

Nadine Gordimer: Mentor, comrade and friend



Nadine Gordimer and I met through the Congress of South African Writers in 1988 – round about the time when I joined. I would perform at quite a lot of their annual general meetings and various events and she really liked my poetry and music.

“Your message is more powerful when it’s just your voice delivering praise accompanied by the accent of your guitar – without the band,” she used to tell me.

But it wasn’t enough for me to just know how to play the guitar. She encouraged me to learn how to read music. So in 1989, I began taking lessons from a woman in her area. And she paid for those lessons.

I continued with the lessons for some time, but as you can imagine, during that time, politics, the struggle calling and performing got in the way.

It was Nadine’s way – she was like a mother to me – always guiding and advising, making sure I was on the right path and doing the right thing. It wasn’t like I was burdening her with my personal issues or asking her for financial support, no.

Quite a number of us who she was helping knew that when it was time for her to write she needed her space and didn’t like to be disturbed. She and that typewriter were inseparable. She was old school like that.

But when I needed a quote for a press release for a new album, she would give up her time unselfishly and send my record company what they needed. And as soon as my new album came out I would send her the first signed copy. And it would make her really happy.

Gatherings

A few of us would often gather as a group at meetings, workshops and poetry readings – Nadine, the late Dennis Brutus, Wally Serote, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Lesego Rampolokeng, Professor Njabulo Ndebele and me. There would be talk and the focus would be where we were as a country, where we needed to be ... She always encouraged us to do more – to do better for our country.

In the early years, it was Raks Seakhoa and Nadine who introduced me to Manifesto by Chilean activist and guitarist Victor Jara. She told me the story of how soldiers took him prisoner during the right-wing military coup in the 1970s, chopped off his hands so he couldn't play guitar any more, tortured him, and then killed him. His protest music and life inspired me to continue to write and perform.

Illiteracy rates are so high in this country and I use my words and the words of other writers to inspire, to rejuvenate flagging spirits so people don't despair, and to spread a positive message.

I recorded one of Nadine's poems, Face to Face, one of my favourites, and included it on the album I did with Jive Connection, Special Delivery. Her message was one of humility and of being one.

Wonderful memories

The last two times I saw her in the past year make for wonderful memories. On one occasion, I introduced her to Derek Schrier, a trustee of the African Leadership Academy and a friend of mine from San Francisco who was visiting South Africa. She, John Kani, Slumdog Millionaire author Vikas Swarup, Lance McCormack, Derek and I had tea together.

The other was at the Sunday Times Literary Awards tribute held in her honour last year. I was the surprise guest – and I didn't realise then that this occasion would be the last time I would perform for her.

She contributed so much to this country, highlighting injustices with her voice and through her writing. She was such a beautiful soul and we will miss her deeply. May her soul continue to shine from where she rests.

Poet and singer Vusi Mahlasela spoke to Zodwa Kumalo-Valentine.