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ALBIE SACHS Interviewed by HEIN WILLEMSSE, Cape Town 3 April 1992.

Albie, perhaps we could start by you giving a short biography of yourself.

I was born in 1935 in Johannesburg. My mother brought <sup>my</sup> myself and my little baby brother down to Cape Town, and I grew up at Clifton. It's a wonderful place. In those days it was a place for bohemian people. Uys Krige lived there, Jack Cope lived there, and one could live there very modestly and enjoy nature and be a little cut off from the hurly-burly. Clifton has featured in my imagination, my writings, quite strongly. When I was released from prison after my first detention, I ran to the sea and jumped into the waves at Clifton, and that featured in the *Jail Diary* that I wrote. And when I wrote *The Soft Vengeance*, the fantasy at the end, I imagined that I would be running on Clifton beach with Nelson Mandela, who was then in prison, at my side. When I came back to South Africa I just wouldn't consider living anywhere else. The fact that I'm surrounded by millionaires, completely out of my class, doesn't bother me. I'm hanging on in there. That's their problem.

I went to school in Cape Town. I went to university in Cape Town, and I went to jail in Cape Town, so my roots are here. I practised at the bar for nearly ten years. I had a ~~very~~ busy practice, because it involved a lot of civil rights work. This was in the fifties and early sixties. Then I was twice detained under security laws and eventually left on an exit permit in 1966. It was quite bitter, not only asking for an exit permit, but being angry with them when they delayed giving me a permit to leave the country, to leave the struggle, to leave the battle ground, as it were, of my being, my ideas, my spirituality, of everything. But once I took the exit permit there was no looking back.

*I regretted the decision to leave before I took it, never afterwards.*

Were you looking forward to something out there?

No. I left because it was just ~~sheer~~ hell. It was impossible to function. I had been detained twice. I had virtually no legal practice left. I was about to be disbarred. I was confined to a small area of Cape Town - except it was like being restricted to paradise because I could climb Table Mountain and swim in the sea. So if you've got to be banned, this is the place to be banned in. But politically we were smashed, and it was either go underground full-time or leave the country, otherwise we would have just faded out, *become*

*pathetic phantoms, zombies.*

You come from a very strong political family. Did this play any role in your <sup>makeup?</sup>

or 'Party'

Happy birthday.

It had an enormous role. Not so much in directing my ideas, but in establishing what really mattered in life. When I was leaving to go into exile, my mother showed me a little postcard my father had sent me on my sixth birthday. It was during the Second World War, and he said: "To my dearest son Albert. May you grow up to be a soldier in the fight for liberation. Your loving father, Solly". We lived very modestly, and values, ideas were much more important than possessions. And the vivacity of the people around, and who was respected. The people who were respected were people who had been trade union leaders, Moses Kotane, my mother worked for him, my mother was Moses' secretary. A.J. Naidoo was very friendly, and the excitement when they came round, preparing a special tea, for leaders of the people, it was a much more effective way of overcoming possible racism *than lectures or moral stories.*

That strikes me as a completely different history from the ordinary white person at that time.

Yes, <sup>and so -</sup> what was special for me was that I had the ordinary experience and the extraordinary experience all together. I went to a white school. I lived in a basically white neighbourhood. Cissie Gool was one of our neighbours, she

H.A.



# Modern Youth Society

used to baby-sit me at times. But by and large I grew up ~~in~~ <sup>in</sup> an anti-racist atmosphere, and there'd be great excitement, there'd be a strike on and people would come around buzzing and painting posters and preparing soup to take out. These were the things that animated that little world in which I was growing up. And they left an impact. But at school and for my first year at university I didn't want to know about active politics. I didn't want to feel my parents were telling me where to go or what to think. And the minute I met a young crowd at university with the same values, I just clicked straightaway. My peers, not something that was coming extraneously from belonging to a movement, but people who were also studying. I was also <sup>active in</sup> ~~active in~~ a group off the campus, and if you judge the character of a movement by the number of years its members spend in jail the ~~new society~~ <sup>new society</sup> was extraordinarily successful. Dennis Goldberg brought the average up a lot with twenty-three years, but almost all of us were in and out. And we're still friends and we're still active, and we're still full of, you can call them illusions if you like, or hopes, and we're achieving some of the things, ~~we believed in~~ <sup>then and still believe in now.</sup> Moving away from Cape Town, going outside South Africa, what was the impact of exile on you?

I don't even think of it as 'the impact of exile'. I was just living in another context. The context I'd lived in here was the context of growing up in a family ~~if you like~~ of rebels in white society, but with tremendous vivacity, and lively people and funny people and people full of stories and a lot of animation in that world, and this is one thing I remember from my childhood. Then establishing a career, and getting into the Movement and finding my own place as myself, as one of the 'people's lawyers.' I used to do some journalism for the *New Age* newspaper as well, and public speaking.

Then I was banned, and being a rebel in a racist and an authoritarian society, with the police raids and the banning orders and then the detentions getting progressively worse - that was one kind of identity, one mode of existence. ~~Then~~ <sup>Then</sup> exile was basically just an escape from a sense of uselessness, of incapacity to function in any way. I couldn't function as an ordinary member of white society. I couldn't function as a rebel. So it was a sense of just removing myself to another sphere. I was very down, especially after the second detention involved torture by sleep deprivation. I had written one book. I wrote a second book, *Stephanie on Trial*. It's not very well known. A very sad book, a poignant book. But in a way ~~that~~ <sup>it</sup> stands for that phase when the whole Movement was being crushed. It is the story of Stephanie Kemp and myself, the way we tried to hang on to a little bit of dignity, a little bit of resistance, ~~even~~ when everything was collapsing around us.

I was eleven years <sup>of my</sup> in exile, living in London. I never really recovered. I wrote books. I got a PhD. I broadcast. I had an active life, saw lots of movies, I went to a few concerts, occasional plays. I became impassioned with Wagner and I saw the whole *Ring* cycle. I kind of completed a European cycle. I wrote a book called *Sexism and the Law*, and that was my contribution, if you like, to English intellectual life. The only theme that reached me with anything like the emotion of struggle in South Africa was the whole issue, the dilemma, the contradictions, of sexism. I discovered in reading a book by Sylvia Panckhurst, a case that was decided in the '20's in the House of Lords, that finally decided that the word 'person' included woman. She said that ~~overturned~~ <sup>case</sup> sixty years of decisions in which English courts had held that women were not persons. Just a little footnote. I felt amazed. Here is something that is so prevalent and none of us lawyers knew about it. Something totally ignored. So I followed up those cases, and they're cases in the highest courts in the United Kingdom. And one even reached the Appellate Division in South Africa. At least the South African judges were ashamed. But English judges were said to be doing it for the protection of women, excluding them from being called persons. So I wrote a

book about that.

But in terms of subjective experiences; I saw the whole *Ring* cycle at the English National Opera. Marvellous production. And it's also wonderful to see English people passionate, which they were about Wagner, and enthusiastic. It was sung in English so that you could follow the story and feel the full richness of the drama. I read Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. These are the two huge mountain peaks that I had to scale before I left Europe.

*Was that a way of alienating yourself from South Africa, of escaping?*

No, no, no. On the contrary, it was a question of enjoying what Europe had to offer. I am a South African. I'm a member of the ANC, and that tie was never lost, and the knowledge that I would be back was never lost. It was a total, absolute conviction. Once one is clear on that, you can absorb external cultures very comfortably because they are not warring against your identity. I never lost my South Africanness. So having that certainty and being in the ANC helped very much in that connection. It meant that I could immerse myself in the world and the culture and the civilization where I was, without a sense of betrayal, or loss, or abandonment. On the contrary, I was enriching myself. I was having fun. And also conquering a kind of complex I think we all have in South Africa, that there is that towering mountain of European culture. You read *The Observer* and the people are so damn intelligent and smart and they use language so beautifully and they make all these references. And we feel so puny. So now I was climbing these intellectual Matterhorns, but doing it with joy. I adored the Wagner. If I had tried earlier I don't think I would have coped. I couldn't wait for it. Five hours for a performance was too little. I was sorry after five hours that it was over. I just plunged myself into it, it was a total experience.

each show

And the Proust. There are all sorts of theories about reading, but there's a kind of sensual, physical aspect. The actual book was a single volume, a very heavy thing that physically lay on me. I used a piece of silver paper to mark my progress. There is a certain element of pride just working your way through the damn book, and not reading it slowly and savouring it, reading it quickly, and stunning myself with the language and the thoughts and the ideas. Knowing that I am missing an enormous amount, not just because of translation, but because I'd rather get the heady, breathless, euphoric verbal sense, the high oxygen of the words, rather than savour the detail and nuance of his ideas.

the act of

*Albie what if you said this to someone who had a stereotypical image of the ANC as just a bunch of illiterate terrorists? Did this experience influence your sense of humanity?*

We had our hard times and difficulties

It all came from the same source. It came from South Africa. To enjoy what you're doing. I wasn't in exile, I lived in exile. I happened to be living somewhere else. I often had the thought: "I'm going to bring this back with me". But I also feel we must live where we are. We live in our bodies, we live in our communities, we live in our place, and we absorb whatever we can. So it's part of also not being a victim. I get a bit impatient with exilitis. People play with it. They feel sorry for themselves. In a way we were very privileged in exile. ~~In a way~~ But we were privileged because we weren't subject to further interrogations and being picked up and that ghastly fear. We were privileged in the sense that we were in touch with other languages and cultures and climes. Certainly we were much more privileged exiled in London than exiles in most parts of Africa were. ~~Living~~ <sup>with</sup> conditions were really harsh, where there was not much interchange and where there were all sorts of social difficulties. But we also had to have a certain inner pride and dignity to function, not to be lost in this other world, with other points of reference.

*After that you went to Mozambique, to an African country where most of the*

wherever we were, whether we were black or white

cultural Matterhorns weren't present in a European form but in another form. How did Mozambique influence you?

engagement, a lot of sparks

England didn't influence me at all. I picked up a lot of information there, practical stuff about arts councils and freedom of speech and things like that that are very useful. And I had a lot of fun, a lot of interest, a lot of emotional struggle, if you like, with certain ideas. I used to listen to the Third Programme when I was writing and I heard some wonderful music and marvellous talks, and those BBC voices and all the rest, which I am very happy about. I saw some great television programmes. And often I would say to myself: "Gee we've got to have this in South Africa". Studio debates, lively, open things. Good soap operas that really have strong, vivid, slightly larger-than-life identifiable figures.

But in terms of standing me on my head and really making me see the world in a different way, Mozambique was the place. For a number of reasons. It had just undergone a revolutionary transformation, it was a real revolution. The poor, in a way, took over in quite a profound sense. The non-racialism was extraordinary. England is very racist. It manifests itself differently from formal, institutionalised apartheid, but it's very racist. In Mozambique I felt like a human being for the first time. I didn't feel like a white rebel, or an anti-apartheid white South African. I never had to explain things, I just felt there I was involved. People would shout at me, I would shout at people, I would enjoy things. Very liberating, very wonderful. But more than that, they've solved a lot of cultural/national/creativity questions in practice. There was a very powerful "plastic arts" movement, that is sculpture, painting...

Malangatana and others...

Right, but much more than just Malangatana and Chissano, who are the famous ones. Twenty, thirty, forty artists supporting themselves. Probably more artists support themselves just from selling their work in Mozambique than in South Africa. They established a style. The whole debate about Euro-centred, Afro-centred hardly arose there. They were people of African origin, speaking African languages, living in what we would call the townships here, painting, sculpting, exhibiting at galleries, maybe beginning to make films, being sound recorders - they just wanted to express what was in their hearts, in their minds, to develop new forms, to sell, to be successful, to be good professionals. And the idea was to use all the inputs that you could, and not to make an artificial distinction.

not about the art but

We produced, I remember, a slide-show dealing with the murals in Maputo. What is a mural? It's public art, it's painted on a wall, using pigments and brushes and so on that maybe weren't there in traditional society. As Malangatana said: "we had a concept of aesthetic beauty before the whites came". He said as a kid he used to play with pieces of orange peel and glass sticks and make pretty pictures and patterns. He didn't even know that there was paint. In any event, we made the slide-show and then we showed it, and the big argument was about the sound-track. And some people said: "How can you have a saxophone playing jazz music in the background", and we used some Abdullah Ibrahim as well, "and you must have African music". So we said: "But this is African music. Who said Africans can't play saxophones?" People are getting tired of just hearing tambila xylophones and drums. It was wonderful to hear that, but ~~wrong~~ to be restricted only to that on all occasions because you're African, when people wanted to move ahead and create the way African people always created. So these things became very natural and easy for me.

piano

irritating

accepting the multiple inputs of our cultures?

Something else that became easier, and landed me in terrible trouble here, was we would criticise each other quite vigorously. So when I was asked to open an art exhibition here, Peter Clark and Rufus Bester and a third artist. Peter's work I loved because I'd known him from before. I We could

Willie

I should mention that it tended to be what we would call the white left who wanted to replace saxophones with marimbas

what you felt

Willie

as presented. it was unfinished.

I was on

tentative

recognise the style, but he'd moved quite a lot in terms of pictorial technique and presentation. ~~But~~ Bester was a wonderful discovery. The third artist, I just didn't like his work. ~~It was like a blind date.~~ Three artists, one of which I knew, the other one I discovered and liked. The third one, I could see great potential there, but it was unfinished work. He needed to be pushed, pushed hard. Now in Mozambique there would have been no problems. If you hadn't said ~~that~~, even if you were opening the exhibition, people would have said: "Gee, you're patronising. You're holding back. Why? Because you're white and he's black?"

I said to the artist: "I feel you've got to work much harder". And I mentioned some of the things the sculptors were doing in Mozambique about polish and finish and using the movement in the wood to tell the story and developing themes out of that. The audience were furious with me. How could I? I was robbing him of his moment of triumph. I was using my power as a privileged white to put down an underprivileged black artist. Now, eleven years in Mozambique, that kind of thing just did not arise. I was somebody just speaking to somebody else in the same field, and I would praise liberally and freely and I would criticise liberally and freely.

*Isn't there a sense in South Africa that white people ought not to say anything negative about black people because they haven't suffered, they don't know the struggle?*

It was whites who were angry with me. It wasn't blacks who were angry with me.

*Going back to "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom", where you said that South African art, literature and culture generally have this feeling of being dismal, being always in ~~the~~ black cloth. Do you still have that feeling after two years?*

No. But I like to feel that the paper contributed, not directly but indirectly, to legitimising fun, freedom, openness. Somebody came to me, in Cape Town, she put her arms around me and she said: "Comrade Albie, I was so happy when I read your paper. I love doing tap dancing, and I used to feel so guilty that I have this horrible bourgeois bias. And I read your paper and I had the dream that I would go to an ANC conference and jump out of a cake and do a tap dance". And I thought that's marvellous. Instead of those solemn things we have at ANC functions where you're made to feel that belonging to a Movement is a penance and you prove your revolutionary virtue by being as gloomy as anything.

But let me say one thing right from the beginning. I never said art and politics don't mix. People said that about my paper. I never said art should not be an instrument of struggle, and it doesn't rest with me to say that. I just said: "Let's stop saying, let's stop mouthing the statement over and over again, that art is a weapon of struggle".

*If you look at working-class life, struggle is an exuberant expression of vitality, whereas the middle-class notion of what it is to struggle is to have a straight face. And I think, especially in activist circles, that was the norm one took as the image of the serious activist.*

Somebody was telling me, she was in NUSAS some years ago, that they used to have a horrible thing called a "one-to-one." A one-to-one was when you were rebuked for a failure to live up to the high standards expected of a revolutionary. Once she wore lipstick, and a man, in fact, said: "This is a very serious matter. If you claim to be a feminist how can you wear lipstick?" So her reaction, of course, was to wear brighter lipstick. The interesting thing is that she's still there. I suspect the persons who were lecturing to her are not there, because for them it was all in the head. It was like a concept that you had to live up to,

not something that came from inside.

in private

5.

itself

Full stop."

Full stop."

The paper was presented to an ANC conference. Somebody there, (I wasn't there), said the best answer to it was: "Comrade Albie contradicts himself because his paper is an instrument of struggle". It makes the struggle more effective, wider and more ebullient. "I don't have any problems with that. We shouldn't say: "Art is a weapon of struggle". We shouldn't say: "Art is not a weapon of struggle". But what I was worried about was a tendency in our ranks not only to be very narrow and puritanical, but to reduce culture simply to being an instrument, and not to realise that in fact culture is a much more profound thing. It is actually more deeply political because it touches every facet of our lives, from our body language to the way we relate to each other.

Did people like Uys Krige and Jack Cope have any influence on you?

energy and fantasy

Uys had an enormous influence on me. In two ways. One was the sheer ebullience of his personality, the way he would talk. He was totally unsolemn. But also he broke out of the Anglo-Saxon mould of what culture is and who the points of reference were. He introduced me to Pablo Neruda. He introduced me to Lorca, to Latin America. Before that, what was Latin America? It was a continent that had one of the longest rivers in the world, that had the tango, that had some very high mountains, and that had banana republics and coups. Neruda was very important for me. I discovered him in Cape Town. Afterwards I went to Chile, I went to Neruda's house, it was like a pilgrimage for me. I enjoyed the ebullience of his house. It's a mad, crazy house. He built the house for his things, not put things into his house.

for me

you did not just analyse it and give it marks.

Uys was the one who did that. It was a totally different style from English literary criticism and approach to poetry. You lived it, you felt it. To me the big question was the connection between the public and the intimate. I was ~~was~~ thrilled to discover Shelley and Byron and more recently Auden, but I felt somehow unsatisfied. And poets like Lorca, and certainly Neruda, had a much greater dynamism and spoke to me far more powerfully than did any of the English poets. I took Neruda with me into the ANC. It played a very crucial part in opening my imagination at a stage when I was searching for something, I didn't quite know what it was. I found some of it in poetry, and then I found the living side in the struggle.

It's the same with people like Nicolds Guillen.

Guillen was the third one. But Uys's personality was important. He was a fun figure. Then he became older. People only knew the rather querulous, hypochondriac guy living on his past. I read an obituary written by somebody who only knew him then, and I was so distressed and angry because Uys really was a huge pioneer in South Africa in all sorts of ways, and a kind of natural non-racist and a liberated, progressive person. Jack was different. He wasn't liberated in terms of the flowing, easy, relaxed, spontaneous way Uys was. Jack was a thinker, his head was very strong. He was on a long, tall body, and he spoke with what we considered a rather Englishy, slightly posh voice. He was thoughtful. He shook me once. I heard swearing from him like I've never heard from anybody in my life. That was the journalist side of his background. He was quite an important influence, but ~~much~~ less so than Uys.

a steady one,

Coming back to South Africa. Some artists are asking: "Would we be required, in the future, to toe the Party line?" What is your vision of artistic freedom in the future? How can one protect that? Is it necessary to protect it?

I think it's necessary to have specified ground rules, to establish constitutional space for arts, for people to function and to feel free. This has been a very repressive society, in all sorts of ways. And I suspect we might get beyond racism before we get rid of authoritarianism. The habits of



They are found in all communities and in all political elements.

subordination, of fear, of obedience, of a kind of over-respect are very powerful. Part of discovering our South Africanness is dependent upon being much more comfortable, accepting a kind of openness, a pluralism and an interaction, and enjoying the variety of life experiences. We would be an impoverished society if we restricted ourselves to one kind of cuisine. Imagine if we all had to eat just boiled beef and carrots, and no curries, and no paps and no boerewors and no imported Mediterranean food, or whatever people like. The same applies to choice, experimentation and the comfort you get from sticking to things you know and like in terms of cultural output.

I think the wrong questions are actually being asked. Maybe I'm naive, but I don't envisage thought-control being a major problem. I don't envisage any kind of retribution or punishment or attacks on criticism or on satire. I don't see that really being on the agenda. I don't know what happened when I wasn't here. I understand that certain people involved with the cultural desk behaved, to put it lightly, in a very brusque way, maybe thinking that they were being good revolutionaries, I don't know. But the whole Movement's direction has been away from that towards much more openness, a kind of eclecticism. *There is a lot of humour and tolerance in the circles in which I move.*

To me the real problems are not related to that at all. The real problems are that we have an enormous cultural resource in this country. We have a musicality and a capacity for dance, thought and imagination that doesn't find real expression. I'm not saying that we have to suppress the received culture or the developed culture. On the contrary. I love Beethoven. I remember, one of the touching things in exile, meeting a very fine Chinese pianist Fou Ts'ong, who left China when pianos were burnt. He wanted to play Beethoven. That was the Cultural Revolution. It destroyed real cultural development there, just for the sake of an idea. I never supported that. I've had to change on a lot of things, but that I never supported.

One doesn't have to choose between Beethoven and forms of traditional African music or whatever. Our world, our culture, our interaction must be big enough for all of them. The problem is that we are smothering a vast cultural potential. It's in poetry, it's in dance, it's in song, and we are not giving it the vehicles for expression and performance and being recorded and transmitted and for growing.

*What are your thoughts in terms of developing that? Are you thinking in terms of Councils, of State funding?*

*what are needed.*  
It's a whole number of points of intervention and promotion and facilitation. Certainly the occasional community arts projects funded by a few commercial donors and international NGOs are not nearly enough. They've gained valuable experience, they've done a wonderful job, and one can see extraordinary fruits. But one wants something on a much bigger scale, that's much more promotive. One wants basic principles of good government that take everybody into account, *which* so that means everything from building cinemas to concert halls, to the whole place that culture will have in schools as an ordinary part of the curriculum, just something normal that is kind of *there*, to competitions - I'm not against competitions, they can be fun, when one doesn't have to do everything anonymously, one doesn't have to suppress any form of striving or individuality. There are also ~~some~~ alternatives - to NGO-supported community arts projects, to crazy artists doing their own thing, to people just making pots that don't help the world at all. *except add a touch of beauty.* We've got to be very open to a whole range of things.

But I do see a central role for regional arts councils, *only* that are funded by the State but independent of the State. At the moment we have almost the worst of all worlds, because they are part of the state machinery. They are appointed by the State, they are accountable to state departments, they are ~~very~~ top-heavy, and there are far too many administrators involved as compared to creative artists. They are restricted to four areas, and they are

Note: [leave dots to space ...]

locked into big complexes and buildings, and towns. The towns are there. I live in the town. I'm a city person. I also have my cultural rights. These performing arts centres, they're there. They were very expensive. Now the thing is not to close them down but to open them up. So we must take advantage of what's been done. But we have to find, if I can adapt a phrase of George Bush's, "a thousand points of light" - many, many points of cultural input. It might mean fewer expensive opera productions. It doesn't mean banning opera. If ever there was a country where opera has an enormous future, and dance, it's South Africa.

In South Africa there is the sense that South Africanism, South African culture never came to the fore. It was repressed in a number of ways. People feel that this has played a divisive role in our society. One important part of a future policy is actually bringing in people to bring what they have as South Africans. But how does one cultivate that sense of confidence?

It's confidence. I suffocate when I go to things that I love. It can be the City Hall Symphony Concert, and I see it's virtually a hundred percent white audience. It's wrong. I go to see the ballet. Who are the people who can dance in this country, who don't need professional training? It's not the people who are in the audience. The people in the audience just sit on their bums and ~~the~~ professionals dancing for them. We're cutting out something. The idea is not to suppress the ballet, but to open up dance.

The crucial thing is not bussing in spectators, ~~as~~ performers, when the performers come from all over, with aunts and uncles and daddies and neighbours and loves. Mimi Coertze did a wonderful job to bring Afrikaners to respect and enjoy opera. So we need performers. But I don't like this word "role-models". The sense of participation, the South Africanness, should be a natural one. I have made strong proposals to the Cape Town City Orchestra and to the Nico [Malan Opera House], saying: "Why not put on Beethoven's ninth symphony with choirs who are all South African?" What more wonderful thing than the Ode to Joy to express your South Africanness? And they did it.

Something people forget is the church choir. A lot of the experience there is of classical music. That's part of your development. Cape Town townships have these massive choirs and churches singing Ode to Joy, or The Messiah.

We have the best ears in the world. I mean musical ears. And the ear. We had a meeting, and the soprano starts, the basses come in, the tenors, people who have never heard the song before. This is one of the things I learnt in exile - there is no country like South Africa for musicality. It's in people's heads and ears. You grow up in a world where from childhood you're learning to sing. So if we can get that onto the stage, either through singing Verdi, that lends itself to it, or creating South African things, I think King Kong was a beginning. It was crushed deliberately by the Nationalist government. We have to go back to something that was emerging there.

In that sense exile is valuable, in the sense of points of reference. I can't wait for South Africans to discover Latin America, not just for tangos and sambas. Jorge Amado, a wonderful writer that just speaks so directly to South Africans. OK, Marquez has got a certain vogue now. But not just to say that Marquez was a genius who stumbled on this wonderful form. He emerged from a continental tradition. They were struggling for thirty, forty, fifty years to establish a Latin American literary voice. We're not doing that enough in Africa.

That kind of voice is just a ~~catch~~ realism, but there are so many other voices in Latin America as well, which we also can take as images of what is possible.

But it's not even copying them, it's the search that must follow, where you

stage

and operas

vocal

but allow performers to develop

from S.A. and William Zell: The Beethoven

Magical

not the results,





You don't know what the outcome might be

might be using a European language initially, but you're touching into the culture, the mythology, the everyday and the deep and the hidden thoughts and feelings and emotions of the community. We've barely started that.

We're talking about culture. What were your thoughts about the cultural boycott?

something apart.

I supported the cultural boycott. I supported it with a ~~very~~ heavy heart. Of all the aspects of our political programme, that was the one that cost me the most. But I saw it as part and parcel of a total project against apartheid. It couldn't be seen as something on its own. It's almost inevitable that artists will see the cultural thing as a sphere on its own, ~~and~~ in the lives of people it just wasn't like that. ~~It hurt~~, whereas other aspects of the struggle we used I felt enthusiastic about. This was one that cost me. One reason I'm pleased the cultural boycott's coming to an end is that we'll get away from talking about it. It has so dominated debate that we haven't got on to more profound and serious questions.

of our own continent?

The other point worth making is the self-imposed boycott that continues. We boycott Africa. What do we know about the sculptors, the painters, the film-makers, the clothes-makers, the musicians? Very little. There are wonderful clothes in West Africa that are comfortable, convenient, beautiful, and washable, and good for the African sun. We don't use them, we look to London. I'm not being an Africanist about it, I'm just speaking about sheer pleasure, variety, fun, beauty. And that's through a disdain for our own continent.

We boycott Asia. I was speaking to people who love music, who love films. They hadn't even heard of Kurosawa, they hadn't even heard of Satyajit Ray, who to me, if I had to choose two great film-makers of all time, I would probably select the two. Not to speak of the great art and literature.

In that sense South Africa is a colony. It has been bred to rely on the metropolis, that was the vision. Part of our struggle is breaking out of that particular mould.

Yes. Breaking out doesn't mean repudiating. It means you maintain those links, but you develop other links as well. Sure North America and South Africa, in some ways, have a lot in common. There is a lot of interaction, there are a lot of vibes, good ones and bad ones, that are going between the two sectors. And Europe. We are discovering Europe is more than just the United Kingdom. That's also very positive. And the Netherlands has got a big role to play, and France. I've found a lot in Portugal. I feel very at home and comfortable there. And Italy, and the countries of Eastern Europe, and the German culture. But especially areas we've boycotted completely. Latin America, Asia, and of course, our own people. The majority of South Africans, we boycott their culture.

The cultural boycott was brought very clearly into relief at the time of the visit of Salman Rushdie. For the first time, here was a major figure coming to South Africa, and Rushdie was banned from the country as a result of *Satanic Verses*. What are your feelings about the relationship between literature and religion, about censorship?

In general I'm against censorship. I think the starting-off point is that everything is permissible, and you mustn't protect readers, and you mustn't bar people from expressing what they want. I think it's a profound principle, ~~but~~ it's not a total one. The question of religious sensibilities is important and maybe especially important in South Africa, where there's been so much denial and where there's been a hegemonic religion. The question is what are the best ways of dealing with it? I think there are areas where one can call upon artists to impose voluntary bounds on themselves as a question of conscience

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both in itself and because talking about the boycott became a substitute for talking about culture.

violations of

because of the awareness of the consequences of their actions and the knowledge that what they produce can cause a kind of destruction that is against the very things that they intend. That's not a direct answer to whether Rushdie should have been invited or not. I feel in the light of the whole subsequent episode, it was just an anticipation of what became a ghastly situation. If he'd come here it could have been ~~very~~ tragic. And so there were ~~very~~ powerful pragmatic reasons for not insisting on going ahead.

*What you're saying is that when it comes to religion, areas of communal intercourse, it becomes very difficult for the government to legislate, or for the government to draw the line.*

The biggest problem I have is not religious sensibilities. The biggest one is pornography. Not because of the sexually explicit character. I would favour more openness with sex, and people can live with their fantasies. But there is often a lot of degradation and humiliation involved, and that is a degree of offensiveness that I feel people are entitled to ~~reject~~, because that is actually injuring people. And I'm not sure about the answer to that.

What I would say is we don't want prior censorship. We don't want administrative boards deciding on propriety. But there could be a role for restraints, and for the courts coming in according to certain criteria that are laid down in advance in terms of offences against ~~dignity of that kind~~. It's very important that if any law like that is established, there is maximum participation and involvement and that people don't adopt maximilist, totalist positions, but try to find some kind of ground rule that will at least minimise the dangers and achieve the maximum consensus.

*What is your interaction currently with writers in South Africa? What are your feelings about the prospects we face?*

yet the breakthrough has

We are in a rather strange period where there is a huge sigh of relief that the direct repression of the past is over, and it's almost paralysed people. They don't know what the intellectual project really is now. A certain lack of energy, a lot of regrouping, a lot of preparing for life, as it were, which is actually quite positive, people professionalising themselves a little, thinking in terms of jobs, careers, possibilities that didn't exist before. That's all very good. A certain measure of apprehension. It's maybe because truly in my heart I don't believe that there's any serious chance of a government coming to power that's going to order people to toe the line, that I don't take that issue as seriously as I should. But there is a lot of concern about that. It just doesn't correspond to the people I know in the Movement, and the kind of things we talk about and what we like ourselves. I don't find the sort of narrowness *many artists are worried about.*

There's a lot of concern about the whole question of language. It's a ~~very~~ difficult one. We're going to need to do a lot of talking together on that. The question of language rights. But to have language rights without the possibilities of expressing them and the material base for doing it is also ~~very~~ *demoralising*. The cultural question is the central one, in the sense of culture dealing with identity, freedom, tolerance, exchange, and also sensitivity to poverty, to oppression to humiliation - all that comes into culture.

It's a wonderfully open period with immense possibilities, because what we have are three things meeting. On the one hand we have a community resource. ~~I~~ ~~have~~ the image of a subterranean lake & popular community culture that's ~~very~~ powerful but has ~~little~~ little chance of finding expression. Secondly, we have a capacity for amplification, reproduction, stage and performance, travel, projection, that's ~~quite~~ quite highly developed in terms of the technology, the stages, the lights, the media and international contacts. And thirdly, we have ~~a~~ commitment to a rather open, rather pluralistic and basically profoundly democratic political,

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cultural, artistic system. So I'm extremely optimistic in that sense, but then I am an extreme optimist. But then I'm here. If I hadn't been an extreme optimist I wouldn't be here. We fought for certain things. They came true. We're going to fight for other things. I think they'll also come true.

Your sense of revenge, does it exist?

I wasn't a good freedom-fighter,

I used to think there was something wrong with me, I didn't have a sense of revenge. What's the matter? And then I discovered Mandela hasn't got a sense of revenge and Sisulu hasn't got a sense of revenge and Oliver Tambo, who lived all those years in exile, doesn't have a sense of revenge. So I discovered in fact, maybe it's part and parcel of the philosophy of our Movement. We want to move on. We don't feel we were victims. We voluntarily chose a certain course. Fate hit us hard, but it was a fate that we challenged, so we can't complain about the blows, ~~we felt in that sense.~~ And the real revenge, as I said in *The Soft Vengeance*, is to achieve the kind of world that we always had in our dreams, or at least move closer to it. That's a much more powerful revenge than chopping off someone else's arm or sending someone else to prison, which really doesn't assuage anything or compensate at all.

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