

Interviews

At the Edge: An Interview with Ronnie Govender

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Introduction

Durban playwright, director and author, Ronnie Govender, received the 1999 Commonwealth Writer's Prize for his collection *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*. The stories, his first shift towards the prose genre after sixteen plays, explore the lives, tragedies and pathos of the South African Indian community and are set in the 1960s, the time of forced removals and open repression by the white Afrikaner regime. His oeuvre¹ includes successful plays like *The Lahnee's Pleasure* (1974), *Swami, Off-Side, In-Side* (1949), *At the Edge* (based on his collection of short stories) and *The 31 Million Rand Robbery*. Govender's awards include the AA Vita Award for Life-long contribution to the theatre, Playwright of the Year Award for *At the Edge*, and more recently the English Academy Medal for his contribution to South African English literature. Govender has been invited to stage his play *At the Edge* at theatre festivals in Grahamstown (a festival noted for its marginalisation of black artists during apartheid), Edinburgh, Glasgow, Toronto, Delhi and Chennai.

Govender was born in Durban in 1934 and spent his entire youth in Cato Manor, with his mother and grandmother 'spinning' stories for him and his siblings. His interest in storytelling and theatre was certainly fuelled by the impression these childhood stories made on him. He is a descendant of the 1860s Indian settlers who came to work in the sugar plantations of Natal, the so-called indentured labourers. In his fiery early adulthood Govender believed that no writer in South Africa should remain uninvolved in the struggle against apartheid; to this end he did pioneering work for several anti-apartheid sporting, cultural and literary organisations.

¹ Govender's plays include *Beyond Calvary, Swami, His Brother's Keeper, The First Stone, The Lahnee's Pleasure, Off-Side, In-Side, Blossoms From the Bough, The Jamal Syndrome, At the Edge, Your own Dog won't Bite you, Too Mucking Fuch!, Back-side, and The 31 Million Rand Robbery. At the Edge and other Cato Manor Stories* is Govender's first collection of short stories.

With all his accomplishments one would have expected Govender to have enjoyed considerable renown by the late 'nineties, yet he is little known outside his home province—an ironic consequence of his staunch support for the cultural boycott in previous decades, when he consistently refused to be co-opted into racialised theatre institutions.

I interviewed Ronnie Govender in my office at the ML Sultan Technikon, Durban, on May 9 2000.

Rajendra Chetty (RC) Some of your earlier plays like *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, *Off-Side* and *In-Side*, fall into the protest sub-genre. How did you handle the tensions between politics and aesthetics in your writings?

Ronnie Govender (RG) There were even earlier plays like *The First Stone*, *His Brother's Keeper*, *Nineboy* and *Swami*. The debate between politics and aesthetics is still very current in South Africa mainly because the establishment media is still dominated by critics whose perspectives were born out of a supremacist ideology. I dare say that some black critics also working in the same media followed suit with even greater alacrity. There was a time during oppression when plays did not deal with South African realities. White purveyors of theatre and their black bourgeois underlings looked to the Europeans, ignoring the fact that while these plays were universal, they sprang from the particular and the local.

The majority of South Africans were made to feel inferior and many internalised this sense of inferiority. Thus you were something of an outsider, even in your own community, if you wrote about anything local or about South African realities. That wasn't a deterrent. In fact it spurred me on. Writing about these realities or basing your work on these realities did not mean that your work did not speak to the larger world or was not aesthetically pleasing. I refused to allow myself to be circumscribed by the prevailing twisted logic. Of course, one could so easily have succumbed to it and some did, as in the case of Ansuah Singh's play² which white liberals made so much of because it pandered to their view of the Indian middle classes being charmingly exotic creatures, as long as they kept their distance.

At that time, straying from this line of thinking was a risky business. If you strayed from the norm you were immediately accused of encouraging a culture of mediocrity. Who sets these norms? Who defines these terms? In the main they are people who have specific political and social agendas, and class interests. We must

² Ansuah Singh was the first South African Indian writer to write a novel. Her oeuvre includes *Behold the Earth Mourns* (1960) and *Cobwebs in the Garden* (1966), published by Drakensburg Press, Durban. The play was an adaptation of the first text.

always be vigilant about these lurking agents of reaction and constantly challenge their convenient assertions.

RC In terms of the aesthetics of the English language, you have used the South African Indian working class patois extensively in plays like *The Lahnee's Pleasure*. Any reasons for that specific language usage?

RG It was necessary to take patois out of its private life, the self-conscious domain and give it a legitimacy beyond the proscenium arch, once the preserve of the malleable middle-class, badgered into soulless conformity by a dominant culture. One can say that this is not the King's English and therefore is not literature. What, pray, then is the metaphor of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy*, the poems of Dumbudzo Marechera, or of Reggae poetry? Is this not the very strength of the English language, that it can so deeply touch and link the hearts and minds of people through its elasticity and dynamism?

However, it was inevitable that once the torch had been lit, many false bearers would attempt to carry it out of sheer opportunism. Once it was demonstrated, as *The Lahnees Pleasure* did with overwhelming success, that patois would strike a ready chord in its audience, the vultures moved in and exploited it for commercial gain, as, I am afraid, they are still doing. A spate of mediocre plays have since debased patois to the point of ethnic ridicule, caricaturing accents rather than capturing speech patterns and turns of phrase and by appealing to the lowest common denominator for laughs. In our culture of racial and ethnic stereotyping, this vulgar practice continues without compunction even in advertising in documentaries and soaps on national television and radio. I once turned down an invitation to write sequences for the local television soap opera 'Generations' because the leading Indian and Coloured characters were stereotyped as either money hungry swindlers or as hopeless drunks. The challenge is to contextualise this adaptation of language in such a way that in speaking from the heart its innate dignity and power transcends the barriers which, ironically, English as a tool of imperialism, had itself created.

There is also the tendency when dealing with patois to confuse language with accents. Some accents are easy on the ear, some are difficult to comprehend and some are funny. If you listen to the accents of a Welsh speaker of English and those of an earlier generation of South African Indians, there is not much of a difference. Yet unlike the Indian accent, the Welsh accent is not perceived as being funny. Local white comedians have often, with sadistic delight, shored up their pathetic repertoires with very broadly caricatured Applesamy and Naidoo accents.

Dialects, however, bring a dimension to language that often enhances that language and can therefore have a literary legitimacy. In the metaphor of the patois there are charming turns of phrase which reflect warm familiarity and intimacy as

with such sincere invitations as: 'Howzit bro, let's vie pozzie and catch a chow'³.

A playwright of integrity avoids playing to the gallery and appealing to the lowest common denominator. There are those, however, who use an accent that is looked upon as belonging to the lower classes and exploit it for the sake of cheap laughs. The problem is that legitimate, skilful and honest usage of patois is unfortunately lumped in with the former. The most profound and moving moments in the theatre for me were during a performance of *At The Edge* at the Edinburgh Festival when Scottish women wept during the story which arose from an experience I had at my grandmother's temple in Cato Manor and yet there were elements of patois in all the stories. There was an immediate communication across time, location and language.

RC Which writer, if any, did you admire most and had the greatest influence on your writings?

RG I think somebody who won my admiration, in my youth particularly, was Arthur Miller who wrote *A View from the Bridge* and *All my Sons*. The latter was an exciting play, a deeply moving one. Philip Roth is another exciting writer whose *Portnoy's Complaint* must be one of the most widely read novels of all time. Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal have had an immense impact on social and political imperatives in my writings. Then there are Wole Soyinka, Bertolt Brecht, Rabindranath Tagore, Dambudzo Marechera, R.K. Narayan, Rohinton Mistry, J.M. Coetzee, Arundathi Roy and Njabulo Ndebele.

RC You were able to straddle the genres of drama and prose (specifically short stories) with ease. How do they differ in the actual writing?

RG The challenge in writing plays is brevity. The more economical the language, the more powerful the play. One has to be very disciplined in the use of words to catch a whole world within a hour and a half. This discipline, I think, has helped me with the short story genre because here too you cannot have the luxury of verbosity. The novel appears to be a different kind of animal.

RC Apart from *The Lahnee's Pleasure* that was published in 1980 by Ravan Press, none of your other plays have been published. What are the reasons for this?

RG Publishing houses were not interested in publishing my plays. Although I was a member of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW), I could not push

³ Translates into: 'Hello brother, let us go home and have something to eat'.

my own personal agenda in this institution, in terms of getting my own works published when the imperative was the struggle and encouraging and enhancing the writings of others. Getting published was not easy during the 'seventies and 'eighties. I tried a few times with the establishment publishing houses but was not successful. In fact, my autobiography was turned down by David Phillip Publishers because only the life narratives of eminent people were accepted and I did not fall into that category.

RC Which are your favourite works from your writings? Why?

RG I always hesitate to answer this question which I have been asked a number of times. Writing as a process is almost like giving birth. It's something that belongs to you and you feel deeply about and for it. Do mothers have favourites among their children? However, there are times when you know you have rushed something and it is not your best work.

RC I'm sure that one of the pieces of writing has given you greater enjoyment than the others?

RG *At The Edge*, for many reasons is a work that I've felt very deeply about. Perhaps, because this work is so close to the hearth I was reared at. I was born in Cato Manor and spent my youth there. Its destruction was traumatic and I think my outrage actually served to intensify my already strong sense of belonging to the district.

RC How have the critics received your writings? Have critical responses informed your subsequent writings?

RG With the possible exception of Johannesburg, we do not have a sound critical tradition in the media in this country. This is particularly so in Durban where critics in white owned media generally see things from a Eurocentric perspective. This is confounded by a shallowness, which I believe is occasioned by a resistance to the world of ideas, resistance to anything that challenges or has depth of feeling and thought. A questioning mind was dangerous to the apartheid regime. And so there was this resentment against anybody who dared to speak out or who sought to locate their writing in the realities of the day; if you did they'd immediately pigeon-hole you. I have often been the target of these spineless conformists, even to this day.

In the 'sixties my play *Beyond Calvary* broke new ground. It was hailed by the likes of Fatima Meer, Alan Paton and other intellectuals and artists. A lively discussion between myself, the actors and the audience took place after the play.

Apart from a very enthusiastic response from such knowledgeable people, it was pointed out that the play was of historical importance and that it was a most significant development in black theatre. I expected the press to, at least, reflect these views. However, the only mention of the play was in *The Natal Mercury*, a three to four line comment in eight point print merely stating that the play was based on a conflict of religions. It was far more than that. Besides this, there was not a single review.

The playwright creates from his being, he creates within a certain reality. If you located your characters in South Africa, you couldn't ignore the fact that apartheid touched their lives whether they were white or black. Realism demanded an honest look at life. When work so rooted unfolds on stage it strikes a chord in the audience and the reaction is often spontaneous. Yet these critics have chosen to ignore this excitement concentrating instead on what they consider to be political.

In 1989 I eventually accepted an invitation to the Grahamstown National Arts Festival which we had boycotted until then. Our objection to the Festival was that the Grahamstown Foundation's Charter was clearly a colonial document and the Festival itself was Eurocentric. However, after my play *At The Edge* was invited to the Baxter to be part of the People's Theatre Festival and the Congress Of South African Writers (COSAW) had taken a decision to participate in such structures with the aim of transformation in mind, we accepted the invitation to Grahamstown. The critic Humphrey Taylor was most patronising, describing the play as a collection of short stories that lacked conflict. He couldn't see—or refused to see—that indeed every one of those stories concerned a conflict. He did the same several years later when *1949* was staged at the Festival, although he was in the crowd when the entire audience gave Charles Pillai (the actor) a standing ovation.

RC What do you see as the reasons for your exclusion from the Writers' Festival organised by the University of Natal, especially in view of the fact that your writings have won international awards like the Commonwealth Writers' Prize?

RG Although I was tempted to respond publicly to my exclusion, I did not. We have precious few such festivals and I feel that we should give them as much support as possible but the organisers would do well to realise that such festivals are not there for the exercise of personal whims and fancies. The Festival belongs to the country, to the writers. Despite extending invitations to international figures these people want to keep it insular and small. It was not simply a question of inviting Ronnie Govender to the Festival, it was the snubbing of a book that dealt with a district on the University's doorstep. In fact, some of the land which University extensions were built on is land expropriated from Indian owners through the Group Areas Act. This was in fact the University saying, we don't give a shit about the destruction of Cato

Manor, let alone not recognising a book that won a prestigious international prize.

RC You have won the English Academy Medal for your contribution to South African English literature as well as the AA Vita Award for your contribution to the theatre. As a celebrated South African writer, would you like to comment on the literature curriculum of both the academe and the schools that continue to exclude local writings?

RG The civil service is clogged with people who continue to resist transformation. It is only a matter of time before they are replaced. In education, such people have resisted the selection of works by black writers to be used as school textbooks. Despite this, black teachers had a responsibility to be actively involved in the selection of readings, which they failed to live up to. White teachers continue to ensure that the syllabus of old is retained for as long as possible. However, we are beginning to see some changes. I am told that eventually my book has been recommended as a school textbook.

RC Are you optimistic that things are going to change?

RG Oh, yes, I have a great deal of faith in the future. I think we have laid the basis for many important social and cultural initiatives. Some very constructive, far-reaching laws have been passed in the fields of women's empowerment, redistribution of land, education, labour and such crucial areas. The seeds have been planted for a true human rights culture. While the foundations are being laid, it is incumbent on ordinary South Africans to become involved as part of the process instead of forever whining. For young people interested in the theatre there are more opportunities opening up in television and industrial theatre, let alone films. However, the State needs to do far more to support individual artists in the various disciplines.

There is a greater awareness of theatre that reflects South African realities. We are beginning to tell our own stories, taking a great deal more interest and pride in ourselves. We still, however, have to be constantly vigilant about neo-colonial influence through the medium of American video film and music and could well take a leaf from the Australian experience.

RC What are the reasons for the shift towards popular commercialism with plays like *The 31 Million Rand Robbery*? Incidentally, it holds the Playhouse attendance record at 93%!

RG One of the objectives in staging this production was to make money for the Playhouse during the festive season. The play had music, dance and the kind of

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humour that appealed to all audiences. It made people laugh loud and long, one of the most difficult things to achieve on stage.

I asked myself what would catch people's attention and decided it would be the R31 million robbery which had caused a major stir. There were things about the play that escaped most critics' attention. Either that or they must have been upset by the play's focus on these issues. The police force was undergoing transformation at the time. Within the force there were still cops who belonged to the old era, the Neanderthals whose first response was to bash up suspects, to really manhandle them. Those suspected of the robbery, because they were Indian, were removed to the Bluff Police Station which was peopled mostly by Afrikaners, and they got bashed. The attorney acting for them told me how he desperately had to get to the station in time to remove them from the clutches of these chaps.

Now this is in no way to condone the robbery, especially where policemen are involved, but it is important to stick to a human rights culture no matter how trying this may be at times.

Although I am not partial to spectaculars, this musical was a challenge. Unlike the critics, the people enjoyed it immensely.

RC Would you like to comment on the tension that I have picked up with South African writers of Indian descent who do not wish to be labelled as Indian writers?

RG Although at various times, I have been described as an Indian South African, a South African Indian, an Asiatic, a char ou, a coolie, I know that I am a South African. So entrenched is the stereotype that the unwary can easily be trapped into the sense of displacement which hovers over migrant and expatriate communities. I know very little about Indian theatre. I am a South African playwright. I've never heard Athol Fugard being described as a European playwright, or Mbongeni Ngema as a Zulu playwright. I have no doubt about my South African-ness and I resent any suggestion that I'm not African or South African. The South African Indian has been lumbered with nasty stereotyping. He or she has to be a greasy shopkeeper, newspaper vendor, fruit seller, factory worker. He can't be a soccer player or writer.

RC Comment on the category called South African Indian writing.

RG After the success of my play, *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, at The Market Theatre, I was asked by a keen young Afrikaner reporter to tell him about Indian theatre. I said I had no idea at all and he looked at me perplexed. I patiently explained that I was a South African writer, not an Indian writer. Of course, I have located my writing in places like Cato Manor and, naturally, the people there—in

terms of the government's laws at that time—were of Indian descent, but they were no less South African. I was familiar with this location, with the people. This does not mean that in doing so, one's vision is limited. In the local and the particular is the universal; the challenge is for the writer to capture this. R.K. Narayan has written about a small community of people in the tiny village of Malgudi and yet his writing speaks of the world, to the world.

In writing about a particular people, a particular community, one must be careful not to entrench ethnicity or racialism but indeed to challenge and expose such tendencies. Yes, in that respect there is a category for what you call South African Indian writing.

RC What have you been reading recently?

RG I have just finished reading three excellent books, *Redemption Song* by Mike Marqusee, *Night Beat* by Mikal Gilmore and *Primary Colours* by an anonymous writer. *Redemption Song* is an extraordinary work on the fascinating life of the boxer Mohammed Ali. *Night Beat* is a marvellous history of rock and roll and, believe me, I just could not put down *Primary Colours*, an inside story of a United States presidential campaign in which the principals uncannily resemble the Clintons.

Redemption Song shows you another side of Ali, his role in the struggles of the African-American people and the protest period of the 'sixties, the time of the Beatles, Bob Dylan and the Flower Children.

RC You are currently working on your autobiography. Would you like to comment on the work in progress?

RG I am midway through the first draft. I hesitate to call my work an autobiography. It sounds a touch pompous. I have only had one book published and fourteen plays produced. Besides can one really write an autobiography, can one really publicly expose one's life, completely naked, every little detail? I prefer to call it a reflection on certain aspects of my life, on people I have interacted with and events and movements I have been associated with.

RC Do you find that there are certain incidents, certain parts of your story, that you are not telling? That's a big tendency in an autobiography.

RG Of course there are things in my life which shall remain private. At the Pan-Canadian Writers' Festival I had occasion to question the approach of an interesting young writer of Chinese extraction during a seminar. The young lady had written a novel based on her life which had established her as a writer of stature. She asserted

that one had to tell all, even if it exposed every little personal detail, no matter whether it cast people in a bad light or whether it hurt them or not. My response was that we could not play God with other people's lives. However, this does not mean that I spare quislings and opportunists who benefited by playing the game with the apartheid regime.

RC What message do you have for the readers out there?

RG The message is in my writing, although I would prefer to think that my work, far from being didactic is celebratory. Let's celebrate this life for death is a cold reality. 'Do not go gentle into that good-night/ Rage, rage against the dying of the light'. We take things for granted. We take life for granted. We are all going to die. You're gone, full stop, end of story. We have no idea what comes after death, if anything at all comes after it. Religions tell us that the soul does not die and I would love to cling to such notions as reincarnation. But notions of the after-life blind us to the fact that we are mortal. Yet we mortals have an immortal consciousness, the imperative that drives the truly great souls of this world: Sankaracharya, Christ, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Madame Curie, Mandela and those unknown heroes and heroines who have striven unselfishly to make this world a better place for generations to come. This moment, as we are talking now, will never come again. If we understand that we will appreciate every moment of our lives. This sounds a bit maudlin, but listen to Pablo Pascal, the world's greatest cellist. When he turned ninety, he was still playing his cello and was still a happy man. When somebody asked him, 'How is it that you are so happy?' he said, 'When I get up in the morning I stop to smell the roses'.

RC We have now entered the new millennium. Where do you see writers coming from?

RG Writing is informed by realities, by the environment, by interaction. Those who have felt challenged by writing that does not ignore realities, that celebrates the local, that sees the universal in the particular, constantly emphasise the paranoid question, 'Now that you have written about the struggle and it is over, what are you going to write about?'

Writers will always come from that place where Olive Schreiner, Doris Lessing and Sol Plaatje have come from. I think their concern was for life itself, they revelled in their own humanity and rebelled against the things that curtailed that humanity, both in their personal lives and in their writing. And who says the struggle is over? The struggle is still continuing and if the pain of helpless people does not inform your writing whether you are writing a love story or about an experience in

Iceland, you are limiting your canvas.

Of course, there was one-dimensional, protest writing during the anti-apartheid struggle. That's the kind of writing which, while serving a purpose then, really has nowhere to go now. This in no way reflects on the political writing of, say, Athol Fugard. *The Island* was staged recently in London to rave reviews. Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* and *The Crucible*, and Shakespeare's *Richard III* have all been born out of political issues but are timeless in their universal appeal.

RC Is there any place for the theatre of the oppressed within the South African democracy?

RG Very much so. Not only in South Africa but in third world countries there is massive poverty. You could choose to write best selling romantic novels, ignoring these realities. You could also write one-dimensional plays which will inevitably fail. You could also become a pseudo-intellectual hermit railing against the human condition in pervasive tones of self-despair. Or, you could look at life honestly, into the hearts of the beggar man, the thief, the prince, as Rohinton Mistry does in *A Fine Balance*. The theatre of the oppressed is about the eroding effects of poverty as much as it is about the human condition.

References

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