

FILMING SOUTH AFRICA: A PERSONAL QUEST

By Peter Davis

Villon Films (<http://www.villonfilms.com>) is a former production company that is now largely devoted to the distribution and collection of films, videos and photos on a variety of subjects. Most of these are related to my work when I was more active in production, and consist mainly of social and political subjects ranging from 1960s Britain to the USA, Central America, the Middle East, and Africa. Of interest to current readers would be my African collection, which is based on my anti-apartheid work which began in 1975 and ended during the last years of the old regime. It includes some work done after the ending of apartheid, and extends to some other parts of Africa.

My work on Africa began as a cameraman for the American NGO CARE, in the early 'seventies, when, if I recall correctly, I covered ten countries in about thirty days. I passed through South Africa at that time en route to Lesotho and Swaziland, so I acquired a taste of apartheid. Not that apartheid was off my political map before then – in the '50s and '60s, for all those who care to recall, it was integral to the political landscape in Britain: I have photos I took at that time of a rally in Trafalgar Square, opposite South Africa House, that feature Oliver Tambo and Harold Wilson protesting against arms sales to South Africa.

It was my first South African visit that inspired me to embark on what turned out to be a long anti-apartheid campaign, although that was not the original intention. It went on for about twenty years, and if I try to rationalise it now, I do so first in personal terms, because apartheid as a system appalled me, then because it seemed to me that apartheid could be defeated by dissemination of information about its true meaning. I had moved to the United States, where ignorance about apartheid was widespread, and where the government, beneath a veneer of disapproval, actually supported the white regime. So for me, the United States was the prime battleground. But there were strict limitations on access to my chosen medium, which was primarily television, for a debate on apartheid; during the period of apartheid up to the watershed year of 1976, I don't think there were a dozen documentaries dealing with apartheid shown on American television.

I began with *Hello, from Swaziland* (1974), a fifteen minute piece about interracial sex and gambling for white South Africans (such sins being forbidden in the Republic) in the neighbouring country, made for the prestigious CBS show *Sixty Minutes*. These I followed with *White Laager* (1976), a history of Afrikaner nationalism and *Generations of Resistance* (1978), a history of black resistance to white rule. Both of these were co-productions with the United Nations (condemnation of apartheid being about the only

thing the UN members could agree on) and Swedish TV, where I had worked before. PBS Boston came in on *White Laager*, but not without writing an extensive critique that could have been equally composed by an Afrikaner Nationalist; even though it was post-1976, PBS abstained from participation in *Generations of Resistance*, and reneged on a promise to help finance *South Africa: the Nuclear File* (1979), the story of South Africa's acquisition of nuclear capability, which was largely backed by Swedish TV.

It is hard to credit now, but in the mid-eighties, Nelson Mandela had been dismissed by President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher as a player in the South African political game. In an attempt to keep Mandela's name alive, I embarked on what turned out to be two biographies, *Winnie Mandela* (1986) and *Remember Mandela!* (1988). For the first, I received support again from the UN and from Swedish TV, but the second was essentially self-financed. I also put together a 21-panel exhibition of photo-collages on the life of Nelson Mandela. Both were shown at the Democratic Convention in Atlanta in 1988, the opening day of which coincided with Mandela's 70th birthday.

In response to the draconian censorship of the foreign press imposed in South Africa during the mid-eighties (to which American networks shamefully acceded), my partner Daniel Riesenfeld and I had the idea of doing a documentary on this subject, but we could arouse no financial support. So we developed instead the idea of doing a history of how South Africa had been portrayed in the cinema to show how popular views of that country had been moulded in such a way as to encourage racist prejudices. The resulting two-part documentary *In Darkest Hollywood* (1993) proved to be extremely popular, being shown in many countries, with the notable exception of the US; I have no explanation for this omission. I followed this with a book with the same title, of course a more extensive coverage of the topic.¹

I returned to South Africa in 1998 to make *Sangoma*, a look at the role of traditional healers in a changing society. I participated in other productions as well, but the above canon constitutes my own productions. From the rest of Africa, there is a piece on weaving in Lesotho from the early seventies, and a documentary on the Rhodesian civil war from 1976. There was also a very early documentary (1961) about the weaving workshop in the village of Harrania in Egypt, and a political documentary on Egypt from 1970.

Making my documentaries, and especially *In Darkest Hollywood* got me interested in the history of film in South Africa, and when I began to self-distribute in the 'eighties I started to gather historical material, much of which I now offer in distribution (see appendix below).

Three areas of research have occupied much of my time during the last twenty years:

- I. *Come Back, Africa* (1958). Lionel Rogosin's film, which was shot in Sophiatown and featured a number of Sof'town notables, like Lewis Nkosi,

Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, and which premiered Miriam Makeba was probably the most important film in the anti-apartheid struggle. Rogosin had an unpublished manuscript about the making of the film, and after his death I edited this for publication by STE Publishers in South Africa in 2005. It is a very handsome volume, but I don't think it has had much exposure outside South Africa. I also have a substantial collection of photos relating to the film.

2. *African Jim*, also known as *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* (1949). Made by Donald Swanson and Eric Rutherford, this was really the first attempt to make a feature film for black audiences. Through this film I got to know the South African township diva Dolly Rathebe, and maintained a relationship with her up until the time of her death some years ago. I brought her to Vancouver for the film festival in 1998, and we did a tour of a number of colleges in North America, which I documented. I have so far made one of a projected three documentaries about this tour, *Travels with Dolly, Part I*. I also have an extensive collection of photos. It is my ambition to find a niche in a South African museum for an exhibition permanently devoted to Dolly, perhaps in a wider context of the "Sophiatown Renaissance".
3. The title that has taken most of my research is the, for me, utterly fascinating *Siliva the Zulu* to which I am devoting much of my study these days. Shot in 1927 by the Italian adventurer Attilio Gatti, it is a heady potion of love, hate, betrayal and witchcraft that could just as well have been set in medieval Italy, but which is distinguished by being the first all-black fiction film made in South Africa, with untrained but nonetheless competent (silent) actors, and by the fact that it contains the only comprehensive record on film of Zulu life and culture at that time. It is no masterpiece of film-making, but I consider it nonetheless an immensely important film. I have prepared a book about the making of the film, and am looking for a publisher.

Research into the making of this film introduced me to the film-maker Attilio Gatti, explorer, adventurer, writer, great self-promoter, and to Lidio Cipriani, anthropologist and later devoted fascist – among other fascinating personalities. There is enough material for a couple of documentaries here.

It also led me to a cache of still photographs, mostly taken by Professor Cipriani, that constitute what I believe to be the most comprehensive record of rural Zulu life from that time. These photos not only document everyday life in a thorough fashion, but do so in images often of high artistic quality. Many of them are sensitive portraits that reveal character as much as costume and adornment. I have presented the film on a number of occasions with live music by South African musician Themba Tana, sometimes as an introduction to an exhibition of a selected sixty or so photos about the making of the film. As a rough estimate, there are about six hundred of these photos in all – I have

not had a chance to catalogue all of them. Very few of them have been published or even printed. I have been trying to find a sponsor to pay for them to be lodged in a permanent home in South Africa – they constitute an invaluable part of South Africa's "lost black history". I would welcome exhibitions elsewhere.

Unlike the completed films listed above, my early documentary, *El Masna*, about the revival of the tradition of weaving in the Egyptian village of Harrania, is not available on any format other than the original 16mm. And this brings me to the biggest problem I face as someone interested in conservation for historical and study purposes, and for dissemination. That is the problem of transferring the material from the 16mm film on which it was shot onto some accessible and durable format. There is the additional problem of what will be considered an accessible format in, say, five or ten years' time.

The problem is both financial and technical. The technical side is not easy. When dealing with a completed documentary, it is straightforward enough, you have a master print or negative, and you simply dub that, for example, onto a relatively safe (in the sense of durable) format such as Betacam SP. It becomes one stage more complicated when you are not dealing with a married print (a "married print" is when the soundtrack has been added to the film) but with a separate soundtrack. In that case, you have to make two passes when dubbing, one for picture, one for sound (so, more expensive); then you have to synch sound to picture, and then do an output from that. All this is easy enough, although very expensive. It gets really complicated when you are dealing with "out-takes". For the uninitiated, "out-takes" is the name given to footage that was shot but not included in the final edited version. This could range from a ratio of ten-to-one (i.e. for a sixty minute documentary one might have shot 600 minutes) to 30- or 40-to-one, and up. In the old days, with film, we had to count the cost of every foot of film that ran through the camera, in effect editing in the camera, which had its advantages as well as disadvantages. Nowadays, for better or worse, with tape or digital formats, cost is virtually a non-issue. (While this has its advantages in the field, it can make the editing process much more time-consuming and costly.)

Among producing companies, it has been pretty much standard practice to jettison film and even video out-takes, the material being considered to have served its purpose once an edited film is completed. With the cost of maintaining the footage in a temperature-controlled environment, out-takes were often just left at a laboratory, and sooner or later (often together even with the masters of the edited material) junked when the laboratory went out of business, if not before. Since the film had no obvious cash value, it was considered worthless. I can't claim to have had any particular acumen in my career, but the one smart thing I did was to preserve as many of the out-takes to my films as I could in my own storage space, which was not of the best. Relief was eventually found when I came to leave my home in New York State

to make a temporary move to Zimbabwe, where I was working on a film. I would return not to the United States, but to Canada: this left me with the enormous problem of what to do with my archives (films, photos, documents) accumulated over by then forty years. I approached Phyllis Klotman at Indiana University's Black Film Archive², and she was enthusiastic about receiving my Africana collection, even though the BFA was primarily concerned with African-American materials. I also received valuable support from Patrick O'Meara, an Africanist at Indiana University, who has given me substantial support over the years. (My collection is not exclusively Africana – I have been involved in many areas of a social-political nature, and it was a relief to me when Phyllis and Patrick agreed to take the whole collection intact.)

Over a period of over forty years of film-making, the out-takes have assumed a historical value that I consider not inferior to the edited material – indeed, since it is not shaped (contaminated?) by editing, it might be considered to have more value – to be, in a sense, more authentic. Material that at the time and for the project in production seemed of little value, with time and new perspectives invites a completely new evaluation. To take a very obvious example, in making the two-part documentary *In Darkest Hollywood*, my partner Daniel Riesenfeld and I shot some forty hours of material, including interviews with South African film-makers Ross Devenish, Antony Thomas, Sandy Balfour, Lionel Ngakane, Wally Serote, Oliver Schmitz, Gibson Kente, Jamie Uys, John Matshikiza, Ken Gampu, William Faure - and so on. Clips from these interviews used in our completed documentaries might typically last 4 minutes, while the original interviews could be an hour. Obviously, the interviews in their entirety are of interest for study purposes, and for possible use in new productions. (The University of Cape Town purchased a copy of this material in its entirety.)

This material was easy to duplicate since it was shot on video during the 'nineties. Material earlier than that was mostly on film, necessitating the duplication problem I have described. I recently had a request from a South African company making a biography of Robert Sobukwe for material on the Pan-Africanist Congress, and I was able to supply material shot in a PAC camp in Tanzania in 1977, possibly the only record on film. In this case, since the producing company was able to pay for the transfer, I was able to dub from the original material (16mm film and 16mm audiotape) onto DVD.

Among a mass of other footage, I have important material on Nelson Mandela that is inaccessible for study because it is still only in film format. And it is not only a question of a simple dub, the material has to be checked to make sure the splices will hold, and thoroughly cleaned. That is the first step before it is transferred to another format.

There are transcripts of many of the interviews, but not all; these need to be

transcribed also, preferably from the original quarter-inch tapes. Most formidable of all, when material is finally in some accessible format, the next step is to compose a shot-by-shot description of the material – not so difficult in the case of interviews, where it is simply a question of transcription, but a substantial job when it is purely scenic in the broadest sense. For maximum value, it has to be described accurately. This makes a search for particular scenes so much easier, and it also forces a close examination of the material. I should mention the example of a film I had acquired, of unknown origin, with scenes from South Africa in the 'fifties. I had run this particular film many times when one shot, of a well-dressed black man and a white man approaching to speak with a woman in a township caught my attention. Finally, it struck me that the black man might be Mandela. I showed it to historian and close friend of Mandela, Mary Benson, who confirmed that it was indeed Nelson. This is the earliest film of Mandela that I am aware of. I still have no idea of the origin of this material, so there may in fact be more footage of Mandela, if I could ever track it down.

In Bloomington, I have some backup from occasional interns at the Black Film Archive who are able to do a primitive dub from 16mm to DVD, which then involves me synching up the separate sound to picture, both time-consuming processes. But at least at the end I come out with a viewable reference DVD, which can be copied and sent out to researchers. For anyone interested, I have an incomplete list of my Africana film/audio collection of out-takes. I want to stress that the problems around a film collection of this nature are not restricted to my collection, but are common to all film-makers of my generation. It would be a painful exercise to record what has been lost.

My collection of Africana documents is only partially catalogued. I also have a substantial collection of historical photos gathered in the process of making my anti-apartheid films. Besides these, I have a collection of photos taken by myself and photographers working with me during the apartheid period in South Africa and the frontline states, showing aspects of life and a range of personalities, anti-apartheid and pro-apartheid. Outside of South Africa, my most interesting photos are probably those taken while making the film *El Masna* (Egypt, 1961), photos taken of the Inauguration of the Emir of Katsina in 1982 (there is film of this also), and during the Rhodesian Civil War (1976).

Unfortunately, I am the only one to have an intimate knowledge of this material, and my great fear is to die leaving an inadequate description of it. I have the sense that I would need another lifetime to complete the task, but even the time I devote to it puts me in conflict with other, creative work. Divided duties...