

Free King Lear! ...and his friends

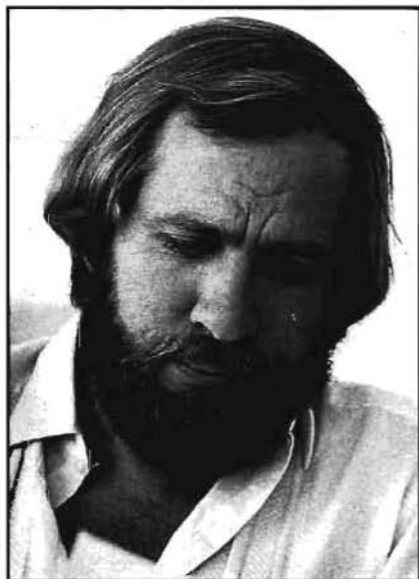
Manie van Rensburg

I have always made films in South Africa. I made a deliberate decision to stay in this country and as with all decisions of this nature I don't know what I would've felt and achieved had I decided to leave the country of my birth.

One is under constant pressure if one makes films. It's the nature of the beast. In South Africa, however, these pressures are quite unique. There is the obvious pressure of State censorship. This goes much further. It is within the government's power to withhold permissions to film on state property. It is against the law to film or even to take a photograph of a prison. A policeman can only be portrayed after the police have approved a script, and even in that case, the actual filming of police sequences must be done under police supervision. It is therefore obvious that if a film is seen as undesirable by the government, it can go to great lengths to make the production extremely difficult if not impossible.

There is a second unique pressure when one considers making a film in South Africa. It is never prescribed; however, there is an unseen and unwritten pressure to only make films about the country's dilemma. The inequalities, the injustices, the oppression, the existence of apartheid and its dramatic effects make for high drama. But there is a subtle pressure to exclude all other possibilities. It could seem ridiculous to make a film of King Lear while the black townships are burning. It seems like sacrilege to ignore the suffering, of especially the black people, in any film one makes in South Africa.

But if we have to lock up King Lear because he is not relevant to the present



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Film-maker

process in our society, it will indeed lead to a poorer film culture.

The lines have become blurred. It has been proved that a film with a heavy anti-South African content can easily find a world market. This has led to a number of people exploiting apartheid and marketing it successfully to an unwitting world audience. It is a fact that "anti-apartheid" has become a multi-million dollar industry worldwide. It has become difficult to distinguish the band-wagoneers from film-makers of integrity and commitment.

South Africa is a complex society with extremely complex problems and many illusive answers.

I am in the process of making a film called "TAXI TO SOWETO". At the end

of the run of the play, "TOWNSHIP FEVER", I took over all the corrugated iron used for the set. I was sure that it would come in handy in "TAXI" and stored it in the backyard. Three days later the requests started. Now the original set for "TOWNSHIP FEVER" houses a family in Soweto. This is a story worthy of a film. But the filmmaker must try and open a window to show the world this total society through the images he captures on his film.

Here another problem arises. A world has been fed on millions of selective television images of South Africa. It will only identify with the stereotypes it knows. An international audience seems to need no more complexity in a film than the white man beating, torturing and killing the black man; the black man killing and burn-

ing his fellow black man. These images are true, but they are only a few of many other facets of the country. The problem is that when different images are shown, the filmmaker is easily perceived as an apologist for the government.

The challenge for the South African filmmaker is first and foremost, like anywhere else, to make a good film, to explore all levels of South African society, to be intolerant of any form of discrimination and not to lose the various shades and textures of South African life in this process.

The struggle for freedom and democracy must be furthered, but art must be allowed to blossom in its own soil.

But the greatest challenge for the filmmaker in South Africa is to make films and stay sane at the same time.