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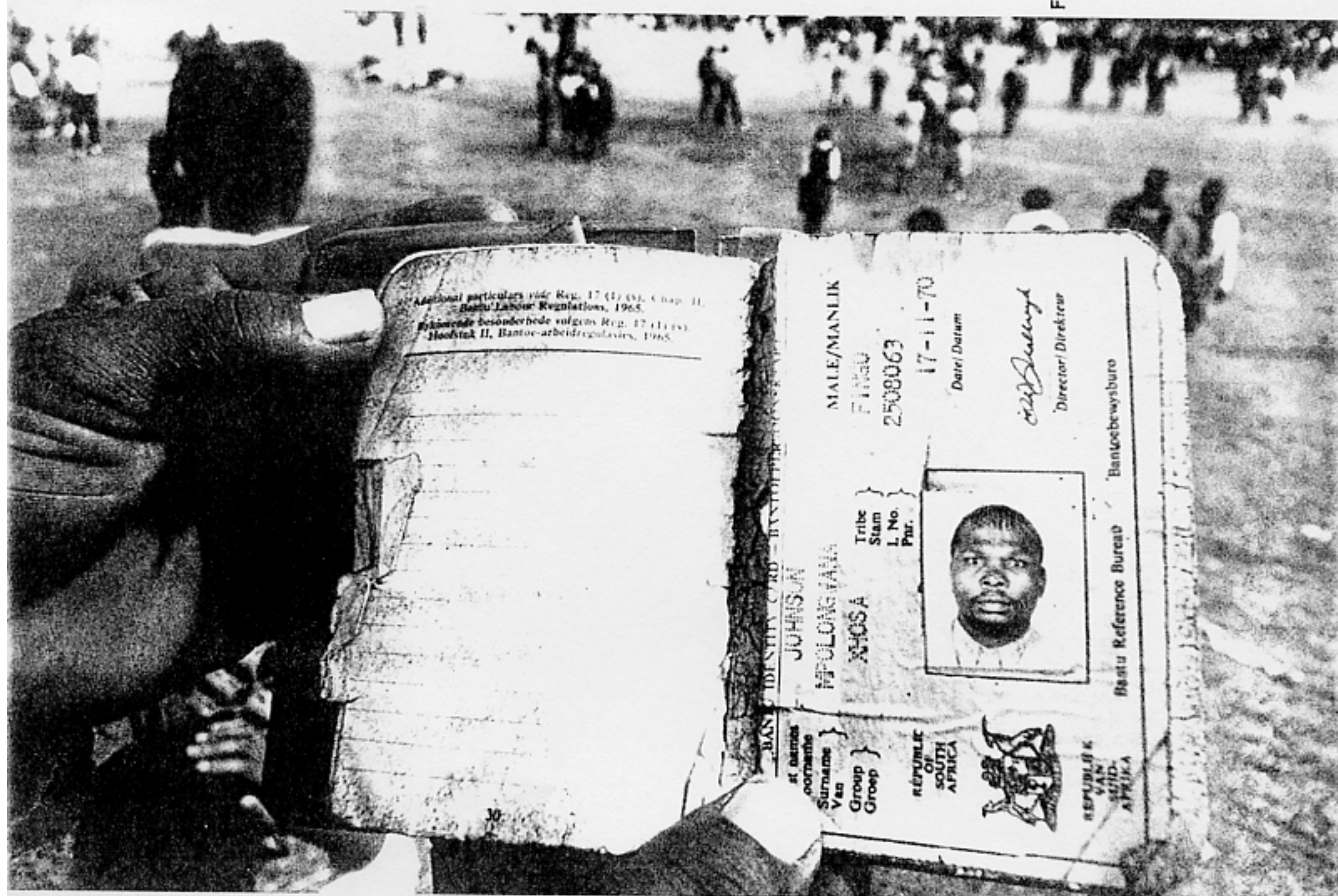

Documenting Apartheid

30 Years of Filming South Africa

By Peter Davis

DURING APRIL 2004 AND BEYOND WE WERE CONSTANTLY REMINDED THAT THIS WAS THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIRST DEMOCRATIC ALL-RACE ELECTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA. I was shocked by the realization that last year also marked the thirtieth anniversary of my first visit to that country, of my first experience with apartheid. After that first trip in 1974 as part of an African tour I was doing for the American NGO (non-governmental organization), CARE, I was to devote a large part of my working life to the anti-apartheid struggle. For those of us who were involved in that struggle, it was such an everyday part of life that it is hard to grasp that there is already a generation out there that does not know the meaning of "apartheid."

The struggle against apartheid took many forms, from protests, strikes, sabotage, defiance and guerrilla warfare within the country to boycotts, bans, United Nations resolutions, rock concerts, and arms and money smuggling and espionage outside. Apartheid, which was institutionalised by the coming to power of the white National Party in 1948, lasted as long as it did, against the condemnation of the world, because it had powerful friends. Chief among these were the United States, which saw a South Africa governed by whites as a useful ally in the Cold War; a Britain whose ruling class had close links with South African capital; and German, French, Israeli and Taiwanese commercial interests that extended even to sales of weapons and nuclear technology to the apartheid regime.

I NEVER BELIEVED THAT APARTHEID WOULD BE BEATEN ON THE BATTLEFIELD. I concluded early on that the critical struggle over apartheid would be above all else a propaganda battle. After the image of apartheid as a lethal system was established with the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, which shocked the world, South Africa's information agencies set out to erase this negative image. Huge sums of money were poured into public relations services, from propaganda films to junkets for journalists to bribes to influential people in foreign governments. Through willing agents, they even bought into newspapers and television news services overseas in an attempt to control, or counterbalance, reporting on South Africa.

Media technology had a vital and changing role in the struggle against apartheid. During the Sharpeville shooting, a newsreel stringer raced to the township. He seems to have shot no more than one roll of film, 100 feet, two and a half minutes, of which only about 65 feet are extant. Arriving at the mopping up stage, the few images he shot are devastating. Dead women and men are sprawled in their own blood, a dazed and wounded man sits on the ground, unable to get up. A body is being lifted into a truck, a group of four black men are carrying a corpse in a sheet, under the supervision of a policeman with a sjambok, a giant whip. These were images that constituted irrefutable evidence of the lethal nature of South African racism, and they became part of the anti-apartheid propaganda arsenal for the next decades.

The opposing forces to apartheid in this massive media war were not inconsiderable, but they were never under any central command. Paradoxically, this may have been the movement's strength. There was no way you could exert central control over thousands of journalists throughout the world, hundreds of NGOs, church groups, trade unions, and political parties ranging from the centre to the far left, actors, musicians, artists and a motley crew of dedicated individuals that included independent film-journeymen like myself. Communist governments routinely condemned apartheid in outraged terms, but in the context of the Cold War, it was in their interest to keep Africa on the boil.

Thirty years ago, concern about apartheid was unevenly divided in the world's media. In Western Europe, especially in the UK, Holland and Scandinavia, and in Canada, close

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attention was always paid to the ongoing abuse of human rights in South Africa, but the United States lagged far behind. America's own civil rights upheavals were still reverberating, but more than that, the country was in the middle of a divisive war in Vietnam that was viciously racist. I would be surprised if, during the period 1948 to 1976, there were as many as twenty programmes aired on American television about apartheid and most of these would have been on PBS.

My first small taste of what apartheid meant in human terms came when I was en route to Swaziland in 1974 on my trip for CARE. I was checking into a hotel in Johannesburg when the desk clerk, who had been receiving me politely, suddenly noticed some minor infraction on the part of one of the black porters, who had probably put a bag down in an inconvenient place. The clerk's face contorted. He started to scream at the porter at the top of the voice, calling him a stupid kaffir. And then back to me in a normal tone. It was astonishing, like switching a light on and off. The difference between—click, the way you treat a white man and the way—click, you treat a black.

When I visited Swaziland, I became aware of the peculiar role played by that country vis-à-vis South Africa. Swaziland is a tiny landlocked country situated between South Africa and Mozambique. By a quirk of British colonial politics, it had escaped being absorbed into South Africa, and so was free from the tyranny of apartheid, if not from the overwhelming political influence of its neighbour. But it acted as a kind of safety valve, because activities forbidden by law in South Africa were tolerated in Swaziland. These included gambling and interracial sex. As a result, Swaziland maintained a casino that thrived on tourists from South Africa, and had a busy sex trade.

I approached CBS, and got a contract from *60 Minutes* to do an exposé on sex and gambling in Swaziland. It offered a subject about which you could moralise in comfort, unveiling, as it seemed to, the hypocrisy of white South Africa. The resulting film, *Hello, from Swaziland!* was relatively innocuous, and certainly no threat to the apartheid regime, but it did allow me to explore South Africa. My next project was much more ambitious.

Reduced to basics, what was happening in South Africa was competition for the same piece of land between two different ethnic groups, for the sake of simplicity, one white, one black. It is the classic formula for friction that we see in Palestine-Israel, the Balkans, Indonesia, the Philippines and numerous other areas of the world, and it brings with it murder and ethnic cleansing. I determined that my subjects would be: first, a history of the Afrikaner people who held sway in South Africa, and then, the history of the forging of an African nationalism for the many distinct black peoples of South Africa, out of the struggle against white domination.

For the first project, I pulled together co-production financing from Swedish Television, the United Nations, and CTV Canada, although the project was still severely underfunded. I wanted to do the history of Afrikaner nationalism first, because this creation of a white African nation was a matter of pride for Afrikaners, and I thought would gain us access to the country, which it did. To present African nationalism to the apartheid authorities would have been totally unacceptable.

For a couple of weeks, we filmed without any problems, although I always wondered if we were being watched. The strategy was to interview only Afrikaners, but by then, in 1976, there was a sufficient range of dissent within the Afrikaner camp to find opponents of apartheid. A leader of this opposition was Beyers Naudé, a clergyman of the Dutch

Reformed Church who had denounced apartheid on moral grounds. About halfway through our schedule, we happened to be in Grahamstown at the same time as Naudé was giving a lecture at Rhodes University. We filmed his lecture and interviewed him the next day.

After that, we checked into a hotel in Umtata, in the Transkei. Shortly after midnight—the classic hour for such things—there was a knock at the door, with an announcement that it was the police. When I opened the door, I saw that they were not uniformed, so I assumed it was the Special Branch. Across the hallway, Barry Callaghan, our interviewer, answered the knock on his door clad only in the scantiest of bikini underwear. Dressed, Barry is an imposing figure. Nudity only added to his corporeal substance, and the arresting officers were duly impressed. Barry got dressed in his own good time. In my room, I spent some desperate moments flushing the names of contacts down the toilet.

We had been arrested in the Transkei, a designated "black homeland," that had no white jail. We were driven several hours through the pre-dawn countryside to the nearest white jail, which was in East London. Arriving there, we found that the white men's prison was full. The only solution was to stick us in the white women's prison.

Being in prison is always an educational experience. Mercifully, my spells in prison education have been brief, but I have always learnt a lot about the country whose unwilling guest I was, and they were things I would not have learnt otherwise. South Africa was no exception. The most subversive things I saw in South Africa were scribbled on the walls of the women's prison of East London; modesty prevents me from quoting them.

Most painful about being in jail, apart from the personal discomfort of sitting on stinking mattresses, was that we could look down into the courtyard below, where our rented car was parked. Our car with our latest exposed film in it. I had taken the precaution of secreting all of our other footage with friends in Johannesburg, but the car contained our most recent material. From our vantagepoint, we saw two Special Branch officers walk across the courtyard and open the trunk, but we didn't see them remove anything. Still, we couldn't be sure that they hadn't done so earlier. I was astonished to find, when we were finally released, that all the footage was still

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there. I still don't know why they didn't confiscate it.

We were kept overnight. Burt, our soundman, and Barry were interrogated, but I wasn't, which I took as a personal affront. I had no great concerns about what they would do to us. I knew that typically in South Africa offending foreign journalists were held at the most three days, and then deported. The only exceptions to this—and there were only a couple that I can recall—were when there was a suspicion of espionage. Penalties for South African journalists, of whatever colour, were of course far more severe.

We were served with an expulsion order to leave the country the next day. We booked our flights back via London, but I was still not sure that they wouldn't confiscate our film on the way out, and I didn't dare ship it out other than hand-carried. So I took an earlier plane out to neighbouring Botswana with all the films, leaving the others to fly to London. From Botswana, I could ship the film through another route than Johannesburg. Then I booked a flight to London via Johannesburg, since that was the quickest route. All I had to do was change planes in Jo'burg, so I did not anticipate any problem.

As I flew out of Jan Smuts airport, I opened the evening paper to read that the police had fired that morning on students demonstrating in Soweto. It was June 16th, an unforgettable date; this was the first act in the drama that became known as the Students' Revolt. It would be the background to my editing at the United Nations in New York during the next several months, a dismal record of protests and strikes put down with brutal police suppression, torture and murder.

When the film was nearly complete, I went to WGBH, Boston to see if they would sponsor the documentary for broadcast on PBS. As was their right as potential co-producer, they asked to look at my script. To my astonishment, my text was subjected to a 10-page critique with which a South African censor would have been perfectly comfortable. This was while the Students' Revolt was still going on, when some 700 students had died—this was the figure admitted by the police—and when thousands of students had been arrested.

There always seemed to me to be a stratum of sympathy among American broadcasters for white South Africans. Reluctant as I was to come to the conclusion, I could only explain that sympathy in terms of racism, perhaps unconscious, which was well concealed under the mantle of a "balanced presentation." You did not need "balance" on apartheid, any more than you needed "balance" on the Holocaust.

The title I gave the documentary was *White Laager*—a "laager" being a circle of covered wagons that the Boers used for defence in their trek north through Africa. It was the dominant icon of embattled white supremacy for the Afrikaner people, the image that defined them as a racial minority in a hostile continent. Reduced to basics, Afrikaner Nationalists—who constituted by far the biggest block of the Afrikaner people—had chosen to sacrifice human rights for security. Now, the human rights they had sacrificed were largely those of the non-white population, but it had severe repercussions on freedom of speech and action even within the white population, and on the concept and practice of justice. And if we need to understand this frame of mind, we have to look no further than 9/11 in the United States and Canada, where the same sacrifice, in the name of a broader security, has been made. The United States has constructed its own laager, with all those who do not support it, whether inside the United States or without, considered as the enemy, and this is precisely what happened in South Africa.

White Laager came out in 1977. Now I had to do *Generations of Resistance*, the history of black struggle against white

domination. It was something that had not been done before. But I had been deported from South Africa and they would not let me back in again. However, for my purposes, this was not as formidable a barrier as it may seem. The historical material I needed was for the most part available from film libraries like Visnews in the UK. I could supplement their resources by using the film and photo collections from International Defence and Aid, the main anti-apartheid media locus, situated in London. In the phase of the struggle current at that time, the centres of resistance to the apartheid regime were all in exile anyway, the African National Congress (ANC) headquarters being in Zambia, and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) HQ in Tanzania. Other resisters—by now, hundreds from the wave of student unrest—were to be found in enclaves in Botswana and Lesotho and Angola, countries that bordered South Africa or Namibia.

White Laager had been partially sponsored by the United Nations, and they again gave me some backing for my next film as did my old employer, Swedish TV. Despite the increased news interest in South Africa after the Soweto Uprising, WGBH did not come in on the second film. Still, I had enough money to go to the frontline states. In Zambia, ANC gave me only limited access. I could interview but not film their HQ compound. Their search for security was wise, but in the event futile; the compound was later bombed by the South African airforce. Paradoxically, in Tanzania the PAC, an organization that was dedicated to black power and by definition suspicious of whites, even let me go and film in one of their training camps. I could film openly; I was shocked by this. I made sure that in the final cut, no faces of the young men could be recognized, even though this seemed a matter of indifference to the PAC leadership.

When we got to Botswana, I tried to cross the border into South Africa, but my name was blacklisted, as I expected. While I was at the airport, looking to charter a small plane, I met the American ambassador for Botswana and Lesotho. He was about to fly to Lesotho, a country completely surrounded by South Africa, and he offered to give a lift to myself and my companion, an extraordinary piece of generosity that would surely be impossible today. From Lesotho, where we filmed some of the exiles who would later be assassinated, we crossed over a bridge into the supposedly independent territory of the Transkei. And from there, I could have gone anywhere in South Africa. Actually, this was just a test, because we did have another crew working in South Africa. We didn't linger long. But I had proved that it could be done, and this would come in useful in the future. **POV**

Peter Davis is a veteran cameraman, soundman, editor, scriptwriter, director and producer. He has worked mainly in the area of social and political documentaries, in areas ranging from the USA to the Middle East to the Caribbean to Europe to Africa. Davis has produced around 60 full-length documentaries, for Swedish Television, BBC, PBS, CBC, CBS, West German Television, CARE, Vision Television (Canada), among many others.

Interviewing Winnie Mandela, reflections on the Soweto Uprising, the impact of video technology on radical filmmaking and the exhilarating ANC victory in South Africa. Peter Davis reflects on these and more in the conclusion of his memoir on filming in South Africa. All in the next issue of POV.

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