue and aftermath usually continue with such substance that the war remains always rooted in the landscape and people's faces?

GT: All wars have to end. The scars emotional, physical are readily apparent. But they gradually become part of the scenery; what was foregrounded is now background. Perhaps the photographer's means of communication best rests in accepting the background for what it is, aberrant, different, brutal, and looking for a communal human thread that links us all.

PM: The last interview that I conducted with you left a deep impression on me. I remember the photographs vividly. I even remember where many of the images were hanging in the gallery, a testament I suppose to your own curatorial powers. But I also remember sitting at the top of the stairs of the NSA gallery and talking to you. And I was struck by your sense of self, your quietness and utter lack of arrogance, and by the fact that you contained both a sense of brokenness and a sense of peace with



the fractured world.

You are a million miles away from the stereotype of a war photographer. Of course you began with the idealism that came with documenting and opposing the atrocities of apartheid, but I'd like to know if there was ever a turning point for you; a point which utterly changed Guy Tillim? Or perhaps, in different words, was there ever a breaking point for Guy Tillim?

GT: Turning points in my life have been more subtle changes in direction, than events that have these big consequences. More of an incremental process of narrowing options in the hope of broadening one's mind a little. The Jo'burg work is a consequence of that, an attempt to narrow the focus. It is not a portrait of Jo'burg. Rather, it is an attempt to move behind facades; walls as well as preconceptions.

PM: In the beautifully written essay 'Departure', you talk about the fact that you have photographs you like for reasons you have come to distrust. And the thing that makes you stand out as a photojournalist is the fact that (as Rory Bester says in the DaimlerChrysler catalogue) your aesthetic form and political (or ethical) content are at times seamless. You manage to produce exceedingly beautiful images where the content is never overshadowed by the visual treatment or composition. Is this something that comes naturally to you, or is it something that you actively try to achieve?

GT: It is something that comes naturally I suppose. At the same time, the aesthetic is gleaned from all manner or sources, converging in an approach and then a moment. But the obscure provenance of this aesthetic (coupled with the relatively mechanical process of image production) is a cause of concern and sometimes distrust. The verisimilitude of photojournalism often exudes certainty without the subtlety of doubt and degree

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of introspection that is crucial in establishing an author's bona fides.

PM: At the same time you admit to capturing the 'worthy moment', which also points to all the countless moments of truth which go undocumented. Are there any photographs you have taken, which beyond the notion of looking for the photographic moment, have amounted to a visual lie?

GT: Yes, but I won't tell you which ones! Perhaps in this context there are no lies, but then there is no truth either.

PM: I was told that you used a tripod for your Jozi images. Which implies both that you were sufficiently at ease to use a tripod in a city where at least one photographer has been killed for his equipment, and also that your subjects were comfortable with being photographed by you. So I'd like to know how long you spent with your subjects before you took the pictures. Did you get to know them at all, or is this simply further evidence of your skills as a photographer?

GT: Time with the subjects differed. Most of the time it was a lengthy process of going through a committee in the building and then meeting individuals. I would visit a few times, they'd get used to me hanging around, and would often invite me to take photographs. I was working with someone who knew the city pretty well. He'd introduce me and people would decide: ja, well, fine, he seems ok, or, no. On a few occasions I was shown the door quite smartly.

PM: Finally, an element of your work that is important to me is the fact that you usually supply the actual names of your subject. This is extremely unusual in the canon of photojournalism where people are more normally reduced to mere faces, almost incidental reflections in the waters of history. Is this an important part of your work for you? Renate Wiehager talks about the

GUY TILLIM

fact that your striking individualisation lifts your subjects out of the anonymous stream of history. I think its an extremely accurate statement but is it one with which you agree, and is this something you actively try to achieve?

GT: I got to know most of the people I photographed a little ,and so taking their names down was not difficult, and I made a point of it when it seemed natural. We're all in the anonymous stream of history really, so it is more of an attempt to lend some dignity to a difficult and intrusive process.

Pieter Hugo

Taking the Camera Outside
(2008)

I spoke to acclaimed photographer Pieter Hugo about his exhibition Messina/Musina which explores the confluence of difference in the social and geographic margins of South African life.

Pieter Hugo has made a career out of photographing outsiders. From his series of albino people and blind people to men and their performing hyenas, Hugo's work brings the periphery to the centre. With *Messina/Musina*, the body of work he produced as Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year 2007, Hugo continues this narrative arc, chronicling a reality that exists on the very margins of South Africa.

In this respect he is similar to Roger Ballen, who has gained fame and notoriety for his images of small town South Africa. But while Ballen's haunting images emphasise the outsidership of his subjects, and in fact takes them to the edge of surrealism, Hugo gives his subjects a humanity that is both sympathetic and devoid of sentiment.

Messina, renamed Musina to correct the colonial corruption of its original name, is one of the Northern most places in

South Africa. It is on the edge of the Zimbabwean border and is both literally and figuratively a place that is peripheral to what is considered to be broader reality. With its hunting farms and diamonds mines and North/South Access, Musina attracts a disparate collection of people drawn to the town by the opportunities it offers in a barren landscape.

Hugo documents this landscape in disturbing detail, chronicling an uncomfortable relationship with a landscape that is at once beautiful and uncaring, god's country in a time when god seems to be dead. And there is indeed something strangely religious about Hugo's work, something which becomes particularly resonant when looking at his portraits of the individuals and families who occupy this landscape. Transfusing studio light into people's living rooms, the result is an unnerving and knowing blend of family snap shots and kitsch but immaculate studio photography. Collectively, the images ask questions about race, nationality, difference and sameness, without even beginning to suggest that the questions are answerable.

There is no doubt that the images, like most of Hugo's images, are provocative. But, more than being provocative, the pictures are beautiful, despite the fact that they exist very far from the conventions of beauty. They are by no means pretty – Hugo himself says, and echoes the sentiments of thousands before him, that art should not be pretty. But even when his images are of litter or road kill or the detritus of civilisation encroaching on immaculately unspoilt landscapes, this strange, slightly disturbing, perhaps slightly unsatisfying, beauty remains.

Hugo believes in honesty, and he is honest enough – or disingenuous enough if you take a different tack – to suggest that his own subjectivity is also paramount. So he believes in honesty, rather than truth. But his images are not ideologically or





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politically intentioned. Instead, in their strange fusion of documentary, fine art and the large format most familiar to us in the realm of advertising, they create another world very much like this one.

Joanna Lehan in her conversation with Hugo in the catalogue for *Messina/Musina*, labours the point that Hugo's images are laden with irony, or taken from an ironic distance. To which Hugo replies fairly emphatically that they are not ironic images. I ask him why he thinks that so many people presume an ironic approach to work that is in fact remarkable for its lack of distance.

Pieter Hugo: I think that that kind of criticism often comes from South African audiences. I've showed the work subsequently in galleries in Italy and in the US. And the response people have outside of South Africa is very different to the response South Africans have. I think we often bring quite a big political chip on our shoulders to issues of representation, and understandably so. It's a kind of national preoccupation, and we often throw the baby out with the bath water, where, if it doesn't fit a politically correct paradigm, it doesn't have any validity anymore.

Peter Machen: I would think that people outside of this country are obviously less sensitive to these issues.

PH: I don't think it's necessarily an issue of being less sensitive. It depends from what kind of vantage point you're engaging with the work. I suppose it's often kind of too close to home for South Africans. But to me, the thing the work really deals with is the state of transience. Something that is interesting is that after I did the catalogue and published the book, I've been trying to send copies to people in the photographs. And most

of them have moved on. They're not there anymore. And what was interesting to me was that I couldn't put my finger exactly what the place was about.

PM: This transitory nature of Musina is reflective not only of such obviously transitory places but also of a South African reality in which many people are constantly in transition, as they follow opportunities, or escape violence, and as they move through the hierarchies of class.

I'd like to talk about the image of the two beggars from Zimbabwe, the blind man and his caretaker. Out of all the photographs, he was the only one who seemed to have any objection to being photographed written on his face.

PH: Oh no!

PM: I actually didn't notice it. Someone pointed it out to me. And I think you could read it as a kind of racial thing, but I think it's more about his refugee/illegal status.

PH: I think it's just they might have been self-conscious about being photographed. I met them in the main street of Messina, and we went for a walk to one of the side streets to take the photographs. They were actually legally in the country. And you know it's not a snap that was taken – it's a large format photograph. The process of taking the photograph – to get that shot – took twenty minutes, half an hour. If you didn't want to be photographed you'd have left.

PM: Yeah sure. But I'd like to open up the idea that you can perhaps take photographs of people who aren't one hundred percent happy with their photograph being taken. I'd like to explore that possibility. I don't know how you feel about that...

PH: Look, a portrait is initially a collaboration between two people. But at the end of the day, I still have the power, and the power is in the edit of the pictures. Which one I choose to

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use really relays what my preferences are. But it starts out as a collaborative process.

How does one feel about using photographs where people are not completely happy with the end result? Well, I'm not going to photograph people that cannot consent to being photographed. And I think that we live in a country that is completely media savvy.

People are aware of the power of images, maybe not academically, but they are aware of what imagery can do for you, or not do for you, and of the power behind it. Of course, if someone says they are not happy with the photograph after it's been published, I get slightly affronted by it, because it chips away at my self-esteem and what not... (laughs).

But I don't make a rule about it. I treat it kind of from a situation-to-situation basis. I mean what does one do? There is one person in the book who hasn't been very happy with their inclusion of their picture, but I distrust his motives for being unhappy about it, so I will keep on using it. But if someone said to me that there's a photograph of their mother who died recently, and it upsets them seeing it in the media all the time, I would stop using them, I would stop distributing it in those kinds of avenues

PM: Looking at the work in the gallery, and browsing through the catalogue for the show, I was struck by subtle differences between the black family portraits and those of the white families. The white families seem more composed, and also more fetishised. Do you think there's any accuracy to that?

PH: Well, it's not the first time I've heard that. Look, when I set about doing family portraits, the families that I photographed are people that I met. And I suppose unconsciously one is attracted to certain things and not attracted to other things. I didn't go

out to set up some demographic representation of Messina. For instance, there are tons of traders that have opened up shop. And I didn't photograph any of them because I didn't find it interesting or appealing to do so.

PM: Obviously, I see your work in the context of other South African photographers. And I'm thinking specifically of Roger Ballen and Zwelethu Mthethwa, both of whom photograph people outside of their own social class. It's interesting that people take Roger to task – and you to a lesser extent – and that very few people have challenged Zwelethu's right to do what he does.

PH: It's that issue of who is allowed to represent whom. And at the end of the day, one has to be honest. You photograph what appeals to you and what you feel like exploring. I have heard other criticisms of Zwelethu Mthethwa. And with Roger Ballen, once again the criticisms seem to exclusively South African. I think telling people what they are allowed to and not allowed to photograph is absolutely ridiculous

PM: (laughs) Fully!

PH: It's like I said in the interview in the catalogue. Are lesbians only allowed to photograph lesbians? It's absurd.

PM: And for me, it also forgets the fact that we're all human, and we're all so fundamentally similar to each other.

PH: Absolutely. I specifically avoid dealing with this kind of question. It never comes up except in South Africa. And it's like a stuck record. And my way of engaging with it is just to ignore it.

Because at the end of the day, I do stuff that's interesting to me. And as long as I'm honest about what I'm doing, that should be fine in my book.

Roger Ballen

The Edge of Darkness
(2006)

I spoke to internationally recognised photographer Roger Ballen about exhibition Boarding House, which segues his traditional documentary approach into the realm of surrealism.

Photographer Roger Ballen has been working in South Africa since the late 1970s, documenting specific margins of the country, from the idiosyncratic landscapes of its small towns and their inhabitants to the dilapidated surreality of his latest exhibition *Boarding House*.

Over the course of four decades and numerous books and shows, Ballen, who was born and grew up in America, and who still talks in a clipped American accent, has evolved a style that is entirely his own, and whose references such as they exist, are more reminiscent of primeval consciousness than they are reflective of the ebbs and flows of the 21st century art world.

And while the lineage of his concerns descends both conceptually and aesthetically from the dadaists and surrealists of the 1920s and '30s, it is in the evolution of his own body of work that is the most profound influence on his photography, as his

work has shifted ever closer to abstraction while never abandoning technical precision. The blur, such as it exists in his work, is only ever conceptual.

The endless collage of primitivism and surrealism that constitutes *Boarding House*, currently on show at the Durban Art Gallery, is both a microscopic zoom into the details that already existed in Ballen's early work, and a telescopic pan across the vastness and darkness of human consciousness. Where once he chronicled the exterior strangeness of South Africa's dorps, he now increasingly moves into an into an irrational, primeval interior space where figurativeness itself dissolves, along with words and what we conventionally refer to as meaning.

These chronicles of the unconscious have, for the last five years, taken place in a space that Ballen refers to as 'the boarding house'. While the boarding house is a physical space just outside of Johannesburg that is in many ways just as extreme as it is depicted, it is far more dominantly a psychological space. Says Ballen, quoted in curator David Travis' introduction to the catalogue for the show, "During the process of creating *Boarding House* I broke through or into parts of my mind that I never knew existed. It was quite enthralling to find and be in this place. It is difficult to explain this place, except that I think it exists in some way or another in most people's minds."

There seems to be some truth to this suggestion that he is delving into a collective unconscious. For while the markings in Ballen's images may faintly echo cave paintings, they are also part of a universal language that is both contemporary and probably as old as human marking. Even in Durban, if you look beyond the façades of our mall culture, you might recognise the markings in Ballen's images. For they are similar to markings on freeway balustrades, pavements, pedestrian bridges and



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ghettoised walls, spaces occupied by street children, the destitute and the untethered. It bears pointing out that these markings are generally very different to street art (although not dissimilar to outsider art). They exist without the stylisation that tends to define artistic production. They are products of the id more than of the ego.

Over the years, Ballen has faced a fairly substantial barrage of criticism, criticisms whose concerns have ranged from exploitation of South African subjects by an American photographer to the extent to which his images have been constructed, as if construction somehow robs them of authenticity. But all those who discuss the various ways in which Ballen's photographs are or are not constructed, or the relationship he has with the unseen collaborators and increasingly occasional human subjects, are missing at least one essential point. And that is that the work produced for *Boarding House* and his numerous other exhibitions are the work of Roger Ballen. It's a strange thing to say but we seem to automatically forget – perpetually – that photographers make photographs as surely as painters make painting, that every photograph ever taken is actually constructed, whether over days or weeks – as with an advertising image – or in one 500th of a second, as might be the case with the work of a war correspondent.

But more than that, there is often the sense that, in constructing his images – and also in not acknowledging a discreet separation between that which is found and that which is added – Ballen is somehow guilty of a cardinal sin. “This is one of the biggest problems we face in photography, this issue,” says Ballen, when I bring it up with him. “The most immediate question and frequent question is ‘is this a real place?’. They can't accept that what's on the wall is what they have to deal with.”

For Ballen these predisposed ways of looking at a photograph is a huge hurdle in his own work and in photography in general. “And this comes up over and over and over again”. His response to the questions of ‘is this real?’ goes for the metaphysical jugular. “Well, if one closes one’s eyes and thinks about how one’s mind works, it goes between memory, between imagination, between feeling the body. We actually have multiple levels of consciousness all the time. So there isn’t anything real out there. It’s always a mixture of this and that.”

“And I think”, he continues, “if one goes back to these pictures, it actually brings up that issue in all sorts of ways. So you’re right, there’s a predisposed prejudice in photography. But, I think, you know, that people just have to look at the pictures for what they are, accept them for what they are. It’s a reflection of ignorance rather than anything else, that predisposition that’s out there. As a photographer you have to deal with it. You can’t pretend it doesn’t exist.”

He points to a picture in another room in the gallery taken by a leading South African artist. “For example, that photograph doesn’t mean anything to anyone. So you’ve got to read about it [in the notes underneath it]. The differences between that and something here [in the *Boarding House* exhibition] is that these things strike you right in the stomach, and you can’t get them out of you. You don’t have to read about it.”

“And the difference between someone who really understands photography and that kind of work – which you see a lot of in today’s world, you see a lot of artists using their cameras but they don’t actually understand photography – is that everything you see here has been transformed, ultimately, photographically. If you have to write about it in order to have impact on people’s mind – if you go that far – then you lose it.”

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He continues, “Look at the cloud. Look at the tree. Those are the things that are all around you, the things that you need to inspire you and to give you the right direction. And that’s what you should be doing; through your life experience, finding those things that will give you a way forward.”

Nontsikelelo Veleko

Give My Regards to Wonderland
(2009)

“I am not afraid”. It’s a beautiful phrase that pops up defiantly and sporadically all over the global pop culture, from skate to rock, from fashion to hip hop. It’s invariably an expression of outsiderism, and precisely because it’s not the kind of phrase that the mainstream consumer media are likely to appropriate, it’s usually an authentic, emotionally stirring sentiment.

It a phrase that also appears on the back cover of the catalogue for the exhibition for photographic artist Lolo Veleko’s exhibition *Wonderland* which she produced as Standard Bank Young Artist of the year and which opened at the Durban Art Gallery on Thursday night. And truly Lolo Veleko, or Nontsikelelo Veleko, to give her her full and proper name, is not afraid. *Wonderland* constitutes a gloriously open-ended paen to the bravery of being defiantly one’s self.

Graffiti, clouds, incidental landscapes of the heart. *Wonderland*, suggests Veleko, both is and isn’t a place. According to the catalogue for the show, it’s a cat, it’s prejudice, it’s love, it’s rejection, it’s tea or coffee, it’s anything. It’s what you make it. And at the shimmering centre of Veleko’s fluid, technicoloured world

are a series of portraits of young South Africans from Cape Town, Durban and Jozi, all radiating an idiosyncratic style that could come from nowhere but the periphery of contemporary South Africa.

These beautifully dressed young people might look like hip young things in the context of the fashion photograph. But think for a second about the possible home lives of these stylish dressers. South Africa is a place of great freedom but it's also a place of great repression and a profound conservatism, a place that is in many ways in conflict with the freedom radiating from Veleko's subjects.

Then there is the fact that clothing has always played a special role in South Africa, particularly for the country's working class. Given the temporary nature of material possessions for working class South Africans, both under the forced evictions of apartheid and the forced evictions of so many in 21st century liberated South Africa, the shoes you wear, the shirt you put on your back, these become prime expressions of identity for many in ways that are almost unimaginable by a middle class who are themselves for the most part obsessed by surface and image. Veleko's portraits exist in the face of this acquisitive culture. The coolest kids at Veleko's party are always wearing the weirdest clothes. This is not mall culture but the culture of the self reflected through a world that too often exists in opposition to it. And the result is spirited and heart-warmingly beautiful.

I have heard one or two criticisms that Veleko's work is too European. And, in truth, her work does fit into the same loose genre as the work produced by American and particularly European cutting edge culture mags such as *Trace* and *Dazed&Confused*. In these magazines fashion is often presented as documentary, and more to the point, often is documentary. But the style







is one that was heavily influenced by (or ‘stolen from’ if you like) African street photography, and if anything, Veleko is only reappropriating a tradition that has its roots in the streets of the continent. And, unlike the culture mags, she is not concerned with the culture of cool.

But I doubt that she is that concerned with the disjuncture between African and European aesthetics. For one thing, Veleko is too much of a global talent for such continental parochialism. For another, the separation between Europe and Africa is based on essentially false premises. For many, these two words represent two utterly different realities, two vastly different paradigms. But hundreds of years of colonialism and migration have ensured that the histories of the two continents are ineluctably intertwined. And nowhere is this truer than in contemporary art, where the European narrative and African narratives are inseparable.

But Veleko is aware of these and other charges leveled at her. A stand-out work in the exhibition features words in a digital scrawl layered a photographic image. These words include “the art sweetie of the moment” and other far less ambivalent insults. So she knows. But does she care? It would be hard not to. But perhaps when you’re capable of finding such a wonderful Wonderland in contemporary South Africa, where so many see dark skies, such insults hardly matter.

Santu Mofokeng

Memories are Photographs
of Ghosts
(2007)

I spoke to celebrated South African photographer Santu Mofokeng about the major exhibition Invoice which surveys his last 25 years of image-making,

Santu Mofokeng's calling to the camera came quickly. While he was still at school in the early 70s, he had already embarked upon a career as a street photographer to earn some money. In the schools uprising of 1976, however, he lost his camera and didn't get another one for several years. But the experiences of '76 brought home to Mofokeng the power of the photographic image as a tool of consciousness-raising and political subversion.

Ten years later, Mofokeng, now stridently aware of his calling, was a member of the seminal independent photographic agency Afrapix, which played a leading role in documenting the growing resistance to the apartheid regime, and whose legacy continues to exert a major influence on South African photography.

Now, 31 years after the Soweto uprising, Mofokeng is one

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of South Africa's most critically recognised photographers, acclaimed around the world as a leading contemporary talent. In the words of David Goldblatt, "his photographs of life and landscape in Southern Africa are among the finest that we have".

Invoice includes images from the major bodies of work produced by Mofokeng between 1982 and 2006, with much emphasis on the landscape on which Mofokeng has focused for much of the last decade. These are landscapes in the broadest sense of the word. From the urban periphery of South Africa's townships to the lives of tenant farmers in rural Bloemhof to Zionist rituals taking place in caves in the Free State to the implicit devastation of Auschwitz, his collective work constitutes a haunting meditation on the relationship between landscape, memory and identity.

I spoke to Santu after he had spent a long day driving from Johannesburg (he left at 3am) to Durban and then hanging his photographs in the art gallery. By the time he is ready to talk to me, the gallery is about to close. He gives me a whirlwind walk-about and we then eject ourselves onto the gallery steps for a smoke before deciding that a drink might be in order after such a long day, and we head for the bar in the Royal hotel.

But before we do, Mofokeng talks about his need to wrest some element of control from those in the media that write about him and his work. He says that he and his work are seldom represented with any accuracy in the publications which cover his shows. And while it's common for our local media to dismiss the visions of artists in favour of a reworded press release, Mofokeng makes the same attack on some of the planet's leading publications. Some journalists, he thinks are lazy, but most are simply not aware of what they are doing. Most people, he says, when they ask him questions are simply talking about themselves.

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I bring up an article I read on the net from one of America's most prominent and celebrated newspapers which discussed Mofokeng's images of Auschwitz. The article explained his work as that of an African coming to Europe. I had thought this faintly ludicrous when I read it, but for fear that I was being an oversensitive African, I mention this to Mofokeng. He falls about in hysterics for a few minutes in response. This is something he does frequently during the next two hours. He clearly finds much of the modern world surreal and ludicrous, and these outbreaks of hilarity, laughingly indignant, are as fitting a response to the world he sees as his images and his often eloquent oration.

While we're on the subject of other people's interpretation and his battle to make his own reading in some sense primary, I ask him if he thinks that his interpretation of his own images is more valid than that of others. Not more valid, he replies, but they are his images, and he would like ideally, to have some degree of control over their meaning.

There are ghosts everywhere in *Invoice*. On the one end of the gallery, people dance with their ancestors in caves outside Ficksburg and Fourieseburg. On the opposite wall is a single image of a warehouse in Auschwitz – a concentration of ghostlands – seen through glass, with Mofokeng's face reflected in the bottom. Between them are a geography of landscapes, some populated by people or animals, mostly unpopulated. But all except a single images – a breathtaking large-format image of the Namib desert – depict landscapes which either include people or which have been altered by people; the ghost of humankind, slowly evaporating, being erased by the landscape itself.

I say ghosts, Mofokeng says memory. And I'm not sure, in truth, if there's any difference between the two.





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It's not surprising to learn that Mofokeng worked under both Jurgen Schadeberg and David Goldblatt. These two giants of South African photography are worlds apart from each other; Goldblatt's stark formalism and powerful explorations of place set against Schadeberg's poetry of deep humanist empathy. In visual terms Mofokeng does indeed walk the middle road between these two once-masters-now-contemporaries. In fact "middle way" is exactly the word he himself uses. Which isn't meant to suggest that Mofokeng's work is simply the splicing together of two talents. He might occupy that artistic position in visual terms, but the world that he evokes is all his own, filled with a vision that is far more left-field and idiosyncratic than either Schadeberg or Goldblatt.

I ask him a little later, if he has attempted to take another middle road. In the way that he answers – or doesn't really answer – many of my questions, there is something of a Confucian or a Buddhist. He tells me that he has been on several roads in that direction, beginning with the eight forms of yoga. But he does not even begin to suggest that he has found an answer. But I will tell you that his laughter, when it erupts is so high-pitched that is almost soundless. And it goes on for a good while.

Before I question him about his spirituality, I've already ventured into other territory, and have asked him if he is depressive by nature. He smiles squintly at me and then says "manic" followed shortly by "depressive" and a wry chuckle. He sometime takes medication to counter the condition that is now referred to as bipolar but which is surely as old as philosophy. But he is not at the moment medicated.

He tells me how he read Socrates as a young boy. "And if you're reading Socrates at that age, you know trouble will be coming your way". He tells me also that, at the age of 51, he

thinks that he is living on borrowed time – not because he is spectacularly old, but because his family has a history of very short lifetimes, his father having died at the age of 44. He relates his enormous sense of visions still to be realised, of projects still to be completed.

I suggest to him that if he lived to 150, he's probably still have the same problem. He nods in wry agreement.

One of these projects, entitled *The Black Photo Album/Look at Me*, although it includes none of Mofokeng's photographs, nonetheless shines much light on his approach to the importance of representation in photographs. *The Black Photo Album* is a series of digitally reworked 19th century formal portraits of black South African Families. The project came into being in response to the fact that, in South African photographic records, black people are usually present only in their relation to hierarchy, and are seldom represented as fully human beings who have lives and families.

Talking about these images, Mofokeng has said elsewhere, "When we look at them, we believe them, for they tell us a little about how these people imagined themselves. We see these images in the terms determined by the subjects themselves." The project is not so much a labour of love, as laden with love. And implicit in the project's importance is the notion of imagination as opposed to the objectivity of record. We build the photograph. The photograph builds us.

Mindful of Mofokeng's acknowledgement – and also admonishment – that the interviewers are almost always talking about themselves, I hold back my readings of his images. But as Santu gets into his second double whiskey (I abstain, I cannot write after more than one drink) I bring up once more the notion of ghosts. I suggest to Mofokeng that his images are populated by

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ghosts of various kinds. But more than that, that in his images, he too is a ghost (sometimes almost literally, when he appears in a reflection in an image). He is the man who clicked the shutter, who stood in that landscape and then disappeared. And more than that, that the viewers of his images also become ghosts. They stand in front of the images, for seconds or for minutes, all the while their translucent reflection fused with the landscape they are looking at. And then they are gone. I tell Mofokeng this. "That is a compliment," he says.

While he may have made his name as a documentary photographer, the world of the single instant captured in time is clearly no longer the world Mofokeng occupies. Whether he ever did is another question entirely, and one that I never get round to asking. Mofokeng's world is far more concerned with the time that lies on either side of the photograph, the time that came before and the time that comes afterwards. From the seemingly eternal memories of Auschwitz to the sands of the ever-shifting Namib, the only victor that remains after all humankind's atrocities, conceits and frailties is time itself.

Despite his desire not to be labelled, Mofokeng does, during the course of our conversation, admit to being several things. He is a poet. He is a photographer. He does not call himself an artist but he endorses my claim that he is one. He is a meandering soul. He is a manic depressive. He is a father, with all the extra meaning that might have for an artist. He is fond of alcohol. And some of the medication he takes is really, really great!

And through all these things, and after two hours spent in his company, I am left with nothing so much as the revelation that he is in essence a beat poet. The rhythms of his narratives, both visual and spoken, spread out in all directions and then return refracted through a single point, before once more arcing

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up through the atmosphere. His pictures, extraordinarily diverse as they are in content, are all bathed in the poetic. And bear in mind that the poetic can also be brutal. Yes, Santu Mofokeng is a beat poet on all counts. And he is a man.

Peter Magubane

The Lens of Change
(2006)

I spoke to Peter Magubane about the life-long journey that has made him one of South Africa's most important photographers.

Photographer Peter Magubane is talking to me about the many months he has spent in some of this country's jails. More specifically, he is recounting the time he was forced to stand on three bricks for five days and nights, with only sugarless black coffee to sustain him. And as he tells me this and other stories—from his past, they become real for me, even without his photographic medium, so evocatively does he describe the events. And for a few minutes on the phone I become a cliché, the boy sitting next to the wise, older man at the fireside, the grandson listening to the grandfather. The interview falls away and I am someone to tell stories to.

Although he eagerly recounts the events of his life, his youthful bravado and his growing older, Magubane is unusual in that he doesn't seem to embroider his own past the way that most people seem to do. Instead, he gives it depth by filling it with detail, and I imagine that it is exactly that same sense of

detail which fills his photographic eye.

Magubane, who became a photographer under Jurgen Schadeberg at *Drum* magazine in the '60s, chronicled the absurd and heart-breaking narratives of apartheid through the medium of magazine photography. This striving to represent the truth of life under the National Party government gave him the title of 'enemy of the state'. But things change, thank God, and fifty years on, Magubane is one of the country's most recognised photographers. Currently working as an art photographer, he has four honorary doctorates and has garnered a slew of awards from around the world.

He tells me about the events which earned him a special kind of award: one from the American National Professional Photographers Association for his bravery. Magubane witnessed the killing of a man in front of his own house. The two assassins were intent on killing the other two people in the house – the mother and child of their first victim – but Magubane persuaded the pair that enough blood had already been spilled, and they went away, sparing the lives of two people.

Hearing him recount the event, the logic of the foolhardy sage – “no more blood” – rises to the surface. I almost imagine the killers being cowed into subservience by the authority of the wise, a bit of a Jesus thing. And when I ask him if he was convinced that the young men would heed his words and not turn on him instead, he is silent for a few moments, and then says: “I fear no evil. I fear no man. I walk with God inside me.”

And listening to Magubane talk is a little like talking to a prophet, a prophet not shy to extol the virtues that he says age has bestowed on him. He has, he says, matured like a fine wine. But he was not always so mature. As a younger man, he was something of a Sophiatown bull, a boxer with slightly





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wild ways. He tells me of his exploits with a mix of pride and amusement. But before all of this regaling, I begin on a more serious note...

Peter Machen: I wanted to begin by talking about your current work. Much of it documents cultures that are disappearing into the global melting pot. Do you think that there is any hope of maintaining what is left of our cultures in South Africa?

Peter Magubane: Well, I think there is – now that people are realising who they are and what they have missed out on in all those years because of apartheid. It was apartheid that made people forget and leave their own areas. Because of the pass system you had to lie and say ‘I was born in the city’ so that you could get a permit to work and get a pass to be in the prescribed area of a city.

PM: And you don’t think that things like MTV and the internet might offer competition to local cultures for young people?

Magubane: No, it doesn’t seem like it’s affecting them, you know. Because Christmas time, November/December, you’ll find that there are the youngsters from the Eastern Cape going in for the rite of passage. Then in June you find them going for the rite of passage across most of the country – they go in winter. And you still have lots and lots of traditional weddings. Even in the cities people now choose to have a traditional wedding, plus a ‘white’ wedding.

PM: Do you think that coming from a background of news photography yourself...

Magubane: No, I don’t come from that. I was trained as a magazine photographer, which made me more hardworking because I knew how to get a story in pictures and I also knew how to cover news stories.

PM: So you think that you've always been a documentary photographer?

Magubane: Oh yes, that's what I started with.

PM: And you think that news photography doesn't really document in the same sense?

Magubane: No, it doesn't. Because there you are dealing with just one or two pictures that have to tell the story. I am more versatile. I get into a magazine situation, I can pick up a picture, just one, to tell a whole story. I get into news, I am adaptable.

PM: So, when you started taking pictures, was your first desire an aesthetic one, or was it a desire to represent reality?

Magubane: When I got into photography it was because I wanted to use my camera to ease the oppression and the burden that was perpetrated by the system then. I had been going through *Life* magazine and other publications, seeing how strong pictures are, how pictures can change situations.

And the only thing I could think of was *Drum* magazine – the stories that I had seen by Bob Gosani, the photographer, and Can Themba, the writer. They were fighting apartheid in the magazine using words and pictures. So I thought, “Well this would be a good thing for me to get into. Instead of getting onto a platform or fighting people, I can fight with my camera. At least with my camera I will be able to show the world what is going on in my country.”

PM: As a result, you spent a lot of time in prison. And you also risked your life to help other people. The fact that you've intervened in situations that you've photographed is very rare for a photo-journalist. Did you ever feel that you had a choice?

Magubane: Well, I always think that once I have my picture, I don't see why I should not help a colleague who is in danger, or help someone else who is in danger. Once I've got my picture,

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yes, I can now help. But before I have my picture I am like a wounded tiger (laughs).

And when I sat in prison I said to myself, “You are not the only one that is struggling.” There were other people who are in worse conditions than I was. At least I knew that the newspaper I was working for – *The Rand Daily Mail*, with the support of Raymond Louw who was my editor – was looking out for me. You know, they would have tortured me to death, but they knew that *The Rand Daily Mail* was looking out for me.

The only torture I got was to be placed on three bricks, a foot from the ground. I stood on those bricks for five days and five nights, drinking strong black coffee without sugar. The fifth night I fell to the ground and pissed blood. They gave me some tablets to relieve myself.

PM: As you say, so many worse things happened. But as you describe it, it’s so unbelievable that people would do that to each other...

Magubane: Once you think of yourself as the only person that things are happening to, then you will not be able to pull through, but once you’ve realised that you’re not the only one experiencing those conditions...For instance, there were detainees from Namibia who were arrested – they were crying every night, they were being tortured every night – now who was I to cry? I couldn’t very well say “I’m the only one”. You just say, “Well, I take it as it is, and one day, either I’ll come out, or I’ll sit here for the rest of my life.”

PM: Did you really think that you might have to spend the rest of your life in jail?

Magubane: No, not ‘life’. But I was thinking 25 years. And I thought, “Well, if it comes, it comes. There’s nothing I can do.” I could deduce from the questioning that they didn’t just pick

me up. They picked me up because of some of the stories that I had been doing. Then one of these guys said, “You came to my father’s farm. You asked questions and you took pictures.” I said, “Yes, I was doing my work.” I’m not a politician. I’m a politician with my camera.

PM: When you were taking photographs, were there ever moments when you didn’t do something, that looking back you wish you had done? Moments when you didn’t intervene...?

Magubane: Well, it’s always been in my blood that if and when I see a chance to intervene, I go for it. But if there is no chance, I don’t do it. I look at the situation. If it’s such that I can go in and rescue a person, I do so. But this is after I have taken a few shots, so I know I’m covered.

PM: You’re a good man...

Magubane: But when they shot me 17 times below my waist in Katlahong – I was running in one place, and I fell to the ground – school children that were there dragged me into a house. The guy that was running in front of me was hit stone dead. Because of those children I am still alive today.

PM: After everything that has happened, the last 50 years, how do you view South Africa today, in 2006?

Magubane: Well, the fight that was put up by all the South Africans, black and white, has made this country what it is today. And if there was no Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I do not think for one moment we would be where we are now. Because I think hell would have broken loose. We have a beautiful country now, but that doesn’t mean we can sit back and expect the country to work for us. We must work for the country, the democracy that we have, we must work for it, because we worked very hard to obtain this democracy.

PM: Where do you live now?

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Magubane: In Melville, in Johannesburg.

PM: Is there anything you would like to say to young people taking pictures today

Magubane: It is nice that we now have young women and men photographers who are working hard to get into the books of history. The sky is the limit. You don't have the police interfering with you anymore. You don't have the Minister of Justice interfering with you. The worst thing is to be banned, where you are made a non-person, where if you are found talking to more than one person at a time you go to jail. If you break your banning order, you know that that it's the end of your seeing the sun outside.

But no sane person has ever obeyed the banning orders. Only if there's something wrong with you will you really obey banning orders. I could never do it. Sometimes what I used to do was I'd go and report on Monday and after reporting I'd then drive to Durban, incognito, using a different car and stay there for five days at my aunt's place and come back – because my banning order was not a 6-to-6.

PM: I'm glad you did what you wanted. I think it really made a difference.

Magubane: When they caught up with me once I was sentenced to six months imprisonment. I was sent to Leeukop Prison where I spent six months on my own in the cell. I didn't cry. I said, "Well, you know, what is six months when there are people that have been sentenced to life imprisonment. Who am I to cry?" I said. Even though I left my children alone, there were people who would look after them."

PM: You spoke about the TRC and how that prevented this country from blowing, but do you think that perhaps the other thing that prevented this country from blowing is this incredible

PETER MAGUBANE

capacity for forgiveness?

Magubane: Yes, that has prevented this country from blowing.

PM: I say this because I'm hearing you talking about these terrible things that have happened to you, and yet you don't sound at all bitter.

Magubane: No, because as a journalist, I can't work with a hole stuffed in my heart. Take it out and be able to do your work freely. Even though, when I was taking pictures of Eugene Terreblanche, he said to his supporters '*vat beirdie kaffir vir my af*' (laughs). I looked at him and I laughed and I walked away. I am glad that we took the path of reconciliation.

PM: One last question. Has anyone written your biography?

Magubane: Peter Hawthorn was doing it but I don't know where he is now since *Time* magazine closed their offices here. But I'm thinking about it. Because days are going, years are going by. One would soon forget some of these things.

Machen: I was thinking I'd love to do it. I'd love to listen to you talk, you have so many stories...

Cedric Nunn

The Colour of Us All

(2006)

Cedric Nunn's exhibition Blood Relatives presents a family portrait that binds us all together.

Photographer Cedric Nunn's career was forged out of a desire to document the realities of apartheid ignored by the mainstream media. In the years subsequent to apartheid's initial dismantling, Nunn has continued to document the realities of the new South Africa, realities which remain ignored for the most part by the same media, despite the absence of state censorship that constitutes one of our many new freedoms.

Nunn's self-stated focus has always been to document social change, particularly in rural areas. He began his work, as did many of our foremost documentary photographers, with the Afrapix collective, and went on to work by himself and with various NGOs. His work has garnered much critical recognition and has been exhibited around the world.

Central to Nunn's experience of apartheid, and also of the new South Africa, is the fact that he is a coloured person, and in *Blood Relatives* that fact comes to the fore, as he documents

his extended family. The pictures, taken over 25 years, mostly in Mangete in KwaZulu-Natal, both chronicle coloured life in the area over that period, and point to a rich history deeply rooted in the local soil.

The position of coloured people in South Africa during the twentieth century remains one of the most brutal intersections of apartheid's classification system. Despite the fact that in the ludicrous hierarchy of apartheid, coloured people were supposedly relatively privileged, race-based reality often hit them the hardest, their identity foisted upon them by a system beyond their control and in which they had no say.

And of course, during the days of apartheid's Immorality Act and Mixed Marriages Act, which prohibited sexual relations between people of different skin colours, any child born "coloured" was a direct result of an illegal activity. Which, even without the hindsight of history, is a piece of brutal absurdity.

Nunn regards this notion of a separate coloured people as a "construct of a policy, born out of prejudice, racial bias and the peculiar social experiment foisted on this country by imperialists, colonialists, white nationalists and now adopted by many coloured people themselves." He emphasises that *Blood Relatives* is a documentation of an aberration of the social structure which led to the separation of communities.

The word 'coloured' continues to be used in South Africa, and refers not so much to the children of bi-racial marriages, as to an entire community. Foreign visitors are often shocked to hear the word used so freely, and while it remains a linguistic construct, it is also now linked to a strongly defined cultural identity and thus difficult to reconfigure.

Nunn's pictures give the human counterpoint to all this political and linguistic chimera and, while establishing a rich group





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portrait of his extended family, shows that, despite the classifications that separated them from other race groups, the people living their lives in these pictures are just people. And, in fact, the pictures that Nunn has taken of the poor-but-rich community that is his genetic legacy, look very much like pictures of rural mid-west America, which make the lies of apartheid seem even more stupid.

It's a pity that Nunn has not provided a more detailed contextualisation for *Blood Relatives* in his introductory note for the exhibition. Only those who are already familiar with his work or well-versed in local history will appreciate the fine web of community and family that runs through the show.

For Nunn is part of a fascinating lineage, one that has been previously documented in the Group Portrait South Africa project. He and most of the people he has brought to the walls of the Durban Art Gallery are related to John Dunn, a 19th Century English explorer who became a Zulu chief. Vital to the story, in terms of the exhibition, is the fact that Dunn had forty nine wives. This means that by the time the genealogy arrives at his photographer great-grandson, the family tree has become very expansive indeed. And it would have been nice to know exactly how the people in the pictures relate to each other and to Nunn.

Nonetheless, the cultural and historic richness that he details remains a counterpoint to the stereotype of the coloured people of South Africa, so often lumped into a single history, a single word.

But while that word is one of apartheid's most trenchant legacies of division, the history of coloured people in South Africa also acts as a blueprint for our all histories. If we could go back over the last millennium, we would discover that we

CEDRIC NUNN

are nearly all the products of migrations and trans-cultural marriages, we have all been forced off lands, dogged by ethnic conflicts and expansionist imperialists, and that we have all been reconfigured into some new and essentially constructed identity which, strangely enough, so many of us still cling to. This is the world-wide web which lies beneath Nunn's pictures and his own personal history, and it is one which suggests that we are all coloured people.

‘Everyone is beautiful. There is no-one here who is not beautiful’. I am talking to Thandiswe from the band Bongo Maffin, who happens to be in front of me as we are entering an old theatre on Avenida 25de Setembro in Maputo where Alan Freeman and the 206 Collective are holding a one-off party.

206 used to be a famous dance club in Yeoville, but time, crime and the inevitability of all empires closed it down several years ago. Since then, Freeman has been managing bands (previously Max Normal, and now Mozambican band 340ml) and, together with his accomplices, staging occasional parties – around South Africa, in London and, last Monday, in Maputo. Featuring an array of DJs from all over the place flowing into a performance from punky dubby responsible-anarchists 340ml, the 206 gig was one of the finest parties I’ve ever been to. And not because of the DJs (some of whom were brilliant, some crap) or because of the band (I thought they were great, my friend hated them) but because of the people.

When Thandiswe was talking about how beautiful they were, I’m sure she was talking about bone structure and skin tone. But I’m also sure she was referring to the freedom and ease with which they moved among each other and ourselves, with the grace with which they flirted. There wasn’t an ounce of attitude or aggression present. And the diversity of the crowd was lovely, from 9 to 50, and in every possible hue and hairstyle. I asked the girl in front of me on the dancefloor if parties were always this good in Maputo. “Is this good?” she asked in reply.

While I had one of the parties of my life (despite the fact

Till the Morning Light

that we had to leave early) it also made me a little sad, because it was so far away from the nightlives we lead in Durban. Even if we do mix together in the same venues, we're nearly always separated by our stiff little racial and social cliques. Only at a tiny number of venues, do these patterns seem to break down with any kind of regularity.

We still have a vast distance to travel before we can dance properly with each other. Looking into each other's eyes for just a fragment of a second, and knowing that in that moment there is a shared understanding of the simple fact of being a human being moving to music.

Landscapes

Holding on to Paradise

(2008)

In 2008, a proposed development of the eMacambini area in KwaZulu-Natal threatened to destroy the life of a rich rural community as well as one of South Africa's most beautiful landscapes.

If you drive up the North Coast of KwaZulu Natal, you'll see what was once little than a series of small seaside towns gradually morphing into something that increasingly looks like Jo'burg. Currently the twin epicentres of this urban spread are Umhlanga and Ballito, but the virus is spreading around the province. It has already filled the once semi-rural suburbs of Hillcrest and Waterfall with strip malls and gated communities and threatens to take up wherever there is a beautiful view waiting to be destroyed.

As pre-planned reality displaces the very notion of the organically evolved village and town, these new locations of middle class human habitation – be they Tuscan, Balinese or grossed-out modernism – have become the literal embodiment of the so-called “end of history”. It all fits perfectly. And inside the gated, monitored and regulated communities, that trouble-

some world out there that is so filled with violence and terror becomes no more than a channel on your television screen.

A little further up the coast, an hour and a half's drive away from Durban, a local community is challenging this notion of the end of history. They are defending a richly lived rural life against a virus that is just as destructive to the natural cycles of the planet as the Jo'burg virus: the Dubai virus. And they are doing so against a movingly beautiful landscape in which they have lived for generations. A landscape in which there is little extreme poverty, no violence and no crime, and where community is more important than political affiliation.

I first read about the proposed development of the Amazulu World Theme Park in eMacambini in a local paper. The planned development by Dubai-based Ruwaad Holdings would occupy 16 500 hectares. In addition to the theme park, plans include a gargantuan shopping, a game reserve, six golf courses, residential facilities, sports fields and a R200 million 100-meter-high statue of Shaka Zulu at the Thukela river mouth.

In that article there was no mention of the eMacambini community that was going to be displaced, no mention of the 29 schools that would be demolished, the 300 churches, the three clinics, the brand new RDP houses. No mention of the ancestral graves that would be displaced. No mention of the absurdity of a beyond-vast Zulu theme park that would destroy everything that is Zulu about the area – which is to say everything.

The community of eMacambini also first heard about the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Province and Dubai-based Ruwaad Holding in the media. Many of them were aware of talks between their chief, the province and two companies in Dubai. But they had not been informed that their





entire world had been promised away by provincial leadership. Only later did the provincial authorities, led by Director General Kwazi Mbanjwa, arrive in eMacambini. They were unaccompanied by provincial Premier S'bu Ndebele, who together with Mbanjwa, spearheaded negotiations on the project and threatened the community with land-expropriation.

Anti-Removal Committee member Khanyisani Shandu recalls the meeting. "It was a top-to-bottom kind of approach – 'we as government are telling you that it is going to be like this'." But he also says that the province has no legal power to take away the community's land. "The community owns the land. That is indisputable". And having examined the proposal, the people of eMacambini gave a clear rejection of the project. But that was the last time that the province – or anyone else from government – engaged with the community.

On 26 November, more than 5000 residents of eMacambini marched to the Mandeni Municipal Offices to deliver a petition to Ndebele and threatened to blockade the N2 and R102 if they did not receive a response from him. Ten days later, after having received no response, the community occupied the roads in protest and blockaded them with burning tires. And so, the story made the headlines for the first time. But predictably, there was little analysis of the events that had led to the blockade.

The main response that the community received was the full fury of the local police force who attacked the protestors with tear gas and rubber bullets, and, later, allegedly forced their way into people's house, arresting some people who had not even been at the blockade. During the course of the violence, at least 50 people were shot at, and 10 people hospitalised. The response from the ANC was to condemn the protests, add-

ing that they were “unfortunate and unnecessary”. The Youth League meanwhile cast the Inkatha Freedom Party as political instigators in the events. For the eMacambini community, such responses are just further fodder for their disillusionment with the former liberation movement. The community seems to have been abandoned by the same forces that two decades ago would surely have fought side by side with them. Now, the state sends it police force. But it sends no leadership, no-one to help sort out this dirty mess.

As they eMacambini Anti Removal Committee says, “There will be no compensation for what we will lose. There will just be a swop of land – a 500 hectare township for 16 500 hectares of beautiful and free land with rivers, valleys, pastures and beaches. In the townships there will be nothing for free. We will have to pay rates there. Here we are growing sugar cane, vegetables and fruit. Here we are raising cattles, sheep and goats. Here some of us survive on fishing.”

The community of eMacambini had defended their land for centuries, surviving the threats of colonialism and apartheid intact. “And now” says Shandu, “this so-called ‘people’s government’ is happy to remove us. It’s really terrible to say the least.”

He also stresses that the community’s response to the development has got nothing to do with party politics. “We have all now came together in solidarity to say this is a pure theft of the land. The Premier has been saying that the people of eMacambini are rejecting development. But this is not development. It’s theft. It’s absolute theft.”

Meanwhile, Inkosi Khayelilhle Mathaba , the local traditional leader who was sidelined in negotiations with Ruwaad, points out that Ndebele will shortly be leaving his position as Premier to go into business. And he says that he has documents which





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state that Ndebele will personally get 10% of the shares in the development. Ndebele has also refused to give Mathaba and the community the MOU signed with Ruwaad Holdings.

Apart from the sheer ludicrousness of events, something else struck me about my visit to eMacambini. I have driven all over KwaZulu-Natal and often speak to people in rural communities about their experiences. And the most consistent and resounding cry, from Umbumbulu to Bothas Hill is “we are poor”. By contrast, the residents of eMacambini say “we are rich. We are not poor. We are rich.” Those were almost the exact words used by nearly all of the people I spoke to. And, vitally, they acknowledge that it is their access to land that makes them rich. They realise that their removal from their land would send them straight into poverty.

They also acknowledge that they do not hold all development in contempt. They are in favour of development that would help them become richer – in the broadest meaning of the word – rather than poorer. But they do not want their landscape to change. There is a great African cliché in which the beauty of the landscape exists in stark contrast to the poverty of the people. It is refreshing that this is not the case in eMacambini. Here, people live functionally between modernity and tradition.

Those who talk of African solutions to African problems should come to eMacambini where land, grass-roots democracy and mutual respect have come together maintain a reality that is the very essence of sustainability. Of course, the African Solution seekers might not like what they see. They might object to the lack of ‘development’, to the region’s distance from modernity. And they probably wouldn’t see the similarities between the community of eMacambini and the Tuscan farmers

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who are trying to maintain their traditional way of life, just as small rural communities all over the planet are doing, from Alaska to New Delhi.

Mathaba and the community of eMacambini will soon be taking the matter to the country's courts. It seems likely that they will be successful in maintaining their land and their autonomy. And if they are, it will not simply be a victory for themselves and their land, but for all those South Africans who are in favour of self determination and sustainability over rampant development.

Post-script:

The development at eMacambini never took place and the community have maintained ownership of the region.

Landscapes

The Broken Beauty of Maputo

(2003)

Mozambique is famous for its pristine beaches but I couldn't bring myself to leave Maputo, so bewitched was I by the city's broken elegance.

Socialism still walks the streets of Maputo. Any communist or socialist with any degree of fame (or notoriety, depending on the fickleness of history) has a street named after them. You can walk downtown along Avenida Karl Marx or Avenida Vladimir Lenine. Mao Tse Tung, Hồ Chí Minh and Albert Luthuli all have avenues named in their honour. And while the potholes and peeling paint that decorate the city might stand as a metaphor for the current state of socialism, the beauty of being in Maputo – the people, the buildings, the colour of the light – continues to offer hope for an alternative model of social and economic reality in Africa.

Maputo is an extremely poor city in an extremely poor country. Like South Africa, there is massive unemployment. Prices are higher and salaries are lower. Nearly everything is imported, refuse removal is minimal and the police are a law unto themselves.

Yet, for the most part, everything seems to work. There are far fewer beggars on the streets than in any South African city. You can sit at a pavement cafe drinking an excellent espresso and a delicately delicious pastry and not feel compelled to think you're in Europe. This is Africa, pure, simple, beautiful, and without pretensions.

The Coca-Cola signs are coming, sure, and there are cheesy billboards advertising the consumerist promise of modernity – and in a streak of historic irony, some of the new construction is surrounded by hoardings painted with the ANC colours.

But the rabid consumerism that has come to characterise post-apartheid South Africa is largely absent from Maputo. Walking through the sprawling Xipamanine market in the poorer end of the city, or the more upmarket Mercado Municipale-downtown, it seems the sellers outnumber the buyers a hundred to one. Only in the very specifically upper middle-class Supermercado does commerce begin to resemble anything like South Africa. And, apart from the curio sellers which line the roads where the hotels are located, bargaining will get you nowhere. Even in the shops, prices are standardised in the same way as they are on the streets of Durban, with hundreds of hawkers selling a range of identical goods at the same price.

And the people are almost painfully honest. Often I would leave vendors with 500 meticas change (about 20c) and without fail, they would run after me, clutching the coin to give back to me.

Service in Maputo is impeccable (tips are appreciated, but not expected) and food arrives at one's table remarkably quickly since even the toasted sandwich machines run on gas. You are discouraged from drinking the tap water, but the locals do and with my Southern African stomach, I didn't have a prob-







OSQUE
ALZIRA



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lem. We ate a meal at a fantastic Ethiopian restaurant at the Feira Popular, and although there were no functional taps in the bathroom, our waitress brought a basin and a jug of water which she poured over our hands before we ate.

One of the defining characteristics of Maputo is its vibrant pavement culture. From the cigarette vendors which dot the streets until late into the night to the *pastelerias* (bakeries) and coffee shops, the streets are alive with an ease and elegance we are far from achieving. Likewise, some bottlestores are open until midnight and it's acceptable to drink in public. And while there is a strong drinking culture, it's not a culture of getting wasted as in South Africa. Every morning, there were people in the coffee shops still going from the night before, but looking inexplicably fresh and strong.

And the people are beautiful and friendly. If the buildings are haunted by war, the people, it seems, are not. While poverty is everywhere, there is little sense of the brutalisation that continues to remain so extant in South Africa. There is simply a sense of life being lived.

And this is not the condescending view of a white middle-class tourist. I spoke to many Mozambiquans who lived in South Africa for one reason or another (usually jobs and rands, sometimes family) and, without exception, they were all glad to be back in Maputo for Christmas because life was more real here.

The paradox, of course is that they need to return to South Africa to work. The big social and economic question is whether it is possible to conjoin the freedom of Maputo with any kind of real capitalism.

Despite the proliferation of houseguards and carguards and the warnings to tourists, crime – or the threat of it – seems

far less pervasive than in South Africa. Although, as with any city, it's advisable to keep a firm check on your wallet and your passport, and there are certainly roads that only the bravest or most foolhardy will travel.

Like South Africa, car theft is evidently a problem, as is car-part theft. Some of the vehicles we saw had their registration numbers pop-riveted across both doors to make them less attractive to thieves. Often windscreens are cracked to make them less stealable, and car lights are secured with strips of metal.

The architecture is truly lovely, despite (and because of) the poverty and a war remembered most strongly by the buildings – a melting pot of Brazilian modernism, old-school colonialism and African style. The most striking thing is the individuality of every building, every street, every detail. A single medium-rise block of flats might have 20 different styles of burglar guards for example. Looking out from a rooftop across the beautiful cityscape, a criss-cross of shapes and patterns emerges that is inspiring in its acknowledgement difference and sameness.

And if the banality of South African post-modernism is starting to spread in the form of the office parks popping up in the business district downtown, such grossness will hopefully be restrained by the ghosts of socialism which continue to linger amid the encroaching billboards.

Despite the dilapidation, the cracks in the buildings, the potholes which line many of the streets and the question of the economic future, South Africa has a lot to learn from Maputo. There is a freedom and fluidity here which barely exists in South Africa. And racial identity seems minimal despite a strong history of colonialism.

Sitting on a rooftop, surrounded by the sprawling mass of

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buildings, under a starlit African sky, Maputo is a city out of time, almost forgotten by the ravages and progress of history. But life is lived here with a broadly human grace that one day we might all acquire. You might just have to slow down a little to see it.

Elise Durant

A New Eden

(2015)

Edén is the delicately bewn feature debut from director Elise DuRant. The film tells the story of a young woman who returns to 1980s Mexico where she grew up, and where she revisits memories of her late father (played by Will Oldham) and his bohemian life of self-determination. Bathed in a dusty golden palette and fuelled by the fragility of human memory, the film is a gentle but powerful meditation on loss and belonging. I spoke to DuRant about this small but remarkable film.

Peter Machen: I'm interested in the extent to which you have fictionalised or reimagined your own childhood in *Edén*. I also found the film engaged a lot with the intersection between recall and reconstruction. When you watch the film now, how much of it is a new story? And how much of it is an accurate reflection of your past?

Elise Durant: My father had a romantic notion of Mexico, informed by westerns and travel writers of the time. In a certain way, he lived out his fantasies in Mexico as an adventurer. As his only daughter, raising me on his own, I fitted into his adventure and fantasies. He was very charismatic, and he introduced me

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to art and culture and experiences that few children around me were exposed to. And, yet, I've never quite known exactly where I fit in. My father was American in a way that, since I was a child, I was in awe of, and could not relate to: he moved in the world as if it was his. I never had that. Wherever I was, I was the foreigner. I came into this world feeling there was a set structure that I had to quickly learn and fit into, but always felt out of place, like I could never get it right, never truly be fluent. I also saw my father over the course of his lifetime become deeply disappointed and wounded by the world. It almost seemed, from my perspective, that he had created a world for us to live in that didn't allow for him to truly be himself. I wanted to explore that in *Edén*. It's a bit like the daughter fits into the father's idea/fantasy/romantic vision, but what is her place in all of this when that vision has died? What is she left with? And I also wanted to explore a particular moment in this young woman's life when she tries to understand her place in the world. I wanted to present that very masculine, sparse world I was raised in and help her find a new direct relationship with her motherland. *Edén* is fiction. It's its own story, just as a writer may draw from personal experience to create a short story.

PM: The actress Diana Sedano who plays Alma is at least nominally an avatar of yourself, both physically and in her mode of being (although of course she is also very different to you). How does it feel to watch a proxy of yourself on screen? And can you tell me a little about the process of casting Alma?

ED: It's funny, when casting Alma I looked to very practical things: she had to be bilingual and physically ambiguous in that she not be identifiably of any specific nationality. And yet she was the hardest to cast, the character that I knew the least about. I wanted her to embody this restraint and cut-off emotionality

that Alma has inherited from her father and that has brought her to being isolated. I can imagine Diana wanted to desperately claw herself away out of those rooms we were filming in. I kept boxing Diana in, constraining her. That's what Alma is.

PM: It's rare nowadays to watch a film that is so free of references to other films and film history. Was this intentional or simply your natural, intuitive response to filmmaking?

ED: You could say I work more intuitively. I think we're all informed by what comes before us. I've always been drawn to specific intimate moments in films. But it wouldn't make sense to refer to other filmmakers when making decisions about *Edén*.

The idea was to tell the scene in the cleanest, most straightforward way possible. It was important that the story be told from Alma's perspective, and that we stay with her. I knew I wanted to shoot in widescreen format, with a washed out palette, as a nod to certain cultural references of my father's generation, such as the western. I knew we had to go to John's back to reflect his emotional distance from the world at key emotional moments, and then repeat that with Alma, to convey that she had inherited these traits from him. I knew that I wanted to give importance to the ambient sound, and to stay there with the characters with very static long shots, so that the place became a character with them. And I knew that I wanted to hire local non-professional actors, again so that place became more real.

I don't know if this may have something to do with it, but I didn't study film in college. I studied still photography with Joel Sternfeld, as well as short story writing. I learned filmmaking from working in the editing room. Still photography, short story writing, editing: they are all about paring down – at least from the schools of thought that I come from. Vicente Pouso, *Edén's* director of photography, had a long career as a still photogra-





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pher before coming to *Edén*, so we saw eye-to-eye on creating static, minimalist shots.

PM: With *Edén*, I found that a second viewing greatly enriched both the film and my understanding of it. Did you intentionally prefigure later moments in the film with earlier references – or was it subconscious? And do you think that this approach reflects real life, in which we tend to repeat themes and choices, regardless of our desire to do so?

ED: Yes, those who have seen *Edén* more than once have said similar things, that they see things they hadn't caught on the first viewing. This makes me happy. There is a path of breadcrumbs that has been laid down in *Edén* that is there to guide you along the way, a key word here, an object there.

PM: Tell me about your choice of palettes? Are the muted browns and pinks and yellows intended to suggest nostalgia and memory, or are they accurate reflections of the colour of the light in Mexico?

ED: The idea was to shoot during the dry season, when the rains had passed. We accentuated that palette with the wardrobe and set design. Those colours are meant to reflect a certain austerity, a barrenness to Alma's world. And, as I had mentioned earlier, they also nod to the western. I was asked if I wanted to make the past a certain colour palette and the present another, but did not want to do that. Instead I wanted the present and past to meld, to not have clear indicators of "okay, now we're in the past". I thought the viewer would figure it out at one point or another, and if one person figured it out later than another, that was fine by me.

PM: Can we talk a little about the process of casting Will? When you were writing the film, did you have him in mind? Does he remind you of your father in any way? And did he have any in-

put into the script or the filmmaking process?

ED: Will came to mind after the script was written, in the moment I began to think of a cast for *Edén*. He was the first person I thought of, the ideal person for the role. I knew he acted but I knew him more from his music. I was drawn to his voice and the words, how they were put together. It was so raw, and personal. He also had a reputation for being very guarded, very private, and this reminded me of my father.

I wrote to a friend of mine who knows Will, and asked if he could help me contact him. He presented the idea to Will, and a few days later Will and I were talking on the phone. We spoke for close to an hour and talked about the role. I then sent him the script. We spoke again, and he was on board. We corresponded over the course of a year. I would share with him anything and everything I could about Mexico, my upbringing, my father, certain ideas I had. We never spoke again about the script, and I didn't want the actors to see themselves in dailies, so he didn't see the film until just a few months ago for the first time.

PM: Did the dialogue change much during the filmmaking process?

ED: The dialogue stayed pretty much the same as it appears in the script. I love distilling things down to the bare minimum. So, we did keep paring the dialogue down to the bare bones in the editing process.

PM: I'll admit that during both my viewings of the film, I kind of forgot about the opening scene in the abortion clinic, which – of course – has considerable relevance to the rest of the film. I watched the film with a woman friend of mine and her husband, and she spent most of the film thinking about the events in that context, while her husband and I did not. Do you think

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that one's gender influences one's response to the film – and to cinema (and other artforms) in general?

ED: It's funny you say that, because those who have connected the abortion scene to Alma and Paco's confrontation scene have been women; they get the connection between Alma and Paco that is there for me. But, I think that what people take from *Edén* depends more on the person – their sensibility and where they're coming from – than on gender.

PM: Did you, in your own life, go back to Mexico to uncover the past and re-trace your father's life?

ED: I returned to Mexico for the first time on my own in my mid-20s. I think I was secretly looking to reconnect with that mother figure I felt I had lost when we were forced to leave the country when I was a little girl. (Hence the abortion scene and not the father's death triggering the return.) It was a deep, deep loss for me. When my father died, and I inherited his journals and photographs, and books, was when certain things about his life began to reveal themselves. He was a very private man that spoke about himself and his past on rare occasions. He was shrouded in mystery.

PM: And what do you think your father would have thought about the film?

ED: I really don't know what he would have thought. He was so private.

PM: Was making the film a healing process for you? And do you think that it might be capable of having a healing effect on viewers?

ED: Yes, now that you ask, I can say that it has been a healing process to make *Edén*. I don't think I could have said the same a year ago though. I'm in a different mental space now. I can let my father rest. I no longer identify myself as an orphan in the

world. My life is now my own. A woman wrote me after she saw *Edén* to tell me how much the film had moved her. She said she cried for an hour the next morning, and thanked me for making it. It triggered something for her in her own life. Others have approached me after screenings to share how the film has touched them. So yes, I think it can have a healing effect. I think we all know the truth about our lives and where we come from. It's the concealment of the lie that creates the damage. The healing process is in bringing it to the light.

PM: *Edén* is unusual (though not exceptionally so) in that there is no score involved, and all music and sounds are ambient. Was this your intention from the beginning? And do you think that it makes the film harder to watch for contemporary audiences? It seems to me that omnipresent scores only became mandatory in commercial cinema in the 1980s. Do you think that this has changed the ways in which viewers relate to cinema?

ED: I knew from the beginning that I did not want a score. *Edén* is so silent as it is, so sparse, I think, that it can be uncomfortable for some to watch. It's interesting you bring up this word "mandatory". It seems to me that films these days are measured against a "mandatory" checklist. You'd think that so many great filmmakers who have come before us – most of whose work would probably fail if measured up to that checklist – had not informed filmmaking. Cinema is one of the greatest arts of our time. And there needs to be a certain amount of freedom for exploration and playing with the elements available. It's the films that don't necessarily comply with convention that have stood out to me and enriched my life, that make it worthwhile, because you can see in them a search to try to understand our experience on this earth while we're here. It's the unique voice, the intimate moment, that brings me a sigh of relief, because they are trying

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to get at the intangible stuff, the hard-to-grasp stuff, the stuff that makes us human.

I don't care to see an idealised human being who says everything perfectly at the right time. I can run into that at a cocktail party. Cinema allows us the privilege to go into their bedroom afterwards, once they've shed their clothes, to quietly sit with them by the window on a Sunday afternoon.

PM: Finally, in an industry that remains dominated by men, do you feel in any way constrained by your gender? And how do you feel about operating in the industry as a “woman filmmaker”? And do you think that there's any truth to the notion that women make films that are in some ways intrinsically different to those made by men?

ED: I was unaware of any differences until I went into production with *Edén*. I prefer to see it as each mind is a world of its own with different sensibilities, some speaking from how they're identified in society based on their gender, some not. Having been born female will, if unconsciously, always inform my work. Since filming *Edén*, I have more respect for a woman's effort to direct. It's made me want to seek out filmmakers who are women and ask them about their experiences, their approach. I now see that making *Edén*, my first film, was a voice-building process. I have very clear ideas on how I want to work and make films in the future. For the next project, I will know how to identify and ask for what will support me as a filmmaker.

Will Oldham

A Prince Among Men

(2016)

Known most widely as Bonnie “Prince” Billy, Will Oldham started acting years before he became a singer, and, although it is his prolific musical output that has predominated over the course of the last three decades, he has played a fair number of roles in small, independent films, from a young evangelist in the John Sayles film Matewan (1986) to a bohemian outsider in Edén (2015). In a career-spanning interview, I spoke with Oldham about his parallel journeys in film and music.

Peter Machen: Do you see your acting roles and your musical work as part of the same spectrum of expression, or are they separate things for you? And which came first?

Will Oldham: They’re interrelated for sure, but they’re crucially separate because, with the music, almost all of the time I’m overseeing something, and with acting, almost all of the time I’m observing another individual or individuals – which is really great!

The acting came first. I started acting when I was really young. And I kept doing it pretty intensely and rigorously throughout my teens, to a point where I sort of figured that that’s what I



was going to do. And then, when I started to look at the real, professional world of making a living as an actor, it just didn't look very good to me. (laughs)

So I lived for a little bit in Los Angeles, a little bit in New York, and it just didn't strike me as something that I could do – that I could stomach, really. There were a couple of years when I really didn't know what I was going to do, and I just started to write music – I don't even know why. And there was an interest in it from people to hear more, so I kept doing that. But I felt like my ability to deal with music and to make the music came from wondering about art and the logistics of art production through theatre and film, and understanding what's behind these illusions that we are so in love with, or so in need of.

So they support each other. One of the best examples to me of the relationship between making music and acting was during the making of the *Old Joy* (2006) movie. During that time, I felt sort of set free by living under Kelly Reichardt's auspice. She determined what came out of my mouth and where I sat and where I slept and what I ate and all these things. And that sort of freed my brain up. And, at the time, a colleague of mine was doing a record with a woman named Candi Staton, who's an R&B/Gospel singer, and he asked me to write a song for her. And I found that I could work on that song while making the *Old Joy* movie, because they were completely unrelated in my brain.

And, all of a sudden, I had this huge free space open up, because I wasn't fussing over production details, which is what I usually am involved with. And I usually try to make it as pleasurable and rewarding as possible, but that can be a challenge sometimes. And, all of a sudden, I had this musical part of my brain that I almost never even have access to, to explore the po-

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tential for writing a song for someone. I was overjoyed.

PM: That's interesting. On the one hand, it's a freeing process, but, on other the hand, you do exercise a strong degree of control over your work and professional and artistic life. So do you ever find it frustrating – that kind of “freedom” – where you have to stand back and let someone else take control? Does being directed ever feel like an imposition?

WO: Oh, no, not at all. You know, in general, it's a great pleasure in life to serve other people, and on some levels, as a musician, I'd almost rather be a singer in somebody else's band. Because most of my natural tendencies in terms of thinking about performing arts – or whatever you want to call it – are towards interpretation, and are about performing. And so I'm very happy when I can put myself in somebody's hands and I can listen to them and I can read between the lines of what they're saying – this is talking about a director, but in collaboration with a writer whose words I'm supposed to be saying. I love the distribution of labor. I love collaborations, but especially collaborations where you know approximately where the boundaries of your job are in relation to the boundaries of everybody else's job.

And that's one reason why I didn't want to be a professional actor – there are not a lot of people that I feel like I can trust enough to yield to in that way. But every once in a while there comes a situation where it's like, “I feel comfortable letting this person define my actions for a period of time.”

PM: So, is it the director rather than the role that attracts you to a film? Or is it both?

WO: It's everything. It can be combinations of the director, the writer, and the relationship of the director and/or the writer to the material. It can be the location. It can be the kind of production that it's going to be.

I tend to like smaller productions because I like the interdependence that a smaller production fosters in the crew and the cast. And I like the fact that you're kind of on set with all the decision-makers which is ... (laughs)... not how the producer or director would ideally want it. You know – they look forward to one day having some decision-maker on top, behind a desk, spending the money. But at the end of the day, it's more, I don't know... to me it's more rewarding to be sort of on the battleground, or whatever – at the front – with everybody who knows what's going on and who are making decisions that are going to affect the fate of the movie.

PM: Yeah. Because it seems to me, specifically thinking about *Edén* and *Old Joy* and *New Jerusalem*, that there is such a thing as a Will Oldham film. (Laughs) I mean...I love all three of those films very much and they all talk to me in quite a specific way, even though they're all different to each other. So, do you think that these roles you play reflect parts of yourself at all?

WO: Uh yeah. I...know that they do. In the biggest way, that's really true of *New Jerusalem* (2011), simply because it's an unscripted film. Every line of dialogue I had to find – and that dialogue had to come from somewhere. And then with *Old Joy* – for a long time Kelly and I were talking about me playing the other part in that movie, and then she couldn't cast the Kurt character and asked if I wouldn't mind playing the Kurt character instead.

And that was a kind of a relief, because the Kurt character represented so many people that I knew and it was more productive for me that I mastered that character rather than the other character.

And then with John in the film *Edén*, I'm not a parent, you know, but I have relationships with lots of young folk. I have five godchildren and I know lots of kids and I'm friends with

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lots of kids, and I...don't really have parents myself anymore. It was being able to – at this point I'm 45 – think about my memories of my parents and the things that they did and the things that they didn't do, and the way that they tried to connect with me, and the ways that they were completely unaware of how disconnected we were. And having the opportunity to experience some of that as John in the movie was brilliant.

There was a great woman in Texas who was making a movie last year, and who wanted me to play a dentist who's part of some weird sadomasochistic pagan sex cult. And I thought, "why am I not excited about this part?" because it sounds kind of fun. But ultimately, I couldn't. I just said "I don't think I can play this part. I'm really sorry! I really would love to be there with you. I'd love to work on this and it looks like so much fun. But I can't imagine getting on set and doing something that anybody's going to want to see, or that anybody would believe." So that is definitely a part of what goes into deciding if I could try to do something – whether or not I can see my way to finding what I hope would be a piece of work that would resonate with me.

PM: It seems that both your film roles and your music exist at an intersection of what I would call religiosity and the profane, and kind of reflect both of these things. Does that make sense to you?

WO: Yeah, I think so. In terms of music, I think that what I do is related to certain kinds of music traditions as I see them – popular music really. And popular music usually has a relationship to the sacred and the profane – and to the idea of music activating a part of the brain that frees you, for a moment, from certain kinds of realities, and allows you free rein in another kind of reality.

Usually that kind of departure can be equated with some sort of religious experience – or a fully profane and physical experience. You know, there's no place for putting lots of words into describing these experiences, and, if anything, you want to walk the tightrope balance between just full-on interjections and exclamations. But you also want to be as eloquent as possible with the interjections and explanations because you want to describe your predicament or your ecstasy or your despair in such a way that it, as closely as possible, resembles the feeling you're describing, but, at the same time, is elevated by thoughts and language and all that. But movies are different because they're longer... (Laughs)

They're longer. And they allow for interaction and they allow for physical movement through space. And they demand that the audience be captive. So, in that way, they can step further away from this sacred/profane thing and towards a wider spectrum of experiences and emotions.

But it feels like, when it comes down to it, with most of the music that I love, the subject matter ends up being fairly simple. The lyrics of the songs that I listen to – whether they're songs from the 1920s or songs from 2004, or whether they're from whatever part of the world or whatever age of the musician or songwriter – they don't, for the most part, stray into detailed interactions and significantly detailed and different realities. Whereas movies do allow for that.

My experience of movies has always been that it's like going to a pharmacy or like going to a church. It's like some sort of addiction to entering somebody else's world that has this disembodiment that's similar to music but it's so much more thorough. You know how you have to run alongside of a train and get up to speed before you can get on it – you sort of have

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to do that with the cinematic experience. But it's usually not a euphoric departure from your reality and from your body. It's much more complex.

PM: It seems to me that a key concern in all your work is authenticity, but I'll say with a lowercase "a," since we live in a time when authenticity is something that is marketed and sold, almost as a product. Do you feel this tension – and also the tension between accessing a larger audience and fighting against fame in the way that you have?

WO: Yeah, this authenticity thing is very important to me, in certain ways. You know, to some extent, it's impossible to do it completely, and it can be impossible to do it thoroughly. But at least, on some level, I like to feel like I care about the perception of what it is that I've done with the audience, that it's not totally separate, that the audience doesn't think one thing about a part I've played, or a song that I've been a part of, and I think something completely different about it.

At the same time, I do love show business and I love the fact that people work so hard to create an illusion or an alternate reality or a parallel reality. I love that. But I think that the golden age of Hollywood – you know, the new golden age, being the mid '60s to the mid to late '70s – was possibly the only time that there was a dominant acting style that was allowed to be authentic.

I know that as I discover particular pieces of work – whether it's books or movies or music from all different parts of the world, from all different times – how powerfully they can resonate with me. And, in terms of reaching an audience, I work under the assumption that I am in a movie right now, and this year only some people will get to see it. That doesn't really worry me because next year more people will see it. And the year after

that, still more people will see it. I think that these things have a life of their own. I don't put a lot of stock in a large audience but I do put a lot of stock in a wide audience.

And I trust that there are people every day, finding their way to the pieces of work that are going to be important in their lives, either accidentally, or through some sort of dogged discipline. You know, "What is it that I need? I need something. My community isn't speaking to me. I'm not even communicating with myself – I don't know what's going on." And you find a new gateway for understanding through some piece of work that somebody has made.

And that's something that, thankfully, continues to happen and will continue to happen. And it's not even trackable, you know, it's not a trackable thing – where you can look at numbers or you can look at box office returns, or you can look at theatres, look at how many copies of something has sold – because, to work like this, it happens on such a non-traceable human level.

And it's completely vital that as many people as possible seek and experience these things, these movies and music. But the boundaries are impossible, are defined by who relates to what. You and I can look at the same piece of work and find different aspects of authenticity, and they would both be completely valid. I can never invalidate it when somebody says a thing is great that I can't understand at all, or that I disdain. That's how I learn what is authentic to somebody else – when they describe their own response to a piece of music or art.

PM: One thing I've really realized is that there's no such thing as critical consensus, that everything talks to us in different ways. I recently re-watched *Mateman* (John Sayles, 1986). Did the experience of making the film have any deep experience on your life and your craft?

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WO: Oh yeah, yeah. That was one of the most crucial experiences. It was a hugely important experience for many reasons – working with John Sayles and Maggie Renzi – who is John’s production partner – and Peggy Rajski, who also was a producer on the film. And, there were a lot of people that they’d worked with many times who had the same attitude towards the work.

I was 16 and they gave me so much respect and so much responsibility. It was the first time I felt like I had a place in the world. There were times when I was younger when I went to summer camp, and, you know, I loved it, or when I acted in a play and I loved it. But this was the first time that I was sort of out in the world a little bit, and working with people on a big project that had resonance outside of rural Kentucky. And I got paid for it! Which was huge. It distorted my reality significantly and, you know, I would essentially be a gentler, happier person if I hadn’t experienced that movie – because it sort of set the standard high for collaborative, rewarding work.

And it’s something that I’ve sought to either find or recreate throughout my adult life. And it’s a lot of work to have that high standard set for me. It felt so natural and felt so logical to me, and it’s continually frustrating that other people don’t have that standard when they’re making something. But I’ll never be able to get rid of that example. And I try to achieve a working environment or working experience that is similarly eye-opening and supportive and rewarding for the people that I work with, and ideally, by extension, for the audience.

It was working with those actors, the character, and also beginning to even have a relationship with an audience outside of Louisville at that point. Because I would travel and talk to people on the street about the movie – and it might be somebody who is a labor enthusiast or, a movie person, or just a plain old

citizen. And realizing that I had something to talk about with them and with people all over the place— it's still something that I talk about with people — it was a great experience!

At the same time, you know, frankly, I was aware then that, in wanting to be an actor — and thinking about the actors whose work I admired, including those who were on that set — that I felt like I didn't have enough inside of me, as a technician — or even as a human being — to be the kind of actor that I would want to work with or experience, even as an audience member. And that scared me, got me thinking, "I don't want to keep acting if this is all I've got. So how do I get more?" And it was about trying to do more roles and get more experience so that I could be an actor. But then I ended up being a singer instead.

PM: Do you think you will ever work with John Sayles again?

WO: That's a great question. I would love to work with him again and I would do so anytime. I hadn't seen him in a number of years, and then he came through a couple of years ago on a book tour, doing readings from his recent thousand-page historical novel, and he and Maggie stayed at the house. And then maybe about two years ago now — I was in New York and they invited me to come to a preview screening of *Go for Sisters*, which at the time was his most recent movie. Spending time with him again and then seeing that movie and the way the acting was so cool and so good — it seems like his productions are always about allowing the actors and everybody in the crew to feel free to do their best work. And he's aware of how to make that happen. Of course, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to be widely recognized. But I can't imagine that any self-respecting actor could watch one of his movies and not be inspired.

PM: In terms of your most recent film, *Edén*, did you immedi-

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ately relate to the John character or did you have to spend some time digging around in your head to find the character?

WO: I definitely had to spend time digging around in my head. John was more like the kind of person that I would, somewhat ignorantly, probably have claimed as a role mode as a young person. Up until the age of 25 or so, if I had met John in person, I would have thought, “why is this guy doing everything right and I’m doing everything wrong?”

And that’s not a person I can identify with, because I almost never feel like I’m doing anything – let alone everything – right (laughs). In terms of how I live, I think I do my work really well. But it seems like he’s the kind of person whose life was more his work, rather than the opposite, and he was trying to make a life that was kind of a work of art.

He had this relation with folk art, and it felt like living on the fringes of multiple kinds of societies and exercising a kind of ultimate set of freedoms. Which at the end of the day or the end of one’s life, I think turns out to not have a lot of rewards, but at the beginning of the day, seems to have a lot of rewards. So, it was like trying to find my way into somebody who I would have admired a lot more as a younger person and now I feel compassion for him but I don’t idolize him.

PM: Did the fact that John is a character that was inspired by director Elise DuRant’s father in any way influence the relationship between the two of you on set?

WO: I’m sure that it did but we never spoke about it. Down the road, she and I can probably have a conversation about that. And frankly that was one of the things that was very interesting about playing John – knowing that there was most likely going to be an unspoken but complex relationship between me and John and Elise and Alma [the character based on Elise played by

Diana Sedano], that, most likely, would not be verbally explored while we were doing it, but which would be an undeniable part of the energy of what we were doing.

I wasn't just playing a part. I wasn't just playing a character created out of somebody's imagination. On many levels, I was a representation of somebody that this person who is trying to direct me has some finished and many unfinished...you know... lots of feelings about. And knowing that, I thought that it would be a great challenge overall.

Because of our conversations, I knew that her attitude was that "we're making a movie – this is a professional undertaking with great craftspeople and we're going to do this." And not really talking about, never saying, "Because I want to explore this thing about my dad and me, and because I want to explore the nature of memory" or anything like that. She never talked about that. And I was really intrigued by the idea of having all these unspoken forces being at work while we were making this movie.

PM: Would you ever want to have children yourself?

WO: Yeah, I would. I feel like if I don't, there's probably not that much point to living too much longer. I'm in my mid-40s and I think I've taken up enough space and breathed up enough of everybody's oxygen. And if I don't sort of take what I've learned and try to throw it into some other being, then I haven't fulfilled that fantasy.

PM: Although you also have done that, on a daily basis, through your music and also through your film work.

WO: Yeah, I guess, and to some extent those things might take care of me in my old age. But – and it doesn't work for everybody – there's something about the potential immediacy of actual human interaction. In a lot of ways I agree with you,

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but I don't think that's really fair to the parents of the world. There are definitely parallels and then there are ways that they just don't compare.

PM: Absolutely. Do you think that there's a strong overlap between your musical fan-base and your film following?

WO: I don't know how much crossover there is. I feel like I've run into enough people in both camps who are relatively unaware of the fact that I do other things. And I think that I like that. I had to write a bio a couple of weeks ago and for some reason it occurred to me to write it as if Bonnie Prince Billy has been an extended role that I've been playing for the last 15 years or so. I think I wrote something like "Bonnie 'Prince' Billy is a singer played by Will Oldham." Because I want eventually to understand the relationship between the two things – I want my audience to not feel as if they're watching a singer trying to act or an actor trying to sing, but that there is something that is in common with both things.

Since the beginning I've always talked about the music as coming from acting. I came from the *Matewan* experience. More than anything I knew about music, I was trying to repeat what I had experienced in *Matewan* but bring it in musical form. And I always thought that making a record was more like making these...these little movies.

And I'm not a musician. I don't jam or anything like that. I've never jammed! I don't do those things. And I don't think of music in the same way that great musicians think of music. I find a basic texture upon which to sing the text. Which is what an actor does, you know. An actor vocalizes and embodies the text as it appears first on paper. And I don't know of other actors who make music or musicians who act who approach it in quite the same way.

PM: There's also a paradox in that the "performativeness" of your work creates this incredibly strong sense of the real, as opposed to the performed or the contrived.

WO: The performativeness of acting or singing, or both?

PM: Well, both actually, but let's talk about your music for a second, performed as this character who is Bonnie "Prince" Billy, who is also very real. And the music is very real – it's incredibly emotionally evocative and I'm sure it speaks to many people's souls. So there is that paradox.

WO: Well, yes, I think that it's vital to have an authentic relationship to any given song every single time that it's performed. But one day that authenticity could be based on one thing and the next day on another.

You know, the great thing about Bonnie "Prince" Billy is that I can authentically be Bonnie "Prince" Billy even if I can't authentically be the narrator of the song. And Bonnie "Prince" Billy, then, is like this character in Steven Sondheim's *Send in the Clowns* or like anybody in an MGM musical or like Edith Piaf. At that moment I'm playing the singer of the song – the singer being somebody whose life doesn't exist until the song begins and whose life ends when the song is over.

PM: Someone who is not you?

WO: Well, it is, though, because that is me to some extent. I think of the great Al Jolson, I think of the people in Ozu's *Floating Weeds* movies – these people for whom life begins at the beginning of the song. And to a great extent, that is me, and it especially is me when I'm singing the song. But it's not me in that I'm not relaying my life as much as I'm answering this abstract state of emotion that's expressed through musicality.

A performer has to learn the rules of the world of dreams, how dreams end up being structured and having tensions and

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having story and having character. And there are rules, you know, that exist in order for us to even to be able to describe that a dream occurred.

So somebody might write a song about their dog dying or their girlfriend breaking up with them and then they sing it and they're talking about their dog dying or they're talking about their girlfriend. That isn't the kind of performer that I will ever be, even if I have a song that's about my dog dying. I'm going to have to be the one singing the song and it's going to be a different song every time it's sung.

PM: All of this reminds me a lot of 'I am a Cinematographer' and what that song says. Did you ever do any onstage acting?

WO: Yeah, I did tons of on-stage acting from the age of nine to 19.

PM: And after that?

WO: And after that – pretty much none. Once I left home I didn't do any more stage acting. When I was starting out, there was a great repertory theatre here in Louisville called the Actors Studio of Louisville. And in the '80s it was like in its heyday and, to some extent, it was still a good time for live theatre in general. There were plays that were performed in Louisville – with actors that came to Louisville to perform. I got cast in *Matewan* because a casting person saw me on stage at this theatre. And I had already seen Mary McDonnell and I had already seen Chris Cooper, on stage, here in Louisville. And so it was super-exciting, but even by 1988/89, when I was leaving home and beginning to go and experience the world outside of the house that I grew up in, I could sense that there was a diminishing of certain kinds of vitality and certain kinds of power that theatre had in the early '80s and mid-'80s.

And that scared me and I thought, "Well, I definitely don't

want to work in a theatre company that is either exclusively performing to other members of the theatre community or performing to wealthy subscription theatre-goers.” Neither of those things felt okay to me, so I didn’t get into any theatre stuff after I graduated. I wanted to do something where I have a relationship with the audience as well as with the production.

PM: You clearly have a strong relationship to film, and your music is very visually and emotionally evocative. Have you ever considered, or would you ever consider, working as a director.

WO: I was on a plane a couple of days ago when I was flying back from the Netherlands and I saw this movie called *The Lunchbox*. Do you know this movie?

PM: Yeah. I know it.

WO: And it always seemed to me completely baffling – the urge to be a director – because it just seems so daunting. Like I’ve said, in making records I’m kind of so involved with many, if not all, of the aspects of writing, recording, releasing and promoting. And to imagine trying to do that with film just sounds too crazy, like I wouldn’t be able to handle it.

And then, for some reason, just like in the last week, I thought that the place to get in your brain is where you trusted other people to get shit done. And I don’t know...maybe if there was a producer partner who said, “You don’t need to be worried about that.” But otherwise, no. I mean, I love performing. I love performing more than writing. I love singing and being at the mercy of the text.

PM: “Being at the mercy of the text.” That’s a great note to finish with. Thank you so much for talking to me Will.

WO: You too Peter.

Madala Kunene

In the shade of the Zulu guitar (2001)

I spoke to Zulu guitar genius Madala Kunene.

From Madala Kunene's house in Hillary, you can see the gently sloping hills of Umkhumbane, or Cato Manor as it is also called. It is the place where Kunene was born, and from which, along with the rest of its residents, he was evicted as part of apartheid's ongoing experiments in 'town planning'. Despite the fact that its inhabitants were removed in order to make way for a white settlement, nothing was ever built on Cato Manor until the end of apartheid. From there, the 14 year old Kunene and his family were moved to KwaMashu. As an adult, he lived in Chatsworth for some time, before being persuaded to transfer to the almost leafy, formerly white, working class suburb where I find him on a sweltering Tuesday afternoon.

He is playing guitar in a precious stretch of shade that lingers at the side of his house. He is accompanied by his full band with whom he shares the shade, moving and reforming as it shifts in the afternoon light. There is washing on the line. A bra blows in the wind. A pumpkin patch growing on the bank yields at least



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one giant pumpkin and the pawpaws trees are rich with bounty.

For those who don't know – and it's mark of the unjust nature of media and fame that you might not – Madala Kunene is one of KwaZulu Natal's musical giants. Although revered as a master of the strident Maskanda guitar, his infusion of jazz and embrace of broader rhythms has resulted in a sound that resonates in a way that belongs to him and him alone. At the same time, it is a music that perfectly crystallises the musical expression of the region.

Speaking to Kunene, I am seated next to him on the end of a double bed in a room upstairs. Outside, the five handpicked members of Madala's band continue to practice, the wind instruments prominent in the background and gradually growing louder during the course of our interview. A slowly rising tide.

I first met Madala Kunene at the first Awesome Africa festival in 1999, when it was still also called the Festival of Living Treasures and awash with millennium money. That gorgeous weekend of music, which showcased some of the finest musicians on the planet, many of them from KwaZulu Natal, was a demonstration of the kind of musical scene of which Durban is capable.

And inevitably, it points to the failures inherent in our provincial music industry which is so full of talent that goes largely unheard in favour of mostly vacuous American mainstream chart fodder. It is appropriate then, that I ask Kunene if much has changed in the eight years I have known him. But, truth be told, I already know the answer. Not a whole lot. But things are changing, says Madala, just, "very slowly".

His chief concern is that most of his performances take place overseas, instead of on home turf where they should. "We're not performing too much here at home, or Jo'burg, or

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Cape Town,” he says. And while Madala always returns from an overseas excursion excited by the reception that he received, he is not cut out to be a globe trotter. More to the point, it would be nice if the place that has given birth to his music was also the place that could support it commercially. Sometimes, says Kunene, he thinks that there is no market for the music he makes.

But the big problem for him, at this point, is his record company, Melt 2000. Kunene is at pains to point out that Melt owner Robert Trunz is an extremely generous man who has always treated him well. “But the company is not doing well. I must be honest. Melt closed in London. Now Robert is here now in Pretoria, trying to start it up again. But it’s a slow process.”

Another element of his continued lack of commercial success is the fact that he doesn’t see himself on what he refers to “the box – these TV things”. Neither is his music heard on the radio. In fact, it’s barely available in the shops, and the dedicated will probably have to buy it on the internet, most probably from a supplier overseas.

As he explains, “In this industry your music must be on the TV and the radio, and then people will know you. If they don’t see you on the TV, they don’t know you.”

There have been times when Kunene has let these things get to him, but these days he is upbeat about the challenges of the industry. He has a new manager. He has a show coming up at Sibiya Casino on the 9th of March. The day before I spoke to him, he had played a gig at Spiga D’Oro in Florida Road. “The people enjoyed it, but there weren’t many people there. The owner said to me ‘I’m very sorry Madala, we didn’t advertise.’ But it was nice, I enjoyed it.”

“I think something’s going to happen soon. And I think slowly it will come right. Anyway, I can’t complain. If you always

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complain it doesn't help."

Another thing that is lifting his spirits is the fact that his long-time musical soul mate, Busi Mhlongo, seems to be defeating breast cancer. "I'm very happy. I was visiting sister Busi. *Eish*, my sister, when I saw her I nearly cried with happiness, because she's got fat on her bones now. She's healthy and she's going back to the work. She kicked it. She's fine now, and we're going to work together again."

An interview with Madala usually includes a conspiratorial whisper in the direction of positive propaganda. Although not exactly a media type, he is only too aware of the power of media, both that which is included and what is excluded. And so, mindful of the fact that tens of thousands of people will read this story about him (although few might make the effort to track down his music), he always tells me something that he's concerned with. Ideas that could make the world a little better.

"All these lighties smoking glue." He looks me in the eyes, and I think of Durban's street kids and the plastic milk bottle from which they sniff their sticky soma. "All these people dying. I think the government must just stop the people selling glue. If someone buys glue they must be 18 or 21 years, not 7 or 12! It's terrible."

He also has some advice for the government in the field of arts and culture. "I'm not saying the artistic industry is not doing well. But you need someone like Hugh Masekela or Miriam Makeba or Letta Mbuli, someone who knows about these things. The government must employ them and pay them a salary to work together with the minister. Then the musician and minister can work together, and the industry can explode!"

Madala contrasts the treatment that musicians receive in South Africa to the way that sportsmen and women are cel-

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ebred. Sport remains, almost literally, a religion in the new South Africa as it was in the old South Africa, receiving much of its attention at the expense of broader culture – and nearly all of the cash. And it's funny how seldom you hear the word 'funding crisis' in the context of sport.

But if talking to Kunene is a reminder of how little has changed this far into the bedraggled century, it is also a reminder of how much has changed. Towards the end of our chat on the end of the double bed – the rising volume of the music outside now beginning to make our words indistinct – Madala talks about playing with musicians of all races.

And then he says, very carefully, "Your grandfather – I know, he was not like you. You know yourself, he wasn't like you. He wouldn't come and visit like this. But now, how come I must hate you too? How come? Because you're not your grandfather, you're Peter. It's you. Now you're like my brother, so I can give you food to eat. I can say I haven't got food to eat, but I'll give you what I have. We're brothers. Why people don't see? Why?"

But of course, while many people don't see, many others do. Kunene continues with words whose intermittent use by politicians has not removed their power. "Now it's time to work together."

He talks as glowingly about his daughter Nomkosi and his son Sibuy as any father would. But the glow gets even stronger when he talks about the fact that they are friends at school with a boy called Nico. "He's their friend. Tomorrow they'll be married together. Nico Smit and Nomkosi Kunene!" And he laughs joyously. "The past is past. Now we're going forward. I can't tell my kids not to play with the boy next door because he's white. That's nonsense. It's another generation. Tomorrow is here."

Jennifer Fergusson

Wild African Woman

(2007)

I spoke to South African singer-songwriter and activist Jennifer Ferguson, who is now based in Sweden.

I am speaking to Jennifer Ferguson on Skype. Her beautiful, compassionate face appears in a small window on my laptop screen, a stop-motion animation effect induced by my relatively slow internet connection. She can't see me because I don't have a webcam but this doesn't hinder the two of us from embarking on a long and thoroughly engaging conversation, one which sadly I can only provide fragments of in the space of a tabloid page.

"It's very beautiful, liberating technology this," says Ferguson, talking about the technological bounty of the web. I respond by telling her that I downloaded one of her albums the night before – and actually paid for it! – which makes us both laugh. Ferguson has embraced the internet, both as a means of broadcasting her music and as a means of global activism, through the infinite connections between human beings and through activist sites such as Avaaz.org which gathers supporters and protesters



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around the world into a single but multi-headed body. She has a Myspace page on which she had uploaded her recent recordings and she is undecided as to whether her future releases will be on CD and the net, or only available as downloads. I suggest that she press a vinyl version, an idea to which she enthusiastically responds, her love for the liberating possibilities of the web not ruling out the analogue world.

For those unfamiliar with Ferguson, she is one of South Africa's most gifted folk singers, although that term might be a little too narrow for Ferguson, who is certainly capable of rocking out in the manner of Patti Smith or engaging with deeply experimental music a la Bjork. She is most well known as a voice of resistance to apartheid, and also for her brief tenure as a member of parliament as an ANC minister during the government of national unity (although she says her ANC membership was never official).

Her music is defined more than anything by her silken voice that overflows with compassion, beauty and intimacy. Like many great songwriters, she seldom makes the distinction between the personal and the political, her musical reality a continuum of kitchen sink observations and political reality. As such, all of her songs are both protests against the status quo and a celebration of being human. But in the '80s one of the most revolutionary acts that Ferguson engaged with was simply describing the reality of the time. It is this foregrounding of the real that is in a way her most abiding contribution to our culture; it is a reality that is essentially beautifully but bathed in horror.

Talking to her, and watching her emotionally expressive body language, Ferguson achieves that rare fusion of being overwhelmingly positive while never disregarding the terrors of our times. She talks about life in Troyville in Jo'burg, one the places

she calls home. Like much of South Africa, it is a place of extreme humanity and extreme violence. She mentions the park in the area that she helped to clean up, but also the young girl who was raped there, talking about the fact that parental anxiety in South Africa is not neurotic but rational. But these terrible things, of which there are so many, never seem to negate the beauty of life for Ferguson. There is a sense that the only way to fight the terror is to hold onto the beauty. And when she says “I loooooove South Africa” you can hear her voice shining, resonating with joy – and also an undercurrent of sadness.

She points to the trauma of this country’s past – a trauma which still continues for many, particularly the poor and the dispossessed – as the root cause of violence and crime in South Africa, but also points her finger at the domination of patriarchy and the mistreatment of women. “There is a kind of response that focuses on what is extraordinary and positive in the country. And there are huge displays of miraculous human interactions among South Africans finding their way together. But at the same time we have these terrible rape statistics, child-rape statistics, the violent nature of criminality, the misogyny.”

She continues: “We have a still long way to go in terms of living in fundamental respect with each other, alongside each other. I feel it has to do with the South African male and possibly the African male. When one looks at the history of colonialism, there’s been an emasculation and a deep betrayal of dignity and belonging and identity, which now, especially in South Africa, is playing itself out on children, on women, on lesbians. I don’t think we’ve had a sufficient analysis on the nature of violence in South Africa. We’re still tiptoeing around it”.

Ferguson has spent the last decade between this intensely urban life in South Africa and an equally intensely rural life in

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Sweden, where she lives a life that rural Swedes have lived for centuries and where crime and violence barely feature. (Sweden has not engaged in war for 200 years).

By her account, modernity had not displaced tradition in the Swedish countryside but supplemented it. She was initially drawn to the country because it was the home of her husband, renowned Swedish choral conductor and composer, Anders Nyberg, but the thing that's keeping her there at the moment (she's been there for the last nine months, having spent the previous five years in Troyville) is the richness of the Swedish folk music with which she has fallen in love and is currently exploring and re-expressing.

She has also found a deep connection in her musical relationship with Swedish pianist Rickard Åström which is the other thing that is keeping her in Sweden. Their collaborations are delicately beautiful, full of vast spaces and deep tenderness, a wild African voice resonating in the rural Swedish landscape. The full results of that collaboration will be available soon as an album, and possibly a CD, but Ferguson has enough recorded material to fill five albums.

As for her past and possible future in the political arena, Ferguson says that while she remains a political animal, she has never fitted into the strictures of politics and its inherent compromises. Although, she does not rule out future political engagement, for the moment she is content to make beautiful music that heals and brings peace.

In a world threatened by darkness and violence, even that, together with Ferguson's refusal to look away from the world, remains a political statement.

Michelle Shocked

Texas Campfire Tales (2012)

In the early 1990s Michelle Shocked had a critical and commercial success with her album Short Sharp Shocked. I spoke to her about the legacy of the album and her ongoing conflict with the music industry.

Peter Machen: Hi Michelle. You are well known for your critical position on the music industry.

Michelle Shocked: The global music machine is designed to get you in, they blow you up and then they abandon you. Because if they developed you and you continue to develop as an artist you would get too much power. And, once you have too much power, you start telling them what's wrong with the system and how to make it work on behalf of artists and audiences. And the system's not supposed to work for artists or audiences – it's supposed to work for the record machine.

Peter Machen: But don't you think that now audiences and artists are taking the power, and it's a different kind of power that the record industry had.

Michelle Shocked: Yeah, and you can see it's a messy process. And we can see it right now in to talking about the Egyptian

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Revolution. Yeah, they are transforming but it's very mess. We just had our political theatre with the debt-ceiling crisis. And now wheeling Muburak into a cage is not really the change I was looking for there. But we've got some struggles ahead of us as well. But I've always understood that the relation of an artist with the world is Marxism 101. The means of production, the conflict between labour and management. It's all coming to fruit.

But I've also known that the real point of the exercise is to be the last woman standing. I'm from an era, a generation where I will have a history that is much broader than artists today. They can't catch up – 5 years, 10 years – 25 years it gonna be, next year I think.

PM: Well, I was sixteen, no I think I was seventeen, when I heard *Anchorage*. It did something to me, and I immediately bought *Short Sharp Shocked*. And then the first record I bought on import was the Texas Campfire Tapes.

MS: And now with the internet which didn't even exist then, kids wouldn't even understand what that meant – to buy on import at a time when South Africa was completely isolated. So we get to tell that history, we get to remind kids of what came before. Because if you don't know your history, what do you do know?

PM: There's a beautiful Springsteen bootleg – he's talking before a song. And he talks about listening to music when he was a kid. And about hearing these slices of other possibilities, of other worlds, just outside of your own constraints.

MS: I feel that when I hear music.

PM: Me too. And especially with *Short Sharp Shocked*, it did so much on a personal level, to give me that sense of possibility and elsewhere and bigness, especially living in South Africa then. It was horrible, you know.



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MS: Yeah, I'll be doing a tribute show with David Kramer and he's talking about what the possibilities were here. "It was the decade of the sputnik. It was the time of the H bomb. It was the time of apartheid".

PM: You and David will work so well together. I can see it.

MS: (Laughs) For me, I gave a poetic voice to a place that few people travel to, you know it's not a tourist destination, East Texas. But when I sing about it, you feel like 'aah, I know what she's saying?'

PM: I feel like I grew up there. Where I grew up is now all commercialised now, but it was semi-rural and I also learned to drive on those old roads.

MS: Yeah. Yeah. People have actually travelled there and stood outside the city limit by the sign 'Gilmour' and sent me the photo. (Laughs)

PM: Well, how do you feel about all that now?

MS: I was always cynical about fame. To me, fame was a manufacturing process. It wasn't something to base a sense of reality on. Even growing up, popularity seemed liked like such an important value to people. And I recognised early on that the things you have to do to achieve popularity are not worth having the power. But if you do it right, it's so subtle and so unobvious that it takes a very discerning eye. So I say this, you get the audience you deserve. And that's not to say it's based on numbers but the quality of people – people who really listen.

PM: I want to interject there. I think of Curt Kobain and also Springsteen. You've got a different kind of cult of personality, for lack of a better word.

MS: Ok, that's a good word for it.

PM: But you know, people still think that Springsteen is an American nationalist, and there are all the people who never

got Kurt's whole anti-discrimination and anti-prejudice agenda. And I don't think that's a problem for you, but is...I just always find it so weird when people don't listen to the lyrics.

MS: I understand. But you know – I blame Springsteen for the ambiguity. It's like in the old theatre tradition you had a greek chorus. And the actors would play out the drama, but the greek chorus would come in and they would reiterate the theme. And if you think about it, the greek chorus was the counterpoint to what the actors were doing. So, Springsteen's main anthem was 'Born in the USA'. Well those words came out of his mouth. Same thing with Kurt Kobain, you know. Sarcasm and satire only go so far. It's very limited.

PM: I remember on the back cover of *Arkansas Traveller*, you spoke about wanting to dress in blackface for the cover and feeling ambivalent about it, cycling through all those political constraints.

MS: Exactly. I don't mind ambiguity. I've created a different problem for myself. My problem is that I am quite famously progressive socially but over the last ten years there's also been a fundamentalist christian strain. And people's concept of the two have never met before. They've never seen the embodiment of two such disparate sensibilities.

PM: But at the same time – I mean, I'm not a christian but I grew up with a christian background. And my mother is very, I want to say, genuinely christian. But my point is surely that if you really engage with that theology properly, you're going to get to the socialism, you're going to get to the anarchism. Read the words of Christ...

MS: I feel that way. But then that goes back to the function of religion. What was it Gandhi said? "When the emperor embraced christianity it became a religion of empire". So yeah,

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politicians will always use religious theology for nationalist purposes. But I don't give it to them. I don't allow that, so far as I can fight it.

PM: I presume that you've always been quite a spiritual person...

MS: By nature I am.

PM: And I'm sure there's a strong link between your spirituality and your politics. And we'll talk about that. But was there a point at which you had an actual religious conversion to christianity?

MS: Yes, there was. But it was very similar to my embracing an anarchist identity. All my life, I found it very easy and fluid to adopt or embrace an identity. I conceive of myself as a blank canvas, and I work really hard to keep it blank, so that I can paint whatever I want on it. I've never had a sense of identity that was fixed. That's why, when you encounter the fame machine, it's laughable. Because they need you to be a certain persona and stay that way, fixed forever, into eternity. And I don't think I ever agreed to that. (laughs)

PM: I'm very much caught up in this idea of the old world and the new world that we are moving towards. But for a long time, there was this idea that you grew up and when you were 17 or 18 or 19 or 21, you were finished, complete.

MS: Right. You had your rebellion and then you settled down and followed the pattern, yeah.

PM: I don't think it was ever valid, but I think it's becoming more and more invalidated.

MS: Good, one more myth to be exposed. That's good. Yeah. "When I grow up ... I want to be an old woman".

PM: That's such a good protest song.

MS: I like that you say it's a protest song.

PM: But in a way I think all music is protest, personally you know , against whatever.

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MS: Yeah, I always embraced the blues because I said ‘ok, what you’re singing about is very sad, but the point is you’re singing ,so how bad could it be?’

PM: It was so nice to walk in here during the soundcheck and see you playing ‘VFD’. How do you feel emotionally about those songs from 25 years ago.

MS: Well. maybe if I was playing for 25 years with the same musicians, it would be the same song. But every night it’s born new, because I’m in the present, experiencing the songs with my band members, Kevin and Melissa and Schalk. I mean, if you have a piece of clothing but you put it on different people, you’re not going to say that the person wearing the clothing is defined by the clothing. So that’s how it feels to me with the songs. Everyone who plays one of my songs is hearing a different song.

PM: Well, I like this shirt but I could say that the last time I wore it, it wasn’t the same shirt - You can’t step in the same river twice.

MS: Yes, that’s quite suitable. That’s a western-style shirt you’re wearing, by the way. I think the embroidered flowers might be a particular touch, it might get your ass kicked in Texas. But you can get away with the pocket arrows, and the parole buttons and uh...you add a belt buckle..and you got it going on. And then you can sing an older western song called *Don’t Fence Me In*.

PM: It’s a western song? I always thought it was a Cole Porter tune. I love that song.

MS: Well, you know what, it may be that it was written by him – because you know he wrote a lot of Broadway and theatrical songs. The thing about that style of song-writing was that it was just that it was how he arranged it, and it could take on other identities, and become identified with rolling tumbleweeds and,

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you know, saguaro cactuses – don't fence me. Yeah, its always identified in my mind as prairie cactus song.

PM: The frontier.

MS: Yeah.

PM: Did you ever see that movie – I mean it's not a great movie at all – but *Seabiscuit*.

MS: It's about a racehorse that won the Kentucky Derby? Yeah.

PM: The opening scene of the movie for was me was the only really good thing about it. Chris Cooper plays a cowboy at the end of the 19th Century – or maybe the beginning of the 20th Century – and he sees his first barbwire fence.

MS: Aah...

PM: And he's just heart-broken.

MS: Wow.

PM: It's a lovely scene. The rest of the movie is quite mediocre.

MS: Yeah. That's a good opening scene – heart-broken at your first barbed wire fence. Yeah, that's like what we said – that 17, 18-year old phase when you realise that the boundaries are ready to be broken and you're not ready to be corraled in.

PM: And I never will be. Haha!

MS: Never will be.

PM: I want to ask you this, and this is very personal. Because something always struck me about you, without really reading much about you – was that there was a great sense of hurtness....

MS: hurtness?

PM: Yeah, of being hurt by the world and...

MS: I've always been sensitive. But it was a cultivated sensitivity. I wanted to feel. I wanted to have a sense of my own fragility, my own vulnerability. I even amped it up. I put myself in dangerous situations. I had more courage than I had judgement... (laughs)...so you know, it could be that I subjected myself to

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abuse, and then wanted to be surprised that it hurt. (laughs).

PM: I'm sure you're not alone there.

MS: You know, I'm made for drama.

PM: But, yeah, I mean, people get addicted to drama, even on a deeply political and spiritual level.

MS: Yeah, and that's where the motivation to keep whipping yourself comes from. But it goes away – you do mature at a point and say 'I can be loved. I can be safe. I can receive the things I need'. But it doesn't have to stop there.

PM: I want to ask you about *Anchorage*. Did it ever feel – because it was the big hit – that it was a weight around your neck.

MS: No the opposite. It's mystical. It's a song with such a pure seed that it...like I was saying about playing with different musicians – it continues to expand. It's just...it's infinite. It's been a wonderful journey to have as the centre of light, the source, so something so beyond my comprehension. The first person that played that song when I wrote it said to me "you may not realise just how great that song is." And you know, as a writer, you say, "you know what, I do know. I do know how great that song is." Because I can't live in it. It's got a resonance that will continue to expand infinitely. And thank God. Because the obstacles and the challenges that I have put in front of myself to limit my own artistic growth depends on a song like 'Anchorage' to carry me through all of the obstacles. So it's yeah, it's my signature song.

PM: Your key.

MS: Yeah.

PM: It's the only song my mother knows.

MS: And I think it's one of those songs you hear it, and it stays with you, whether you know the singer, whether you know the whole thing.

PM: It's magical. I mean I listened it this afternoon for maybe

the 5000th time, and it still sounds fresh, new and immediate.

MS: Yeah, I've heard other artists talk about certain albums where everything just comes into alignment. And in my case, I had not listened to enough outside music to know what I was being processed through. Because the producer said to me 'Yeah, we're going to do this like *Blonde on Blonde*.' And I said 'huh?' And he said 'yeah, we're going to play it like The Band'. I didn't know what his agenda was – I didn't have those references. So, that's a good thing.

PM: And now I can go to HMV in London, and browsw through the 50 greatest albums of all time, and there's *Short Sharp Shocked* and *Blonde on Blonde*. That's pretty nice, hey, regardless of ego or pride or whatever.

MS: It's wonderful. It's wonderful. I know it seems impossible that an artist could conceive of a work like that. But I really believed at the time, that the limitations that I gave the producer were to keep the album from being overproduced.

Because I knew I would be playing it for a long, long time. And I even had the sense of an arc of a career being fat and lean. So I knew I had to create an album that would carry me through seasons of doubt. So I told the producer: "Of these 10 songs, on 5 of them you only get one other instrument. Right?" So he chose the five songs that had an extra instrument very carefully. And he did a very good job of choosing the particular right instrument. 'Graffiti Limbo' was harmonica. 'L&N' has a little banjo in there. 'Black Widows' got the hammer dulcimer. 'Memories of East Texas has got the violin'. So he was very sensitive to all that. And the biggest surprise on that album was in 'Anchorage' – I had never heard of this before, but he was going to put the Fairlight in. And it was in the early days of computer effects – I didn't know what a Fairlight was (laughs).

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And I was ready to have a fight. And he turned the tables on me, because he said if your instincts tell you not to have a fairlight we won't use it. And I've always wondered in retrospect if he didn't secretly put the Fairlight in. But what he told me gave me confidence to stand up for my vision as it was.

PM: And how do you feel about the first album - *Texas Campfire Tapes*? It really wasn't produced at all, hey?

MS: This is the 25th Anniversary of that album. It came out in England in 1986. And uh...even the liner notes were problematic. For example, I'll tell you about some hypocrisies with album. When I hear Pete Lawrence referred to as the producer on the album, I'm always quite adamant to refer to him as a bootlegger but journalists always modify it and call him a producer. He had never produced anything. And more significantly, when he approached me with his tape recorder, it was in the context of "do you mind singing a few songs into my tape recorder. I write for a magazine in England called *Folk Roots*". Does that sound like a producer to you. He presented himself as a journalist.

PM: At what point did he tell you that it would be released as an album?

MS: After the record had been released.

PM: What?

MS: No, it's no shock. You know, when you talk about the politics of it, people's reaction is not outrage at my rights being infringed. People's reactions are "Isn't it terrific that he made you famous. Because you didn't have a destiny. You didn't have a future. You didn't have an identity. Look what he did for you." And that's why you have to be the last woman standing. I guarantee you that every artist that has walked the face of the earth has been subjected to this.

The song I'm writing right now is a tribute to Billy Holiday.

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And I needed to get to the source of one of her most famous songs, which is ‘Strange Fruit’. And it is well known that she was not a composer. She covered songs. I had a suspicion – and I confirmed it – that ‘Strange Fruit’ was written exactly like a Cole Porter song. It was written by what was defined or described by journalists as a schoolteacher. But this same schoolteacher adopted the children of Julius Rosenberg when they were in prison for their communist activities. So whether you say a communist, an organiser, an activist or a schoolteacher – the modifier that she used to describe someone’s role – the point I’m making is that they were trying to get to the issue of who composed that song.

And in the biography *Lady Sings the Blues*, they got the facts so wrong that it caused a lot of complications for the purposes of copyright. And when they asked Billy Holiday herself “well didn’t you say in your biography that you wrote the music to this poem that this schoolteacher wrote? You caused the confusion”. She says “I ain’t I ever read that book. That book was ghostwritten.”

And even though I have been alive to tell my story, in essence my story has been ghostwritten. Even though I’m the subject standing here, saying “No! It didn’t happen that way, it happened this way”. And in my presence, I see my own story taken away from me. It’s quite phenomenal.

PM: Is that a metaphor for how things generally work?

MS: I guess it’s like how they say a picture is worth a thousand words. And once an image is indelibly imprinted in someone’s mind, it doesn’t matter what you do to modify the image, that image is going to hold.

PM: So, from what I gather, like a few contemporary artists and artists from your generation, you are taking control of your own

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royalties and copyrights and things. Are you releasing your own stuff now?

MS: Well, when this bootleg was released in England, it caused such a stir, that Polygram Records came to me, asking me to sign a recording contract.

Now I'm one of the only artists, if not the only artist I know who didn't ask for this job. So when they came to me, asking me to make a record for them, I had turned the position of power on its head, and I dictated to them the terms of the contract based on my political activism.

And my activism had taught me a few things: that when people are offering you a lot of money, don't be confused —. That money is designed to enslave you. I always compare it to that african story of how to catch a monkey — put the peanut in a jar and they won't let go. So I knew that the money they were offering me was a smokescreen for bondage, for oppression.

And why would I give away my freedom for a few shekles of gold? So that was one political principle. Another political principle was that to get this consciousness there had been so many artists before me who had learned the lessons of history, and that I was now standing on their shoulders.

And so I honour them by explaining that the Dead Kennedys, punk rock, etc was already in place. And remember, that was a cultural revolution. And I had experienced it as an activist, not as a musician. Confronting apartheid, confronting the cruise missile bases based in Europe. There was a time when I was a squatter. So there was already channels of independence being manifest, and so I told them "you know what keep the money. I want to own the masters.

At the end of this contract, when our relationship is over, I owned the masters. And that turned the whole thing on its

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head. Because you discover in a power relationship that a contract is meaningless. Its...I mean anyone whose been subjected to colonialism...treaties, agreements, contracts – who's got the gunboats?

And so, seven years later, when this contract came to an end, their strategy was to hold me hostage basically. They wouldn't let me record, but they wouldn't let me record through anyone else. So I had to stand on my constitutional rights as an American prohibiting slavery. And here's how the dots connect – because as soon as they released me from the contract, the rights to those masters returned to me.

So what didn't happen in my country with the abolition of slavery – every freed slave was supposed to get forty acres and a mule – and that didn't happen. But in my case, I had the rights to those masters. So I own an album that is one of the 50 albums of all time,

PM: One last question. Is it important for you that you are here in South Africa?

MS: We have a very interesting relationship because Polygram , who signed me, was a subsidiary of Phillips, and I knew that Phillips was heavily invested in South Africa and that there was a cultural boycott at the time. So the contract also stipulated that there was not to be an album release in South Africa during the boycott. And of course all they did was they outsourced it to another distributor.

(we look at the english and sa versions of the Short Sharp Shocked record, both of which I have brought with me to the interview)

So Teal. That's what they did. This was essentially a bootleg. And I didn't get paid royalties on it because it wasn't supposed to be released in the first place. And when I found out that it

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had been released here, in spite of the agreement, I tried to stop it. It was like some epic battle. But my manager basically folded – he sold me out.

Then, years later, in 1993, when Mandela was free from prison, he came to the United States for in a fundraising drive. And Polygram had promised to contribute the South African profits from Short Sharp Shocked to the ANC because they had violated the terms of the contract. But then they totally reneged on the deal. So then I took that money myself and I got to meet Mandela when I made a contribution. I didn't do it to meet him. I was "like here's a contribution". (laughs).

MS: But i've also heard from South African audeinces how important it was that that audeinces got to hear the album.

PM: It's a selfish thing, but I'm so glad it did. It's a difficult argument, particularly in the light of history,

MS: All's well that ends well. Well, really the spearhead for that was *Graceland*. And Paul Simon is one of my seminal influences.

PM: I think *Graceland* had a huge impact on people. It was the first record I ever bought. And it's still one of my favourite albums

MS: *Hearts and Bones* was the first one I bought.

PM: Michelle, thank you so much.

It's a pleasure.

PM: And thank you not just for now, for the last 25 years.

MS: We got a thing, don't we. Yeah.

PM: When I was 17, I wouldn't have imagined in my wildest dreams that I would have got to talk to you. And now it just seems so natural and normal.

MS: Good. Yeah. Well you conducted yourself with dignity and aplomb.

PM: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

The dilapidated concrete paradise that used to surround Sir Benjamin's Landing is gone now, replaced by the nascent structures that will one day soon form part of another waterfront development – this one on the corner of the Esplanade and Maydon Wharf.

I went to watch them demolishing the site and cried a few tears as I watched the semi-industrial beauty of the site slowly dissolve and transform into piles of builders' rubble. It's amazing how little space buildings take when you condense them into a pile.

One of the tears I shed was for the sheer architectural waste – the existing structures could have been used as the basis for a waterfront that would almost certainly have been more architecturally exciting than the one that will be built.

But the other tear fell more heavily, a reminder of all the parties past, all the wasted mornings, the beats of jungle, trance and techno still somehow carrying in the wind. This is one of the most beautiful corners of the harbour, the water unfolding into a vast vista of speckled, shining light as the first rays of the sun enter Durban. I've been to some of the most fantastic parties of my life here, a space populated by freedom, diversity, curiosity and madness. And there was so much freedom there precisely because nobody really even knew it existed.

Harbours have always been on the edge of the law and the edge of civilisation. Despite the fact that the harbour is one of Durban's most beautiful assets and its most important economic virtue, it has long been mostly hidden from the populace.

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Only in the past five years has it really started to open up – another reverberation of our collective liberation.

But despite the fact that it is only now becoming part of a tourism marketing plan, Durban has always been a harbour city – the vast Evergreen and Uniglory containers that are its Lego blocks are a defining element of its consciousness, along with all their contents, licit and illicit, the plethora of prostitutes, the foreign sailors, Monte Carlo night club and all the in-between characters who inhabit the dew-dark recesses that remain.

But the dark recesses are getting fewer, pushed westwards away from the encroaching commerciality. And while the commercialisation of the city's harbour will almost certainly be a good thing – it will never be Cape Town, no matter how hard it tries, in itself a blessing – I will always hold a little shudder in my heart for almost-forgotten parties and places.

Benh Zeitlin

Beast it!

(2012)

*Peter Machen speaks to director Benh Zeitlin about his ground-breaking film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.*

The extraordinary film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* tells the apocalyptic story of 6-year old Hush Puppy (Quvenzhané Wallis) who lives with her distant but loving alcoholic father among a group of outsiders in a bayou in Southern Louisiana named the Bathtub. From Hush Puppy's perspective, the universe is a fragile web that depends on everything fitting together just right. Faced with rising water levels in the bayou, she imagines the melting ice caps delivering vast shelves of ice into the sea and mythical horned beasts named Aurochs arising from the ice. I spoke to director Benh Zeitlin about the making of this remarkable, ground-breaking film which won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance this year, as well as a slew of awards at Cannes and other festivals around the world.

Peter Machen: Although *Beasts* doesn't feel like a big budget film, I'm sure it wasn't an easy film to make. Can you tell me a

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little about the financing of the film and how you got Sundance involved?

Benh Zeitlin: Sure. The process of financing the film actually wasn't difficult at all. Really, the challenge for us was fitting the story inside of the budget that was available to us. What basically happened with both Sundance and this company Cinereach was that they saw my short film that I made before this and contacted me and asked me what I was doing next. At the time, we'd just started an early draft of the film, and they said "you have to make the film on a low budget. You know, we have to pay for the whole thing". And they were an incredible company. It was the first time they'd ever financed anything, and they gave me complete artistic freedom, which is something that you really never see in the States, especially for a first-time director.

PM: That's amazing. What budget were you given, if you don't mind me asking?

BZ: The film ended up costing about \$1.5 million.

PM: That's even more amazing.

BZ: Yeah, we budgeted it out, and we figured it should have cost over \$14 million dollars or so if you cost it the way you're supposed to.

PM: On that basis, how much of the film includes digital special effects?

BZ: Very, very little. The only complex digital effects are in the final sequence where the aurochs meet Hush Puppy. Almost all of the rest of the effects were done in-camera with miniatures. The aurochs were Vietnamese pot-belly pigs in costumes, which were then filmed in slow-motion. There were tons of effects that were laid on top of that – like, adding textures, removing scraps from the costumes – but basically, most of the effects were pre-digital era.





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PM: I presumed so. And the fascinating thing for me is how much more convincing non-digital effects are.

BZ: (laughs) Well, you know when something's alive. You can't really simulate life. So that was the way that we felt – the way that we did the effects. There was a lot more that we initially imagined the aurochs doing, and we stripped away a lot of that, logistically and story-wise. But that was our feeling – what you gained by having a live animal, with real eyes, with real motion, with real skin textures and its own kind of independent personality would add so much, that it would work writing around what we were capable of training it to do.

PM: The film is really beautifully written and Hush Puppy's voice-overs are particularly beautiful. And I was just wondering if Quvenzhané in any way added anything to the voice-over, if you used her existing speech patterns or anything?

BZ: Yeah absolutely. You know, the way the project worked is that the purposes of each voice-over were probably written into the original script, as well as some of the language. But we went through the process of interviewing Quvenzhané and finding out what she thought about different issues in the film. I'd say "How would you react? How would you think about this? What would you say in this situation?". And a lot of that got written into the voiceover. And what is there is definitely a collaboration between me and Lucy Alibar – who wrote the script – and Quvenzhané who kind of put things in her own words, and also inspired a lot of the types of thinking that are in the voiceover.

PM: The first time I watched the film, there were immediate echoes of William Faulkner, and other critics have picked up on this. And I was just wondering if Faulkner was an actual influence, or if it's just kind of coincidental, just how it happened?

BZ: Um, I mean, I love Faulkner's work, but I certainly wasn't

looking to it specifically. But when you think of the way that *The Sound and the Fury* works, the way that the narrative spills out of itself and tingles, I think there's some kind of tradition that's the same. But I don't know that I was ever looking at Faulkner in a specific way. The author I was probably looking at most was Roald Dahl actually!

PM: I know it's not an issue movie, but do you think that the film is going to make some people think about their relationship to their environment?

BZ: Yeah, I do. And it's not that the film isn't about issues. It's just not about political parties. I certainly think that there are things in the film about people's relationship with nature and with their homes, and the way that the world is modernising and causing these fringe communities to disappear – all that is in there. It's just not framed within the context of, "Well, now that you've heard this, go vote for whoever". I think that for me, when species disappear from the planet, it shouldn't be something that you decide how you feel about based on what political parties you're affiliated with.

PM: How did the Louisiana community respond to the film?

BZ: Amazingly! That was definitely my biggest fear. After the film came out, and great things happened at Sundance and all that, we were able to show the film in Louisiana for a little while. And had it gone over poorly, no matter what else happened, I wouldn't have felt satisfied. But you know, we set up a screen down in Montegut, Louisiana, where we shot the film, and just had an amazingly positive and emotional reaction to it. It was really incredible.

And I never knew how people were going to react to it – the film isn't a piece of realism, and there's no place specifically like the Bathub. It's definitely a somewhat intractable interpretation

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of the place – and that was amazingly well understood. People knew that it was about the issues and the place and that it wasn't like, you know, a documentary, and they really responded to that.

I think it's rare that people down in that region get portrayed in any way that's respectful. A lot of the coverage that comes out about the people that held out during the storms portrays them as irresponsible, suggesting that they should move and that they're uneducated. And there's a lot of pride in seeing a film where the holdouts and the survivors are the heroes as opposed to being presented as some deviant group.

PM: In the film, when Hush Puppy devours a crab, her fellow diners chant "Beast it! Beast it! Beast it!" Where does the phrase come from?

BZ: (laughs) You know that's an interesting question. I don't know whether it pre-dates or post-dates the title of the film but it's something that me and all my friends use – you can use it when you sit down for a meal and devour whatever you're eating. If you sit down and eat an entire pizza in one sitting by yourself you've "beasted" that pizza. But you can also use it, you know, if you have like 50 pages of your script to write – you can "beast" that. It's just about kind of charging into something and attacking it with all of your power.

Oliver Schmitz

The Butchers Heart

(2016)

Shepherds and Butchers, the latest film from South African master director Oliver Schmitz, tells the story of a young white South African facing the death penalty for the slaughter of six black men during the closing years of apartheid. Unflinching in its depiction of the death penalty and South African reality at the time, the film is told largely from the perspective of its young protagonist. I spoke to Schmitz, who lives and works in Berlin, about this remarkable and difficult film.

Peter Machen: Can we begin by talking about this notion of “white tears”, which has been part of the response to your *Shepherds and Butchers*, and which, of course, is part of the current conversation in South Africa.

Oliver Schmitz: I’ve heard this used in some people’s reactions, so obviously it is making the rounds in a perspective criticism of stories in which white characters are the central focus. But this film is not about white tears and it’s not an apology for white society then or now in any kind of way. Any debates that are happening in white society trying to justify itself in South Africa are not part of my notion of this film. For me, the film is very

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much about a generation of young white South Africans and what happened to them and what was done to them. It's an indictment of the older generation of white South Africans who ruled the country, and who sent these youngsters off to war and taught them to fight, taught them to hate. That is clearly what the film is about for me and there is no instance – and I was very careful about this – where I want the audience to feel sorry for the man on trial. But I do want them to pause and think about who this young man is and who he was before he became this monster. Because we're not born evil – we're all human beings who are born and then take in whatever comes towards us in life and learn from that.

25 years ago, I couldn't have made this film. Because the majority perspective had been so negated and obliterated from national media, it was important for me as a young filmmaker to make a film like *Mapantsula* – reflecting the voice of the oppressed, the voice of the majority. Now I feel less comfortable because there is a debate, quite rightly, about ownership of stories. And I've never seen myself as a liberal trying to represent other people or the downtrodden or fighting somebody else's fight. But I think it was important back then to make *Mapantsula*, and I think it's just as important for me now to own this story about this generation, and to tell it as honestly as I can. Even if it runs the risk of criticism of a white perspective, it's not revisionist in any way.

PM: In the film, the black characters do not have very much focus on them as characters. But that's what apartheid was, a denial of blackness, a denial of the black body as a human body, and, for me, your film replicated that.

OS: That was the intention. It was very difficult for me but I didn't want to revise the book and the intention of the story

and relativise it because I think that would have weakened the focus on the main character. I can understand that there are and will be criticisms of the treatment of black characters in the story, but it is the intention. It's not the intention to negate the existence and the meaning of those characters but in terms of the story at hand, I wanted to create a narrative told from the main character's perspective. And I think the film is all the more disturbing as a result.

But just because the black characters are on the periphery, it does not mean that they are denounced. It just means the focus is on the white character. I think any black viewer would have a harder viewing than a white viewer because of that and because of the humiliation that the black prisoners go through. Because it's a humiliation that doesn't just have to do with death row. It's a humiliation that black South Africans have suffered for decades and centuries. But the fact is it's a challenging film. It was never made to be an easy film, and the rest I leave up to the public now. I've made the film.

PM: Earlier this year, *City Press* journalist Charl Blignaut spoke about the prospect of having to watch the film with his black boyfriend. And other people have spoken about the prospect of how uncomfortable it might be for black and white viewers to watch the film together. But I think it's a very uncomfortable full stop. It's devastating.

OS: Absolutely. It is a deeply uncomfortable film. It is a film that will make anyone uncomfortable, and, yes, sure, it will make an audience of black and white sitting together in a theatre uncomfortable because of the physical nature of the violence that is displayed in the film and its absolutely uncompromising nature.

PM: I have one last question. Given that there is now a whole generation of South Africans who did not experience apartheid





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and have only experienced its very substantial legacy, how important is it for you that this film attracts young adult viewers?

OS: I think it's crucial that it attracts young adult viewers. I'm delighted that young audiences still watch *Mapantsula*. I recently did a Skype lecture with students at Wits university who'd just watched *Mapantsula*. And they were amazed and full of questions. It was very thought provoking, and I think they saw things they hadn't seen in that form before.

And I think, similarly, that they will see aspects of apartheid South Africa in *Shepherds and Butchers* that they haven't seen before. I don't think anybody's looked at the nature of state violence in the same way before. And I think it is important. I think it gives a young person insights – it gave the young actor insights into what the society was like – he grew up in a free society. So, for any young person who grew up in a democratic South Africa, it's a call to defend what has been gained and to celebrate what has been lost.

Khalo Matabane

Conversations about us all

(2003)

Peter Machen speaks to director Khalo Matabane about his award-winning debut feature *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon*.

Documentary-maker Khalo Matabane's first feature film *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* is an astounding achievement. Making little distinction between notions of fiction and reality, the film tells the story of a young writer named Keniloe (Tony Kgoroge) who meets a Somali woman (Fatima Hersi) in a Johannesburg park on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. Over the course of the next few weeks, this woman tells Keniloe of the terrible things that have happened to her to bring her to the City of Gold. But her narrative is cut short when one Sunday she fails to appear. And so Keniloe, who wants to write a story about her experiences, starts trawling through the streets of urban Johannesburg in search of this woman who has ignited something deep within him.

In the process he comes into contact with immigrants and refugees from all over the world who have made their way to Johannesburg. We meet a woman from Yugoslavia who





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chronicles her heart-breaking decision to leave her country after years of seemingly endless war. An Asian woman tells of her exile from South Korea and of the racism she experiences in all sectors of South Africa. There is a British man who has come to this country for its promise of intellectual freedom and openness. A young catholic woman from Ethiopia describes her flight from her homeland to escape political and religious persecution. A ex-presidential guardsman from the former Congo describes how he survived a machete attack and fled to South Africa. A Palestinian family have been separated from their motherland for so long, they can no longer conceive of returning.

Some of these refugees have made their home in South Africa permanently and have come to feel at ease here. Others still feel rootless and itinerant, while others are only too aware that they are constantly at risk of being deported. It is this series of interviews that constitutes the core of the film and paints a portrait of contemporary South Africa that is very different to the one that has been painted by the artists and architects of nation building. The film vastly expands the spectrum of our rainbow nation while at the same time exploring the continuing national tendency to sharply delineate the colour differences within that spectrum.

The film is extraordinary on many levels, not the least being Matabane's powerful and idiosyncratic aesthetic which frames the film, and which resonates with the best of contemporary fine art portraiture. That Matabane achieved so much with only R150 000 (an amount which approaches zero in film-making terms) doesn't make his film any better, but it does offer massive encouragement to film-makers the world over and particularly in South Africa, where film resources are so scarce. That

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his film has received such ardent critical praise, winning a slew of awards at festivals around the world, offers equal encouragement, proving that critical recognition does not necessarily require millions of dollars.

Elsewhere, Matabane has referred to his film as a love-letter to South Africa. But it is not the love-letter of initial infatuation. Rather it is a love letter that acknowledges a bitter-sweet South African reality that borders on schizophrenia. South Africa is presented as a country that does indeed offer both literal and metaphoric hope to the people of Africa and beyond. But while the country offers a global embrace, it is also a nation full of ingrained prejudices, institutional discrimination and xenophobia, which we see reflected through the eyes of these refugees and immigrants.

In a world that is increasingly defined by migration, Matabane's film offers a rare dialogue between these fellow travellers. I spoke to Matabane about this breakthrough film.

Peter Machen: Hi Khalo. Your film might not have won an Oscar but it has received substantial international critical recognition at a level unprecedented in South African film. Yet Ster Kinekor are only releasing two copies of the print and I haven't seen any media or hype regarding the film. Are you simply happy that they are distributing and showing the film or do you think that they should be doing a whole lot more?

Khlo Matabane: I think Helen from Ster Kinekor has been supportive of the film. I always think distributors can do more to promote the films. But I think the film is not fat-cat filmmaking.

PM: After the screening at the Durban International Film Festival, I asked – from a seat in the audience – how much of the

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film was acted? Your response implied that the question was irrelevant; that in a world where political fictions are presented as truths, notions of truth become arbitrary. I was only asking as a hypothetical film-maker. For me it is a point of interest more than it is relevant to the film's content or meaning. But has this question about what is "real" in the film and what is not (and those are very large inverted commas) come up much as you have taken your film around the world, or do you think that audiences are getting used to more complex notions of truth?

KM: I think audiences are mainly used to Hollywood cinema. *Conversations* is a film that really does not concern itself with limitation of fact or fiction, imagined or real. In our daily experiences we all move between the real and unreal, conscious and subconscious. We also act a lot, sometimes knowingly so, but sometimes without us knowing. Life is bizarre, and my films are an attempt to capture and reflect on the bizarre.

PM: In Spike Lee's *25th Hour*, the Ed Norton character does this amazing hate-filled speech that attacks every possible minority group in New York – and it ends up seeming like this weird twisted love poem to New York. Your film feels for me like an inversion of that speech, South Africa being the America of Africa and Jo'burg being its New York, and every racial epithet being unfurled from a few blunt words into these human beings who are so completely vulnerable. When you set out to make the film, did you have specific intentions as to how things would work out, or did you approach the film more intuitively?

KM: The film was made without prior knowledge of a lot of things. There were no rehearsals. People say that I'm brave and maybe I am. But we live our lives without rehearsals and one

cannot predict where one's life will turn the next second or minute. I wanted to make a film that was like life itself, to go into the unknown. I wanted to be open to life and to an unknown cinematic journey. I also chose Tony Kgoroge because he is a curious actor. Not once does he dismiss or belittle the people he meets. He is open. The crew was also open to life's possibilities and impossibilities.

PM: Another American habit that South Africans are in danger of imitating is getting so involved in our own national narrative that we forget about the rest of the world and the rest of the continent. The words "interrupts the national conversation" from the DIFF catalogue remains a resonant phrase for me. Do you think that South Africans are capable right now of opening themselves up to a broader narrative?

KM: I don't know. We live in a globalised world. For me, I am surprised by how we are so similar in most ways. In terms of headspace, what is the difference between a 30-year-old in New York or Jo'burg or Maputo or Kampala? Denys Arcand, the Canadian filmmaker who made *The Barbarian Invasions*, says that the notion of borders is disappearing. In the future there will be those with the USA or those who are against it. I like that.

PM: To what extent do you think that xenophobia is actively encouraged by our media and government as a means of constructing scapegoats for economic failure and unemployment?

KM: It is bizarre that around the world immigrants and refugees are blamed for the economic woes of a country. But America was built on immigrants. We know in South Africa that the questions of economic failure and unemployment have to do mainly with apartheid and failure of certain current economic systems to deliver for the poor. We need to tax lux-

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ury goods to pay for the education of the poor.

PM: Regardless of any notions of truth/reality/documentary integrity, your film achieves a remarkable honesty. Do you think that by constructing multiple subjective realities (ie. “fictionalised” accounts of reality), it is possible to perversely provide a much greater sense of that thing called objective reality?

KM: I don’t know what that phrase means. I prefer the word ‘honesty’. I try to be honest in my films. My friend Lesego Rampolokeng, the poet says, “Truth is treason and now liars rule the world”.

PM: Do you think that we will ever reach a situation where cinema is accessible to the majority of South Africans?

KM: Maybe yes, maybe no. But the masses continue to betray great artists and ideas. At the same time I don’t believe in the simple theory of the masses being good and the elite being evil. It’s far more complex.

PM: When you were in Durban for the film festival you spoke of other possible future projects. I know that you are currently shooting a television show. Can you tell me a little about this and other projects you are involved in?

KM: I’ve just finished shooting a TV series, *When We Were Black*, a four-part one hour drama series for the SABC, about a teenage boy who wants to fall in love set against the backdrop of the student uprisings of ‘76. Also there is a film called *Violence* about cycle of violence made with DV8 productions.

PM: The ’90s saw the emergence of many great independent voices in world cinema, many of which were subsequently absorbed into Hollywood. Would you ever be tempted to direct a mainstream blockbuster?

KM: Yes! I want to do a chick flick with three beautiful women kickin’ ass and flying on saucers as witches – mythology that I

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grew up with in my village. Subvert George Lucas. Yes, I want to do films with beautiful women that will gross 100 million US and I would be on the cover of the most shallow magazines in the world. Is this fiction or real, do you think? I mean my answer...I can't tell.

So home is the new club, conversation the new drug, and the lounge the new dance floor. As major new lifestyle trends have all but dried up in the vapour trail of recycling and revivals, a cultural crisis of repetition is driving many of us into our homes. Where we paradoxically escape from the war and the terror by watching it on television between series and sitcoms.

And we can talk about it excitedly at parties, around our dinner tables and our coffee tables and our braais, even as the surreptitious shockwaves of alcohol force small semantic cracks in political views into seismic faults.

Maybe its the war and the Towers and the crime and the road-blocks and the roads themselves and the price of going out, but the houseparty is suddenly in full swing. And after a good house party, you do kind of stop to wonder why you pay to get into clubs, where you pay through the nose for drinks, get hassled by bouncers and are invariably forced to listen to shitty music that invades every piece of conversational possibility. Although perversely enough, sometimes even that can be quite fun if you donate enough of your salary on the barman. And sometimes clubs are fantastic and heavenly and resplendent. But not nearly often enough.

So, we're at home now, sipping on an endless supply of various daiquiris, cocktails and beers, a fraction of the price they cost in a bar or club. The conversation flows excitedly as people spill over into one another like martinis. You engage with them rather than watching them across the room. And music at houses parties is nearly always better than in most clubs and bars.

Till the Morning Light

Because law enforcement and a consensus reality tend to be less pervasive in a more private space, people are often at their maddest and most idiosyncratic when they're at their own or someone else's house. Which is a good thing.

So home and house parties rule for the while. But everything goes in cycles and I can only think of the words of a yearning, almost mournful, Blue Nile song. "Baby, be my baby . . . Let's go out tonight."

Those words, so simple, so tender, contain all the redemptive possibility that explains why people will always go out, and why I, in particular, could never be a complete homebody. And also why all the worries and bombs and madmen and genocides in the world can dissolve in the face of much less important things, as we simply let ourselves go.

Miriam Makeba

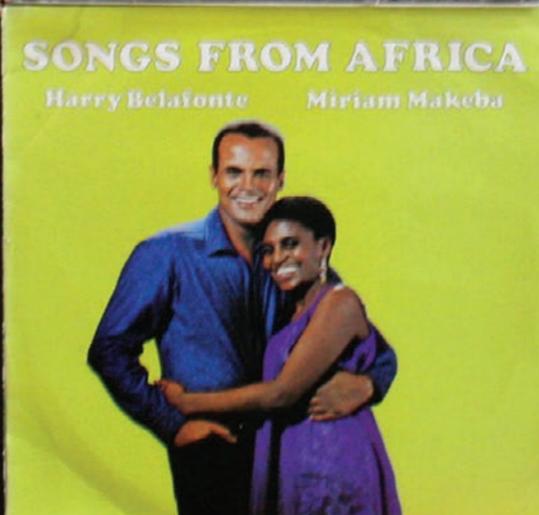
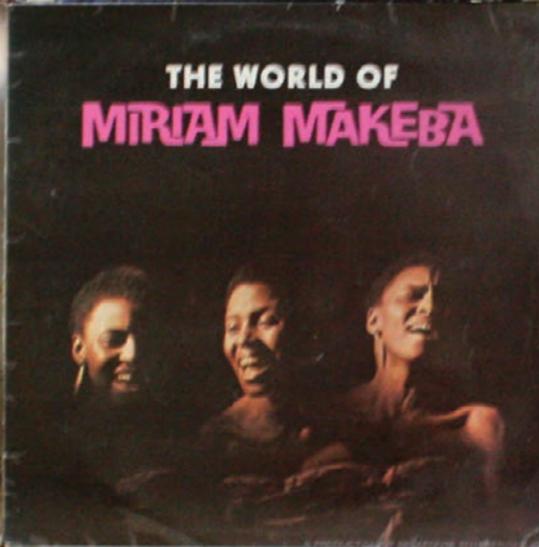
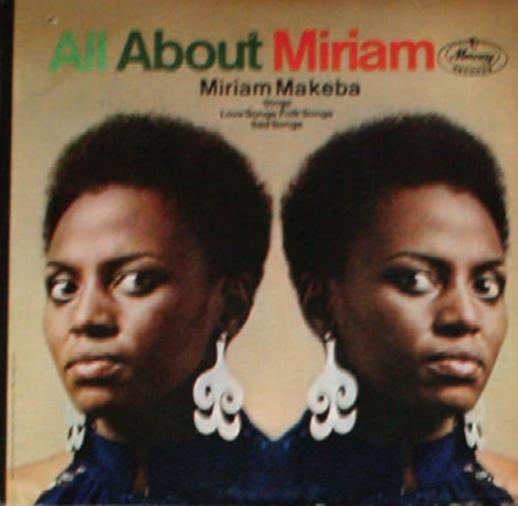
Mama Africa is Dead

(2008)

Mama Africa is dead. One of the continent's most extraordinary voices will never sing again, even as her voice will be heard for generations to come. But if Miriam Makeba is remembered chiefly for *Pata Pata* and *Qongqothwane*, otherwise known as *The Click Song* (famously, “because the English cannot say *Qongqothwane*”), it will be a tragedy greater than any of the tragedies that the singer endured during her richly lived life. And if you're only familiar with those two songs and a few of her greatest hits, you owe it to both yourself and to one of the twentieth century's greatest female vocalists to check out her diverse and powerful back catalogue. From the Sophiatown swing of her two albums with the Skylarks to the moving love of *The Promise* to the gentle but driven protest of *Welela*, Makeba's recorded career covers a vast landscape of musical style and social and personal concerns, infused with a timeless resonance that transcends labels and categories.

While it is the matriarchal figure of Mama Africa that seems mostly likely to represent Makeba's posthumous star – and it was an appellation whose sturdiness and weight offended her –





THE WORLD OF
MIRIAM MAKEBA



MAKEBA SINGS!
MIRIAM MAKEBA



LPM-3391

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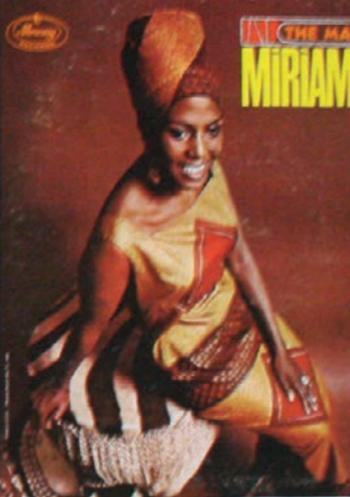
MIRIAM MAKEBA IN CONCERT!



RECORDED AT PHILHARMONIC HALL
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THE MAGNIFICENT
MIRIAM MAKEBA



LSP-3384 STEREO

THE BEST OF
MIRIAM MAKEBA

LOVE ME TENDER / THE CLUB SONG / JOHNNY B GO HOME / I'VE GOT A FEELING
LONELY WOMAN / I'VE GOT A FEELING / I'VE GOT A FEELING / I'VE GOT A FEELING



MIRIAM MAKEBA

FROM AMSTERDAM... THE MOST
AMAZING NEW SOUNDS FROM THE
"MIRIAM MAKEBA" SERIES

OF
**KING KONG
FAME**



RECORDED IN THE HOLLYWOOD PALACE OF MERRILL

NOTES FROM THE SOUTH

the Miriam I want most to remember is the one that existed before I was born. The Miriam who sat so coyly and so beautifully next to journalist and writer Can Themba. The Miriam who led the Skylarks through some of the most beautiful music known to humankind. The Miriam whose sweet young voice could spin the very moonlight into music and then make it roar. The Miriam whose beauty was so tangibly moving that, combined with her astounding presence and vocal gifts, she made the world fall in love with her.

While Makeba sat with equality in the international album charts of the fifties and sixties – before the invention of the World Music ghetto which her genre-jumping career helped to invent – her star easily ascended beyond the world of mere entertainment. Like Nina Simone and Hugh Masekela, she rose above the currents of history, her talent keeping her afloat even when it seemed that the world and her personal life was lost. And like Simone, she surfed the music, her voice not a crowning layer on top of the instruments but the very thing that keeps it altogether, a centrifugal force of elemental human passion.

Makeba in her youth seemed to represent irrepressible innocence in the face of irrefutable brutality. And that shimmering innocence was one of South Africa's most powerful expressions of protest, precisely because it didn't preclude the expression of pain. More specifically, her voice carried the resonance of the pain of the innocent, and it carried it around the world long before the anti-apartheid movement established itself.

All of this is not to be dismissive of the older Makeba and her always illustrious output. She may have lost her innocence but she never lost her shine; her talent never faltered. I think, at some point, though, her heart broke. It may have been the relentlessness of her desire for Africa to be free, or it may have

MIRIAM MAKEBA

been the string of unworkable relationships that haunted her. Or it may have simply been the gradual evaporation of youth that happens to nearly all of us. But at some point that innocence died, even as the stridency and the passion stayed strong.

My favourite Miriam moment involves someone else's memory, and takes place at the car boot market in Durban's Greyville. I was armed with a bunch of records that I'd picked up, including a couple of Miriam records. A woman named Cindi, who sells coats and hot dogs, asked me if I could find a particular song on vinyl that had previously been banned. I didn't recognise the Xhosa title but Cindi sang a few bars of the song. One of the two men present, who like Cindi, were probably a decade or two older than me, said quietly, "Hey...they were hard times". And the other man's eyes watered, just this side of tears.

And in the glisten of those eyes, I saw all the pain and all the joy and all the beauty of Miriam Makeba, how she carried the burden of an entire country in her soul, in her music. And how millions of people carried her with them.

R.E.M.

Meeting Mike Mills
(2007)

Mike Mills is one third of R.E.M., along with Pete Buck and Michael Stipe. Mills was in Durban as part of the Around the Sun world tour. I spoke to him about George Bush, Hunter S Thompson and being in one of the world's favourite rock bands.

Peter Machen: When you started R.E.M. all those years ago, did you ever think that you would still be going 25 years later?

Mike Mills: No. You know, when you're 20 years old, you're barely thinking beyond next week, so certainly we had no idea. Or expectations.

PM: And now, to find yourself here still, after all these years, how does it feel?

MM: Well, I just feel lucky, and grateful that I get to do what I love and get paid for it. A lot of people don't like their jobs. I love mine.

PM: I quite like mine too.

MM: (laughs) Good.

PM: You're one of the world's largest bands but you've managed to avoid the negative celebrity thing. How do you think



NOTES FROM THE SOUTH

you've managed to do that?

MM: Well, we don't seek publicity. We never have. We've never sought to make ourselves famous like a lot of people do. And we're generally well-behaved civil people so there's not a lot of negative publicity to have about us. We just try to not create negativity under any circumstances.

PM: Even Michael, with his kind of wry, sexual ambivalence and political views is a potentially explosive personality in media terms, but has managed to avoid it.

MM: Well, I wouldn't call him explosive. Like I said, we're all just pretty well-behaved and nice people, you know.

PM: Clearly. Where, do you live now.

MM: I live in Athens, Georgia.

PM: Do you just stay there, tour, and go back home?

MM: Well, I travel a lot. Even when I'm not on the road, I tend to travel a lot. So Athens is a nice place to go home and relax. That's a vacation for me, spending two weeks at home. Because it's rare.

PM: And you still enjoy touring?

MM: I love touring. Yeah. I mean, it's difficult, but playing live is why you're in a band. If I couldn't play any live shows, what would be the point of being in a band? Sitting around making records is great, but it's not nearly as exciting as doing this.

PM: When you start a new album, do you ever just feel that the weight of all the previous albums and the weight of expectations is too heavy?

MM: No, I don't feel that. I'm usually so excited by our new songs that once an album is done I tend to forget about it, pretty quickly. We're playing a lot of the songs from the latest album in the live show. But I just think of them in terms

of songs. I don't really think of *Around the Sun* as an album much. Once you've finished them, you turn them loose, and your job with them is done.

PM: Do you listen to your old albums much?

MM: No.

PM: Ever?

MM: Not unless I need to relearn a song. Very seldom will I ever put one on just to listen to it.

PM: Do you forget your songs?

MM: If it's one that we haven't listened to or played in 15 or 20 years, yeah, that can happen. If we want to do some of the older stuff, yeah sure, you forget it. Some of them you never do, but some of them of you do.

PM: On your last tour, you went to the internet I remember to get lyrics. It was a bit of a joke.

MM: I don't know, maybe for something as old as...I don't know. I honestly can't speak about what Michael may have done. Because a lot of the early stuff, it didn't really have lyrics per se. A lot of it was just sounds and words that Michael was stringing together. It was quite emotive and quite beautiful but it wasn't necessarily linear lyrics. So, who knows where he went to get inspiration if we wanted to do something as old as *Sitting Still*, or something like that?

PM: I've got a few live bootlegs of the older songs and the lyrics are often different to the recorded versions.

MM: That's entirely possible. Sometimes songs grow and mutate as they grow over time.

PM: What made you decide to start publishing the lyrics to the songs, starting with *Up*.

MM: Well my feeling was that we were a different band (after drummer Billy Berry left the band due to ill-health). We had

NOTES FROM THE SOUTH

had to rethink all of our rules at that point in terms of how to record a record as a three-piece, how to think about touring as a three piece. Basically we were just a different band. And so all the other rules that we'd set for ourselves, a lot of them just didn't apply anymore. And I thought Michael's lyrics for *Up* were so good, I said "let's publish them, what the hell. All the old rules are gone now. Let's just do something different".

PM: Do you see a whole lot of Bill now? Are you in contact with him?

MM: Oh yeah. We speak fairly often. I'll see him in May when we get back, if not before.

PM: Where's he living?

MM: He's got a place out in the woods, sort of out in the country. He's very happy out there.

PM: Are you and Peter Buck happy for Michael to take the limelight as a frontman?

MM: Oh, of course. I wouldn't have it any other way.

PM: So it's a relief of sorts?

MM: I don't know if it's a relief. You know, I never wanted to be famous. I don't mind that my band is famous. It enables me to do a lot of things I wouldn't otherwise get to do. But I personally have never had a huge desire for fame, so, no, I'm very happy to be where I am.

PM: And is Michael happy with the fame that he has, inasmuch as you can speak for him?

MM: I suppose so. I mean I think we all have pretty good lives. Everybody's life has some positive and some negative.

PM: *Around the Sun*, like most of your albums, has got quite a strong political component, and I felt that this time it got quite specific. I just want to know how you personally feel about the Bush election.

MM: Well, we're all of one mind about that. We worked very hard to stop it from happening. And a lot of the things we attempted to do on that Vote for Change tour were successful. We got a lot of young people to register to vote. We got a lot of them to vote. We got a lot of them to volunteer for grass-roots organisations. And that good work, I think, will carry on in the future. And the only thing we were unsuccessful at was the big prize, which was the presidency. So, you know, we're not happy with anything the Bush administration has done basically, but... that's how it goes.

PM: Is America really as divided as that election suggested?

MM: It's very divided, yeah. There are plenty of people who just utterly reject everything the Bush administration stands for. But a great many people who might otherwise disagree with the Bush administration are very scared of terrorism. That's the wedge that he used to get people.

PM: Terror and queers and drugs and...

MM: Well, terror and queers mainly, that was his big thing.

PM: A friend of mine is convinced that Hunter S Thompson killed himself because Bush won.

MM: I doubt it. I think Hunter likes being in opposition too much. I'm sure there were plenty of other reasons.

PM: Did you see much of Cape Town?

MM: Not as much as I would have liked. But I got out – various dinners – and I hiked up the mountain a little bit, not too far, went up Signal Hill. It's a beautiful place.

PM: Its very beautiful. Do you ever get frustrated that you don't see enough of a country when you move though it?

MM: I suppose I could if I allowed myself. But you know, its just the nature of it. Sometimes you blow into a town and you blow out that night and you just



R.E.M.

don't get to see anything. You could have regrets but I just consider myself lucky to have been there at all.

PM: I wish you were spending a day here, it's such an interesting place.

MM: Yeah, I wish I was too.

R.E.M.

Listening to Michael Stipe
(2007)

“At my most beautiful, I count your eyelashes”

I am standing in a mostly empty stadium. Around me, a flurry of organised activity is taking place as workers, production people and musicians prepare for the 12 000 guests who will descend on the stadium in a few hours to watch one of the world’s most loved rock bands. In the meantime, Michael Stipe is singing ‘At My Most Beautiful’, a heartbreakingly beautiful track off R.E.M.’S 1999 album *Up*. He is accompanied of course by Peter Buck on guitar and Mike Mills on bass as they conduct their soundcheck. And I am in bliss. Amidst all the activity, there are only five people who are actually watching and listening to the band. And when the song ends, I can’t help but clap. I am the only one who does. I am in bliss.

The soundcheck ends. I walk around the field, looking at the giant Toyota sign made up of different coloured pixel-seats. The stadium is branded to the hilt, every possible surface plastered with corporate logos. Stipe is walking around in the near distance. Along with sunglasses and a peak hat, he wears a veil of

privacy, as he moves around snapping pics of the empty stadium, something I suspect he's done at every stadium he's visited on their extensive world tour. I'm too shy to even think about running up to him and saying hi, but he turns around and takes a picture of the stadium in which I am a small, unidentifiable stick figure. I smile a little to myself.

“And love, love will be my strongest weapon.”

Several hours later, R.E.M. are playing to a crowd who know only their biggest hits. They are performing ‘I Took Your Name’, a dark, noisy, gorgeous stalker of a song from *Monster*. The band take a while to warm up as Stipe's movements become less staccato and he begins to engage with the crowd, wet from a constant drizzle delivered by a thin but persistent band of clouds. While I and my friends are bopping and singing along joyfully, there is apparently a little dissent in the stadium because the band are mostly playing songs off their new album rather than more familiar songs.

Which wasn't actually the case. They played an extremely generous two-and-a-half-hour set, of which about half a dozen songs were off *Around The Sun*. The rest of the set-list covered the breadth of their 25 year career, and fans would have known most of songs. But in our ridiculously mainstream and radio-based culture, people generally listen to what everyone else listens to and to what they already know. So after R.E.M. fell from the radio grace plateau of *Out of Time* and *Automatic For The People*, their audience shrunk. Not enough to move them out of the realm of megasuccess, but probably enough for their record company to wish they'd write a few more radio-friendly pop songs than they do.

NOTES FROM THE SOUTH

But for those whose listening pleasure is not determined by the radio, the band has built one of the strongest musical canons in the history of modern music. The average radio-rock band should be so lucky as to have a song half as good as one of R.E.M.'s weaker songs. And they've managed to achieve this over the course of more than two decades, never getting crap, never abandoning their artistic integrity, never resorting to media trickery, always playing the game their way and still selling millions and millions of records.

And at the heart of all this is a profound love and sense of humanity. Once he's on a roll, Stipe literally broadcasts love into the stadium, and eventually, gradually, with the help of his comrades, linked to each other by the invisible threads of time and intuition, he overcomes the crowd's irritation that they don't know all the words. He introduces the politically inclined song 'The Final Straw' by talking about the fact that R.E.M. disagree fundamentally with the actions of their Bush-led government. Which gets a big encouraging whoop from the crowds. And then he launches into the song. And it is very beautiful indeed, even while engaging directly with Bush. "If the world is filled with the likes of you", he sings, "then I'm putting up a fight, putting up a fight. Make it right. Make it right. Now love cannot be called into question. Forgiveness is the only hope I hold. And love – love will be my strongest weapon. I do believe that I am not alone".

And then the crowd, most of whom are hearing the song for the first time, start to clap with their hands above their head. And it is a truly beautiful moment because they suddenly all get it, and, from that point on, they are with Michael Stipe and R.E.M.. They begin to understand and simply listen and abandon the baggage of greatest hits. And they realise, perhaps, that,

R.E.M.

while he is singing to a crowd, he is also singing to each and every one of them, one human being to another.

Because that is the genius of R.E.M.. On a record, or in a stadium, Stipe doesn't sing into the air or to some abstracted concept of an audience. He sings to you, whoever you are. And he sings to you about his life and your life and all the lives in between.

And he somehow means every word, even though he's never met you and almost certainly never will.

Patti Smith

Dream of Life

(20015)

When I speak to Patti Smith at 10.30 on a Tuesday night, she has just arrived in the mountains of Norway after a day of travelling which involved two plane trips and a long car journey. She is clearly tired, and when I begin thanking her effusively for the interview, she asks me politely to get on with it and do what we can. But I think she quickly realises that my adulation is not blind, false or obsequious, but a result of being genuinely affected by her work, that I really do have things to ask her beyond what her favourite colour is, and she soon warms to the conversation.

Peter Machen: I'm not going to ask what it feels like to be a rock 'n' roll star, but I am going to ask you this: How do you feel being the friend and companion to generations that follow you in the same way that Rimbaud and Whitman and Burroughs and Blake were friends and companions to you?

Patti Smith: Oh... (laughs)... I couldn't say that. I mean, if you're saying that...

PM: I am saying that!

PS: Well, I mean, it's quite an honor. What could one say? You know, all of these people have certainly given to me, and if I can

give to others that's a great thing. But it's not something that an artist should think about himself; do you know what I mean? It's a very nice thing to think about, but you know, I mean... All I can say is it's a beautiful thought.

PM: And you made really incredibly beautiful music to break through, to get to me, you know, as a then-19-year old, 20 years later, on a different side of the world.

PS: Well, thanks. The thing is that as you grow through life, the pursuit of art and the pursuit of new ideas, all these things keeps your mind elastic. I am the age that I am but I still look at things, always, with new eyes. And hopefully if people can look at my work in the same way, that's a really wonderful thing.

PM: Do you ever struggle to keep those eyes new? Are there ever moments when you feel disillusioned, when you get irritated with the world, have just had enough?

PS: Well, I get irritated with the world. I get irritated with politicians, I get very irritated with governments and with corporations, but in terms of imagination – my imagination is always fertile. I'm either thinking of my own things, or constantly engaged by the things that other people do.

We have such a great depth of human history in all of the arts, whether it's opera or mathematics or painting or classical music or jazz. There's so many things to study, new books to read, and certainly always ways to transform old ideas and to come up with new ones. So, I have to say that I'm never bored. I might sometimes feel discouraged or frustrated, but never bored.

PM: One of the things that resonates with me is the fact that you've said on several occasions that you have felt alien to the human race, that you came from somewhere else.

PS: I hope. (laughs)

NOTES FROM THE SOUTH

PM: I don't want to overstress my connection to you. I'm just another person on the other side of the world. But you know, when I was a kid growing up, I really felt that quite profoundly. And I just wonder why we think this, you know, is it part of a social response or...?

PS: Alright. I think that some of us... I think some of us just do. You know, the feeling that you're speaking about that you feel is a real feeling. And I think it's because some people are more connected with our most ancient past than others. I'm not saying that some are better than others. I'm just saying that some of us channel the most ancient times. When I was a child, I was certain that I could remember what it was like to live on Venus, I could remember what it was like to live in the American Plains. I could remember. And it's ancient memory. We all have it. It's just that some of us access it more than others.

And I think that thing is a special thing, but it also makes us feel somewhat alien, somewhat removed from our present. You know, I've spent so much of my life just feeling comfortable in the world that I'm in. And one of the ways that I've been able to feel that way is just by doing my work, just by – you know, some of the things that make me feel strange – I've transformed them into work. Maybe it might be a poem. That kind of feeling drew me to write a song like 'Rock and Roll Nigger.' It's about that exact feeling, outside society, it's where I wanna be. But it's also not always where you want to be, it's just where you are.

PM: But I reckon it's a good place to be. Clearly for you, it's a very good place to be. This idea of channeling is one of my questions. When you write, when you perform, things are coming from an unconscious well. As a song writer, as a craftsman: to what extent do you polish your words after they have sprung from the source? Do you rearrange them, change them

around? How much stays unchanged?

PS: Well, when I improvise, I don't polish them at all. I mean, like on my albums, there's a lot of improvisation — on 'Horses', 'Birdland' — it's an improvisation. 'Radio Ethiopia' was an improvisation. 'Radio Baghdad'. 'Gandhi'. 'Memento Mori'. Almost on every album — 'Wave' is an improvisation. I don't clean up or edit or polish improvisations. I leave them as they stand — because they represent a moment where we're struggling to channel something. And it's not about perfection. It's about communication.

When I'm writing a poem, when I'm hoping to achieve some kind of perfection, then I'll spend a lot of time perhaps working and reworking it, which isn't always the best thing, but it seems to be part of the process. But improvisation is really about achieving communication in some higher realm in the moment. And it's a very honest way to share your direct creative impulse with the people. If you give people a poem that you've rewritten and rewritten and worked on, the original creative impulse is in there, but you've also added layers of your own, well, labours into it. But when you improvise live, the people are seeing the naked creative impulse. So that's a whole other experience.

PS: What do you do? What are you interested in?

PM: Music more than anything, although I have no talent that I have ever accessed. But I write poems, I take photographs, I write for newspapers, I lay out art catalogues. I do all kinds of things.

PS: How old are you?

PM: I'm forty-four.

PS: You seem like you have a very interesting mind, because those are interesting questions that you asked me. I'm sorry to ask you such personal questions, but I was just curious.





NOTES FROM THE SOUTH

PM: No, no. I mean, I'm asking you very personal questions...

PS: Yes, but they're very, very interesting questions. People ask me questions all the times and the questions that you asked me are unique, that's why I asked you that. So ask another one.

PM: I saw you in 1999. I think it was the first date of a European tour – at the Forum (in London). I even gave you a hug afterwards.

PS: Well, thank you, I probably needed it. Because I was just beginning again. I was probably a bit nervous. But thank you.

PM: You took it with such grace. And what struck me, both on stage, and just standing next to you for like 30 seconds, was that there was no barrier. And, you know, rock musicians often do construct that barrier. And I just want to know if, when you started out, you ever thought that you were above the audience, if you ever had that kind of patina of arrogance.

PS: No. I had a lot of arrogance, but not that kind of arrogance, because I was really very conscious of being one of the people. I mean I was also conscious of the fact that I was... I believed I had special gifts. I mean, I feel like an artist. I've always felt like, you know, God has given me special gifts. So I understand my own worth. But in terms of being a performer, especially in the context of rock and roll, I had no special talent. I was not a musician. I could sing a little... It was all bravado, and I really felt that I was exactly that, one of the people.

And one of my goals, and one of my missions – within rock and roll – was to break that barrier, that idea of, you know, of the big rock stars that had a lot of money and attitude and felt like they were, you know, above everybody. Because I believed that rock and roll was the true grass-roots art.

You know, everybody can't paint or write a poem or achieve, you know, certain intellectual success. But rock and roll is a very

PATTI SMITH

simple art form. It's based on a few chords, on a sense of revolution, on a sense of sexuality. It opens its doors to anyone, and I have always felt that, onstage or off-stage, I'm just the same person. I don't have a persona.

Of course, when you're younger, you want to be cool, and you know, I could have been a real asshole. But I wasn't. It's just that I had a lot of energy and bravado. It wasn't because I thought that I was better than anyone else. It was just because I had a lot of...you know...arrogant energy.

But in terms of, you know, what you said...I mean...my son, for instance. My son is a great guitarist and he plays with me. And sometimes we're on stage, and we just start...you know...in the middle of a solo, he might come up and we might start talking to each other. My son has no stage persona. He doesn't come onstage and turn into Gene Simmons. He's himself.

One has to be self-protective because people have to have their privacy. I completely believe in the right of privacy of artists. I don't believe that artists are kings. I just believe that they have special skills, or special gifts, but it doesn't make them better than anybody else.

PM: Something that I think is quite remarkable is that you've been successfully able to acknowledge the cultural and artistic importance of *Horses*, but you've also managed to continue to make new work that exists on its own terms. Did *Horses* ever feel like it was an albatross around your neck? Was it ever difficult to maintain that balance?

PS: No, not at all. (laughs) No, I don't feel like that at all. I mean, I'm proud of the record. I still sing the songs on it. I'm always working on new things, and always working on new photographs or new poems or new songs. But the work that I do for the people, which is on my records, to me those records

NOTES FROM THE SOUTH

belong to the people. And if they want to hear ‘Because the Night’ for the one-thousandth time, I’m happy to sing it. And to sing ‘Gloria’, to sing ‘People Have the Power’, to try and keep a relationship with these songs, and, you know, remember what compelled me to write them.

And, you know, *Horses* is not great technically. I didn’t know anything about singing when I did *Horses* and it has its flaws. But I also know that I did it with everything that I knew how. Everything that I knew about poetry, all the things that I believed in, I tried to put into that record. That was a long time ago, and I’ve certainly evolved since then. But I can look at it and say ‘I did my best that I could.’ I don’t look at it and think ‘Oh, I compromised’ or that I wasn’t really paying attention or that I was too fucked up to do this record. I put everything I knew into it.

I really put out *Horses* for people who did feel alienated. Because I felt that I really understood people that felt alienated for whatever reason – because of their sexuality, because they were just weirdos, because they weren’t accepted by their peers or their parents or, you know, for whatever reason. And I think that it stands for that, and it’s amazing how many people through the years, and still now, tell me that the record has meant something to them. And that’s something that makes me feel very proud.

PM: You have experienced much loss in your life. Anyone who knows a little bit about your life knows that. And some amazing people have left you – and they have also clearly not left you. But already on *Horses*, on that first record, there is already this profound and also almost transcendent sense of loss in your protagonists. And...and...

PS: Well, I think it’s because...well, go ahead.

PM: I was going to ask you why, at that point in your life, you were ready to express such vulnerability and such strength?

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PS: I think it's because when I did *Horses*, my generation – I mean I was about 26 years old – and since I was a young girl... you know, I was a teenager when President Kennedy was shot. I was working for Robert Kennedy when he was assassinated. Martin Luther King was assassinated, and then other people that, you know, we put such faith in. In those days, we put a lot of faith in our rock and roll stars. There wasn't so much division as there is now. And people really looked to the musicians. They kept us informed musically and politically, and they kept us in touch with the cultural revolutions.

And you know Jimi Hendrix died, and Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison. And this was a terrible blow to my generation – to lose Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King and Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison in the space of two years. A couple of years, all of them. And Brian Jones. It was just... you know...so many hopes and dreams – that a certain type of unification through, you know, love and no matter how naïve it sounds, so many people believed in that. And then losing a lot of friends in the Vietnam War – I lost a lot of classmates. So by the time I was 25, it seemed like the whole idea was dying.

That's one of the reason I did a record. I mean, like I said, I wasn't a musician. Still, some times it amazes me that I actually even did a record. Because it never was one of my goals. I wanted to be a painter or a poet, but it just organically evolved that way.

And it was my way to summon certain people. Because 'Elegie' was written for Jimi Hendrix. The whole 'Land/Elegie' piece at the end was written for him. 'Break It Up' was written for Jim Morrison. 'Birdland' was written for Wilhelm Reich. It was a mirror into the culture of our time, or my particular time.

PM: That particular time – the late '60s and early '70s – is often

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described in stories about you and, in general, as a freer state. Is that true? Were the '70s really freer, more enabling times than the 21st century? Do we have so much less freedom now? I mean, it feels like it from my perspective, but I don't know how much of that is mythology.

PS: I don't think it was so much that there was freedom. It was that people were fighting for it and gaining it. It not that it just was sitting there. You know, homosexuals were fighting for freedom to be themselves, and freedom not to hide and be looked down upon. The women's movement was very strong. The civil rights movement was strong. We were trying to end the Vietnam War.

You know, I wasn't really part of the drug culture of the late sixties, so I couldn't really tell you so much about that, because I was living a different kind of life. I was going to school, and I was working in factories, working my way through school. I worked all the time, and I didn't have the lifestyle. I wasn't a hippy, you know. I was a person who studied art, studied poetry. I was culturally intelligent but I wasn't really part of my culture. I was more of a seventies person, even though I'm old enough to have been a sixties person. Because of the responsibilities I had in the '60s, I wasn't really part of the drug culture.

Also, I wasn't attracted to the drug culture. So I think it wasn't so much about the early seventies, not so much about freedom. It was about acquiring freedom. And that struggle produced a lot of great art. Once you have freedom, sometimes people forget how hard it is to get it, and they don't use it wisely.

We're in a very material time in our society where people imagine that freedom means they have a lot of things. You know, they might have the best iPhone, or they have the best computer, but you know, it's not really freedom. It's just a differ-

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ent kind of slavery. You're a slave to your credit cards or to the interest or whatever else, or to your stuff.

And I think that we're going to have to go through a re-examining process and try to get back to the place where – not where people were in the '60s, because I don't believe in going back in time – but to at least examine ourselves and think 'well, what makes me an interesting person', 'what makes me a good person?'

You know, right now, we're in this weird place where people are very materialistic. We're in a place where people are so concerned with their appearance that young people are getting plastic surgery. And it's just rampant...almost a disease. And really, the thing that will keep people young and beautiful is really working on their inner self. And no matter how corny it sounds, it's true.

PM: Fully!

You know, if you eat well, if you exercise, if you're positive, it doesn't mean you can't have fun, it doesn't mean you have to be square. But if you have a clean house inside, you're going to be a beautiful person anyway.

PM: That's great Patti. And it leads very beautifully to my last question which is really just about that. Do you think that, collectively, we're going to pull through as a planet? That we're going to manage to pull out of this and change our direction? And I must stress that I'm not asking you this as a prophet-poet but simply as a conscious human being.

PS: Of course I do. Because we're not just one generation. We're generation after generation after generation, and right now, we're in a very...I would say it's a very bad period. But there are good people within this bad period. We're not in a bad period where everybody is evil, or where everybody is buying

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into all this stuff. A lot of people are just confused.

I mean... the way things are, they're a lot worse than they were in the early seventies. It's an atmosphere that I recognize. It's the atmosphere that made me do *Horses*. Because I looked around and thought "What the hell's going on?," you know, "what's wrong with people?" They're forgetting who they are. And um, in some ways, we're forgetting who we are. New generations will make records or write poems or get involved in politics. There are always good people that are ready to make change. And you know, I feel discouraged sometimes, especially in my country – my country is very discouraging. But on the other hand, I just, I don't know what it is...but...I mean life is beautiful.

We have a relatively short life span. But of all the things that we can get, you know, all the material things, life is the best thing that we have. And if you're living and you're breathing, you have a chance. And I just think at any moment people can start turning things around. You know, for me, just the fact that you asked a question like that, I think is optimistic.

I think it's quite beautiful that you would ask me that question. It's like, you're what, 44? I'm 68 years old. So I forget...I still feel young. I don't feel like like your grandma I'm talking to you. You know – we're like two humans...not that there's anything wrong with a grandma. I'm just saying that I don't feel severed by that. Because what we're doing is we're communicating. And that's what...that's how change will be made. And uh...I don't know, it's a rough time. All I can say is you know, try to be happy and take care of your teeth.

(laughs)

Drink a lot of water. And take care of your teeth, because if you don't, it's really a drag when you get older. So keep your

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teeth clean. I really spend a lot of time talking to people about their teeth because my generation had the worst teeth and the worst dental care. And when you get older, it's a pain in the ass.

People think 'It's just your teeth' and so they're worried about their kidneys or their liver. But your teeth are really important. So, take care of your teeth as best you can. Drink a lot of water. Cultivate your mind. And try to be happy. Because the world is fucked up. I can't pretend, or say "Oh, it's not as bad as you think." Yes, dear, the world is fucked up.

And a lot of reasons it's fucked up is my country. But with all that, as an individual...I tell my kids too...you know...you like to think of yourself like a captain, and you've got this little boat. And sometimes the weather's good, and you're just sailing, and sometimes big storms hit, and you know, you're in a stormy sea, but just ride it out, ride it out. Because it's good to be alive.

Brenda Fassie

Memories of Ma Brrr

(2004)

The last time I saw Brenda Fassie I was saying goodbye to her. She was going through security at Durban Airport. Irished cappuccino in her hand (taken away from the smoker's bar upstairs), she was her usual dervish of a self. Half demon, half angel, she projected her force field of abrasive charm wherever she went, offering up a massive smile to whoever got in her way, and then throwing her eyeballs back slightly in a poised suggestion of don't-even-think-about-it. I gave her a big hug. I had been her "white boyfriend" for a little fling around Durban Airport, a last little show for Durbs to remember her by until next she returned.

And, of course, she never did.

A month ago, I wrote a column about the stupid, tragic death of Gito Baloi, who had been shot down in the mean(ing-less) streets of Johannesburg. I spoke about how our musical firmament is being decimated by violence, and also of how this is obviously a reflection of what is happening to our entire population. But Brenda, I said, was lucky. All she had to show for her recent robbery was bulletholes in her bedroom

windows. But now she, too, is gone.

And gone by very different means. Not even the hypocrisy of compassion can remove Brenda's love for substances from what has happened here. But she must have known that she was dramatically shortening her lifespan. She, for whom consequence was such a strange bedfellow, must have known.

But even at her most sober and considered, she lived like there was no tomorrow. I remember being with her on the edges of the Metro Awards Ceremony. Brenda, who so wanted to be at the centre of things, seemed so much more comfortable on the perimeter looking in. Me, holding her drinks and bags, this time the token white slave boy, she headed into the party, while people kept on moving, in small, slightly nervous fragments, towards her, giving her compliments, asking for autographs. I think my favourite memory of Brenda was her posing with the various policemen who littered the event. I would love to see those photographs, there was such an hilarious poignancy to the moment.

I don't know if Brenda ever actually realised how much people loved her, loved her for everything that she was. In the few times that I was with her I quickly came to realise that nearly everyone who approached Brenda with a small offering of worship, was essentially saying: "I Love You."

But the machinery of fame is caustic and brutal, and Brenda brushed off nearly all of them. "I hate blacks," she would say, and then, 20 seconds later, "I hate whites."

I remember her playing dangerous games with a large, extremely Afrikaans man in a bar in one of the beachfront's hotels. I remember her trying to persuade my straight-down-the-line sister to share her crack pipe in the toilet of the same hotel. I remember her abusing the patrons of the airport lounge.

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And I remember all these things with a warm, sad, smile.

One of her most beautiful songs is her ode to Madiba, 'Black President'. "We must pray", she sang, "for our black president". And millions followed her lead, and did so. Last week, another black president urged the country to pray for Brenda.

And undoubtedly millions did. Brenda was one of the most important and well-loved people in the country, but that was not enough for her. And, whatever the sad stories written about her, she was warmly loved by people in her inner circle. But, somehow, she just couldn't get enough of that love.

I'd like to think that perhaps in her last days on earth, some part of Brenda's spirit rose from her hospital bed and saw how many people were praying for her, how much concern there was for her, and, of course, how many newspaper headlines she garnered. In her death she piled up more column inches and front-page pictures than ever.

But beyond the needs to sell newspapers and, despite all her bad behaviour, Brenda had the love of ordinary people. I came home last week to find my maid Beatrice watching the sun go down with Thola Madlozi blaring from the hi-fi. "Brenda is not well," she said sadly. "I know," I said, and we talked for a little while about Brenda and then moved on to how things had changed in this country.

I pointed to a flock of birds that moved across the sunset. "I think they're flying to Europe." Beatrice didn't know about the migration patterns of birds. She was fascinated.

I said that it might be nice to be a bird, and she responded: "Yes, it must be nice to be a bird in the town, but in the townships they kill the birds for food." She said that her father had often fed his family on birds and rabbits that he killed with

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his small gun. They were so poor, there was nothing else to eat. But Thando, her beautiful little grandson, will have a far better life.

We stopped speaking as the sun went down and ‘Vulindlela’ – one of the most beautiful songs in the world from one of its most powerful voices – raged across the sky.

Goodbye Brenda. Goodbye.

PETER MACHEN is a writer, critic and artist from Durban, South Africa. Currently living in Berlin, Machen has been writing about South African and global culture for nearly 20 years.



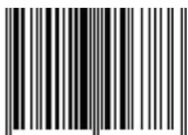
He has written for many of South Africa's leading publications, including *The Sunday Independent*, *The Sunday Tribune*, *Art South Africa*, *The Witness* and *The Independent on Saturday*, where he was Arts Editor during the early years of the new millennium. In recent years, he has expanded to online publications including *Salon* and *Aesthetica*. He has also worked as an art and film critic and recently spent several years as the director of the Durban International Film Festival, before moving to Germany to pursue a career in art and screenwriting.

Machen is the author of two books about his home town, *Durban – A Paradise and its People* (2007) and *Durban – A Return to Paradise* (2010). He currently lives in the east of Berlin with his two cats and heads the design consultancy The Communication Factory.



From South African arts writer, Peter Machen, *Notes from the South* is a collection of conversations with key counter-cultural voices in the first two decades of the 21st Century. From South African superstar Brenda Fassie to American independent filmmaker Larry Clark to punk icon Patti Smith, Machen's intimate interview style allows his subjects to reveal parts of themselves that are rarely expressed in public. Collectively, the interviews provide a cultural and political snapshot of life in this still new century, one that is given additional texture by several of Machen's columns and travel pieces.

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