

Interview with ERICA (ERIC) RUTHERFORD, January 5, 1990, TORONTO, Canada

BY Peter Davis & Daniel Riesenfeld

Rutherford: The whole question of the film started by accidentally meeting Orson Welles in a bar in Florence. It was a foggy day, and he had to land, he and another guy, I think he was someone who was working with him, and I was with some Italian friends, and they recognised Orson Welles at the bar, and the young daughter there, you know, said, "Oh, look, this is Orson Welles, oh, gosh, I'd love to be able to talk to him!" and I said, "Well, go up to him, ask for his autograph, you know, he'll probably be quite pleased," and she said, "Oh, now, I couldn't do that," and eventually I said, "Well, alright, Di, I'll take you over," and we went over, and he was very nice, and very friendly, and gave her an autograph and talked to her, and then she went with her parents, and he and I stayed with another friend, talking about films and things until we were thrown out of the bar. And we got onto the subject of Africa, and what could be done in Africa, and why didn't he make a film in Africa, and he kept saying, "Why don't you make a film in Africa?" And I said, "Well, I'm not qualified, I don't really think that I could cope with it." And anyway, that conversation kind of remained in my mind, and I was involved in doing some acting in a film, firstly in the theatre, and then there was a company making a film, it was a children's film, actually, and they chose a lot of the cast from this theatre company, and when we started to make this film, which was for the Rank Organization, it was a real children's adventure story, we started talking about "Why doesn't somebody make a really good film about Africans?" Because in those days there wasn't really anything, there might have been a few people making the odd documentary, but we got onto the idea of why not a feature film, why not, you know, really having a feature film, a full-length entertainment film with African actors. And a group of us, the cameraman on the film, and the director and some of the other actors all thought this was a terrific idea. And when we got back to Johannesburg we set up a little company, and the guy who had been the director, and also scriptwriter, wrote this script. I really wasn't that keen on the idea of a musical, but I gradually got won over to the idea because in those days, I mean, we were living in a fantasy land, and I must say that Africa as we know it today was nothing like that, I mean, we were hopeful that the African situation was going to get better, there was a very peaceful situation at that time, and there was a lot being done for Africans, there was the idea, that, you know, they were going to be able to become more and more active in their own country. And we then thought in terms, perhaps we could set up an all-African company eventually, that we'd actually have technicians, we'd train technicians, they would be working, and we would turn it over, you know, to really have a black film industry. But in the meantime we decided that perhaps the best idea was to make an entertainment film, and not - we talked about a documentary, or something, a serious film about the African situation, but we felt that that would in fact be for people outside of Africa, that what the Africans wanted themselves was to participate in entertainment, they were being given entertainment, fed entertainment, by the big commercial circuits there, they were getting gangster films, and cowboy films, and really trashy things which were bought with very little money and were very profitable for a distributor to send around. So we got onto this idea of making a film by not drawing salaries, by simply putting some of our own money into it, we all put a certain amount of our own money into it. And the friends that I had, had - the old generation, parents of this friend's were quite well off, and there was a man called E.P.W. Green, and he had interests in hotels, and he had interests in liquor stores and things like that, so he had a fair bit of money, and he was willing to finance his family to put some money in, you know each one put a little bit in, and that's how I became more involved in it, than I would otherwise perhaps have been, because I found that it was necessary for someone to look after the money, nobody seemed very interested in looking after the money, we were all busy making the film. So I got more and more drawn into just handling the money, getting loans from the

bank, doing all that kind of thing, and eventually with the film choosing some of the cast, we became, this woman who was a very close friend of mine, she was very, very aware, she knew much more about Africa than I did, and she was very aware of the African motifs, I mean, what we would now call an Afro hairdo, for example, which she introduced that kind of thing to the leading girl, called Dolly Rathebe, and we, we found these people by going into the township guided by some of the other Africans who knew the entertainment world in the townships, which was quite quite separate, nobody in the white world really knew about this, it was a whole sort of subculture which they really weren't aware of, so we were able to go around and find talent and gradually put it together to make this film, and we borrowed equipment, I mean, a loan, but rather a nominal amount of payment. We put - a lot of the things were done in like sheds, we adapted to studios, we raided the homes of various members of the company to go and get props and things, you know, we didn't have any set-up, really, and we just gradually put it together, like this, and er, it turned out that we had quite a lot of really quite incredible talent that was available for this film. But it was very piecemeal, I mean, it wasn't properly thought through in many ways, we tended to insert a musical number into it because we liked the musical number, you know, so it was not a very carefully planned film. But what came out of it was something was of tremendous import to the Africans at that time. Certainly it was not a political film, in no way was it a political film.

We had discussed the idea of making a serious documentary but we had decided that it would be better to have an entertainment film because the Africans (coughing off)

Well, the film couldn't really be called a political film, in the sense that we had decided to make entertainment, we wanted to make something that was their own, but of course that inevitably was political, in fact the population got an enormous charge out of it, they really felt that this was their film, it was an expression of themselves, of their own personality, it was a question of sort of finding their voice, because they had never seen an actual African starring in a movie, this was quite unknown. We did something which I rather regretted later on, about it, because that was a little thoughtless in that at the end of the film, instead of having a completely sort of fake idea of a musical company that was recording and making record of popular songs, we had a white person. And later on I realized that of course that automatically put it into a patronising thing, which we had not intended to do, it just seemed to us logical that, you know, there were recording companies and they had previously been monopolised by whites, but the fact that they employed a black person, onto the records in the white company then was part of the achievement it seemed to the average person, the average black person. But later on, as I say, it looked like patronising, which we had absolutely no intention of doing. We were wholly concerned with trying to make something that would be beneficial to the population.

Davis: Now there were two premieres, as I understand it, because of segregation. Can you describe those two premieres, compare them or contrast them?

Rutherford: Well, we deliberately opened, we got an opening premiere in a theatre which was normally a white theatre, and then that aroused some kind of ambivalence, so we decided that the best thing to do was to run that for the benefit of African causes, which it was very successful in doing, it attracted a lot of attention, and the stars of the film actually appeared on the stage and things like that, so that it got a lot of publicity and got a lot of exposure. And then it was shown to the black audiences in the townships, where it practically created a riot, it was so successful, they were tremendously enthusiastic and pleased with that film. That, that continued, but what happened in the interim was that we really hadn't realized that we were treading heavily on the feet or toes, if you like, of the

commercial organizations, it hadn't occurred to us that what we were doing, we were making a film for, say, \$5,000, in those days, and they were buying a film for \$50, and distributing it, and making an enormous profit, so they were not a bit pleased to find that we had a successful film, but that film had cost all that money. They didn't want to spend that money.

Davis: Tell us a little bit about the structure, you said they paid \$50 for a film, where did they get that film, who were the kind of personalities who controlled, what we're talking about really is white control of distribution in SA.

Rutherford: Yes, it was almost exclusively white-controlled, and they bought films mostly from the United States, they were usually gangster films, or cowboy films, they would be B films, what they were called in those days, they were not very good films, and they were circulating them in the townships, they would have a circuit of cinema houses, and they were making a very handsome profit out of doing that. There was one exception to that, there was an Indian distributor called Moosa, who had a chain of Indian cinemas, and they had Indian films, so it was quite separate. But that was nothing to do with the normal commercial circuit that we were talking about. And we negotiated with that circuit, thinking that was the best way to go, in the beginning, but we soon realised that in fact they were not happy, as I mentioned, and it only gradually dawned on us that what they could have done was to buy that film from us and they could have put it in a can, they need never have shown it. And we were then advised by our lawyers that this could have been the case. By this time, the company was getting a little fractious, it was breaking into two groups. One group wanted to go along with that and take a chance on it, and I felt that we should not do that, I was against the whole principle anyway, I didn't like this business of this kind of entertainment being put to Africans, and it was real exploitation, I mean, there was no question about it. And so I said we would say No, and finally my argument won the day. And the African Theatres' people were extremely angry, I mean, the head of the organization got on the telephone to me "Unless you sign that contract by 5 o'clock this afternoon, this is the end of your career in Africa, and all your friends'." And in a sense it was true, finally, because we fought on, we tried to continue making films, and we then - I started work actually with a novelist on another film, which was called "The Magic Garden", and we then cast around for more finance. Somehow or other we came up with a man said he represented financiers who were very interested in making a public film company. And I said, "Well, I think I want to know more about this, I don't just want to walk into this, where do these people come from?" It turned out that they came - he, this man who we were dealing with, came from Norbert Ern and Joseph Milne, who were well-known crooked financiers, that's the only way to describe them. They were doing something with gold-mines, so that they promoted the shares and made it look as though the company was getting tremendous profit, and they were floating shares to the public who would then buy these shares and find out a few days later that there was absolutely nothing to it, and these shares just dropped to nothing, but meantime, they'd made all these profits. However, they got prosecuted for that and at the time which we came alongside them, they were actually in jail, and the man that was representing them was making all these proposals to us because they had extensive finances, the fact that they were in jail wasn't stopping them going ahead with all sorts of schemes, and I soon realised they wanted to do exactly the same thing. They wanted to float a public company and they were all going to have founders' shares, or something, I don't know the technical terms for all that, and they were then going to make a film, float the shares, sell the shares, make a profit, and then they'd probably never make another film. And I saw this coming, so I said, "No, I won't go along with them." Well, part of the film company did go along with them, and they went ahead and made that film "The Magic Garden", which I had been talking with the novelist who had the original script, and I'd been trying to work out a screenplay with him, and it just disappeared from my office, it went through one member of the company who simply went off with the others, and he simply took the script with him.

Davis: How did you conceive "The Magic Garden" as an advance on "African Jim"? How did you conceive of any difference there between the two films?

Rutherford: Well, what I felt about "Jim Comes To Jo'burg", that the scriptwriter and director, who is the same man, had concentrated heavily on the idea of all-out entertainment, I mean he had nothing, very very little that was quote "authentic black". I wanted to see something which had much more background of the actual lives which the black people lived at that time. I wanted to see the townships, the houses, the homes, that kind of thing, which the author of the script agreed would be a good way to go. They eventually produced the script, well in rather a perhaps lighter manner than I had envisaged, I mean it became a very lightweight sort of comedy. But it did use the backgrounds that I had envisaged, and I saw that as a much more authentic thing than "Jim Comes To Jo'burg", which was very much an imitation of a rather poor Hollywood musical.

Davis: Can we go back a bit over the African Films problem there. Can you describe the personalities, did you meet Schlesinger at all?

Rutherford: Oh, yes (cough) excuse me - we had a meeting with the head of the organization and all his associates -

Davis: Do you mind naming him?

Rutherford: Er, no - John Schlesinger was his name at that time, he was a young man who'd taken over from his father, and he was the head of the organization. And they appeared to be quite sort of friendly at this first meeting, and seemed as if they might seriously consider distributing our film. I must say that we had at that time already had some contact with a representative of United Artists in the country, who were the only - they were, I have to amend what I said about the sole distribution, because United Artists did have a small distribution circuit other than African Films. And so if we had gone with African Films we'd have got a much bigger circuit, so that's why we went into the discussion with them. But it seemed, it appeared to me very much that these people were very hard-nosed businessmen, they weren't interested in a native film industry, that was not in their minds at all, they were in it to make money, and the maximum amount of money possible. And I just found them all very unsympathetic, I just didn't like the look of them and the way they talked about things, it seemed to me very insincere. And so that was why I urged my lawyer to investigate the background in their case and then later on the background of this other man, who appeared representing Norber Early and Milne.

Davis: Competition from the movie "Zonk".

Rutherford: They named the movie "Zonk" after the magazine, didn't they.

Davis: I don't know the story.

Rutherford: We were approached, I don't quite know when, towards the end of the production we were approached by someone who was starting, again, actually, I think it was a white person, who was starting an all-black magazine for Africans, called "Zonk", and they were very very interested naturally in the film, and they did an interview with the stars, and they got stills from the film, and they published those in the first issue of this magazine called "Zonk". But at the same time, during this process, of trying to arrange distribution we had come to blows with African Films and dropped the idea altogether of working with them, and had gone back to the United Artists idea, of distributing with them. What we

didn't know at that time was that African Films were so upset at our escaping their little net that they wanted to throw around us to prevent us circulating this film was they decided to make a film themselves, and use their existing circuit, which was much bigger than anything that United Artists had or anything else that we could organize, and they worked night and day, I mean they really went all out, literally in shifts, they worked through the night to make another musical film, which they later on booked in as our film was showing, they booked it in at a nearby cinema and tried to compete with us, and of course they had tremendous resources for public relations and things like that, so they could have been very effective, I mean one would imagine that it would have completely spoiled our game, it certainly didn't make it any easier. But nevertheless, - it was called "Jim Comes To Jo'burg" at that time, or "African Jim" - it won out over the other film, it was still the most popular film. However, in all the machinations about distribution, I was sort of suspicious, I say, I don't know - I was very young and naive in those days, I wouldn't have got into it if I wasn't young and naive, but another part of me was rather canny, and a little bit, because I was so inexperienced, in a way it became experience, because I was a little scared of all these people, and I didn't quite trust any of them, even the people who were supposed to be working with me. And I decided that in my contract with United Artists that I would keep the 16mm rights. In those days, that was meaningless, I mean, 16 mm rights were used for amateur showings and things like that, they couldn't understand why I would want to keep the 16 mm rights, they said, you know, "It's ridiculous, what can you do with this?" And I said, "Well, if you don't think I can do anything with them, why do you want to keep them yourself?" and so they eventually said, "Well, go on," you know, I said, "I'd just like to make a home movie of it, have a theatre show it at home on 16mm." And I was being very deceptive at this point, because the thought had crossed my mind which hadn't crossed anybody else's mind, so they said, "OK, keep the 16mm rights." Well, what I had feared was that United Artists themselves and the cinema - I mean, I have to be very broad here, I'm not accusing United Artists Corporation of USA, I'm talking about the sort of sub-contracts they had in the southern African continent, and those people were cheating on us, the cinema owners were cheating on us, we didn't know how much United Artists was collecting and how much they weren't collecting, and our returns were miserable. And we were in a very difficult position, none of us had drawn salaries, we were paying our Africans, yes, we paid everybody who was black, but no white person took any money out of it at all. And we owed a terrific amount of money for rental, for filmstock, for processing, and all those kind of things, there were huge debts there, and we had banked on the distribution to pay this off, and it wasn't working. So I swung into operation the idea which I had had, which was that I was one of the first underground film distributors, because I took the 16mm copy, hired a hall in the township, and practically went against my own distributors, I mean, it was a pretty shifty thing to do in many ways, I'm quite sure they thought I was dreadful, (laugh) they like to get along with their own little chiseling, and were horrified to find that I was almost you might say chiseling against them, because we were then collecting the money directly from the hall and taking it home and putting it in the bank and then what we were doing with that was paying off debts. Of course, we never got anything out - we all lost our money, I mean, all the people who were actually in it never got the money back that they put into it at all.

Davis: Go back a little over the actual choosing of talent for the film, how was that done?

Rutherford: Well, we were very lucky in finding this man Dan Tuala, because he had a very nice nature and he was very very helpful about introducing us into the talent in the townships, and we held auditions there, and saw many different kinds of people for the film. And there were several people who were auditioning for the actual chief role of the female in the film, and there was one woman, whom the director rather favoured, who was of mixed blood, and she really looked quite, on camera, particularly, I could see that she was going to look very white - it's awful, using these names, but that's the terms one used in those

days, and her whole manner very Hollywood, very commercial, singing, and the director really favoured this woman, and shortly after we auditioned her this other woman appeared led by Dan Tuala, and she was very nervous, quite hesitant, she was very unprepossessingly dressed, you know, she - we just took one look at her at first, we said, "Oh, well, she's a nice-looking girl, but what can we do with that?" and then her turn, her time came to sing, she got in front of a camera, and it was like something out of a movie, I mean suddenly this woman took on a whole new personality, her eyes sparkled, her face broke into a smile, she had a sort of swing to her body, and she sang like a bird, I mean she was just absolutely wonderful. And we immediately said, "This, this is the woman," and she looked African, she was African, I mean, she looked the role. And so we eventually persuaded the director to change his mind about it, I mean, the persuasion came from the fact that my little aliens in the company were the ones who held the purse-strings mostly, so ultimately he had to give in, he wasn't at all pleased about it. But she turned out just as promising as we had expected, in fact, she went on to work after the film, she continued to be a singer and an actress, after that.

Davis: And you said how she was arrested for a pass offence?

Rutherford: Yes, although I've said that in those days the restrictions on Africans were nothing like - I mean, it was incomparable, it was a fairyland compared with what it is now. I mean, it's just totally different, I mean, it's so impossible for anyone who knows Africa now to imagine the kind of environment we were living in. Sure, there were a lot of very very bad things, but there was nothing like the violence, nothing like the horror that it is now. But they had already got these ridiculous Pass Laws, and one night, apparently Dolly was out late somewhere or another and got arrested. And you see this is the sort of thing that helped enormously for us at that time, was we immediately spread this over all the newspapers, and there was "Wonderful African film star arrested for being out late at night", and all this came out making the regime look stupid. I mean, it made those laws look ridiculous. Those were the sort of things which were enormously helpful at that time. But of course it wasn't strong enough for what we had to contend with later, but, you know, it did help a lot. But Dolly was a very individual personality, and she knew - I can't say that she knew her true value, I don't think she really did, I think she was very modest in her behaviour, and consequently she was a little bit careless, now and then, for example, one day she arrived on the set without her false teeth. We didn't know she had false teeth, and suddenly there was this gorgeous girl going "MMMM", and we said, "What's the matter with you today, Dolly?" "I forgot my teeth." "Oh, my God!" this was a terrible crisis. We had to get a jeep and rush back to the township and find her teeth in the top drawer and take them back to her. But she was very co-operative, so was all the cast, really.

Davis: Making the film an introduction to the townships for you?

Rutherford: Well, I was there, actually, really at the turning point, you see, it was the end of the Smuts era, and just around the time that we were making that film, the Nationalists got into power. But we were still, we were very naive, we didn't realize the real significance of this. It gradually became evident over the next couple of years, fairly quickly they started to introduce more stringent laws, they kind of threw out the people who favoured Africans in things like the Native Affairs Department, previously the people in that had been working for Africans, but the Afrikaans got people in there who were much more interested in controlling and restricting. That was - a lot of that was very commercial, because it meant they could stop the competitive labour, because Africans were very skilled, I mean there were lots of excellent technicians, good drivers, mechanics and so on. And you could see it very clearly, when they came up against them, Afrikaans men who had the same qualifications, who'd get very vicious with these people, and try to make

them awkward, I mean, if you tell somebody they're stupid long enough, they'll behave stupidly, and we saw a lot of that happening, and it gradually increased more and more and more. And so that from the time that I was working with the film, I had made a lot of friends amongst black people, and I would have dinner in the townships, I would meet people and they would come to the house, and so on, and that sort of thing became less and less possible, partly because of new laws being introduced, but partly because of an increasing suspicion. And I think by the time I left the country, because I became very distressed at the whole situation, I felt that I really wasn't the type of person to be a political worker, and so I decided to leave the country, and by the time I left, there was a real polarisation in the situation, and they didn't really care very much whether I had worked on their behalf, that wasn't of interest, I was white, and that was enough. And it was really not possible to have that rapport that one had had earlier. I mean, there were even scenes like, on one occasion, the man who went into the township with the 16mm film had called me at the house and said that all the tires had been let down of the car that he was driving, and he had been told that he was going to be rushed when he came out, and the money stolen, well, that wouldn't have happened earlier on, it really wouldn't. There was a great feeling about the film, and a kind of, I don't want to use the word gratitude, but they were, they were pleased with the fact of this film, whereas later on it became suspicious, you know, perhaps in the mind of the Africans I think many of them thought perhaps we really were making money and we hadn't let on, and that whole rapport fell away in the next two or three years quite quickly. And that's when I left the country.

Davis: Describe a little bit about the warehouse that you used, about how you did the sets, creation of the night-club. Where you got the idea of the night-club from, because it seems to me that the night-club you create is a Hollywood night-club. And the Africanisation of the dress by your friend. Can you describe those details?

Rutherford: Well, to begin with, I would say that we had zilch money, I mean, we really had very little money, the money we'd put in only went far enough for stock and things like that, and any locations we used really had to exist. But it was quite essential that we had somewhere that we could record some of the music. Some of it we managed to do by borrowing sound studios. Some of it we had this idea of a night-club, I don't know where that arose from because there was not such thing like that, I mean, that was real pure fantasy. But we also felt very strongly - I say "we," there was a kind of division all there time, there were about two or three of us who were very interested in this whole African business, we wanted to stress the African, so we tried to create this night-club as we imagined it might be, with an African atmosphere, with sort of decorations in it, using figures of African people, using indigenous material, bamboos and straws and things like that. And we found this old warehouse which was empty, and we had to block out all the warehouse windows, and to try to improve the sound we all brought blankets from our own houses, I mean we raided our bedrooms and we were quite cold at night because we had nothing left in the houses, because we were hanging these blankets up to try to deaden the sound, in the place, and all that was built with very very little money, most of it was volunteered, and so the properties came out of our homes and things like that. And there was a very amusing incident really, because the three crooks in the film were composed of three men, one of whom was a lawyer, the other was a general handyman, and the other man I think was a student. The general handyman I found very compatible, and he kind of volunteered to help when I was shifting things and trying to put things away, and eventually I got to the stage of thinking "Well, really this man is really very helpful, and I think that I could leave a lot to him." And so he came and helped me put the camera away, all sorts of valuable equipment, lights and things like that, and locked them all up. So from then I found that I could trust him very much. And he was a guy called Woody - can't remember what his other name was now - and eventually I trusted him so much that I said, "Well, could you go to the bank and get the wages?" "Sure," he said, he'd go

to the bank and get the wages. And this continued, this sort of real helpmate, I mean, he was terrific on the film. After the film was over, I was out one day driving with another African, doing something in the town, when I saw a little crocodile of prisoners in prison uniforms, crossing the street, and I said, "That's Woody, what the hell's happened, what'd he do wrong?" And the man I was with said, "Oh, that's Woody, didn't you know, he's always in and out of jail." "But," I said, "I trusted him with everything," "Oh, yes," he said, "well, he liked you, he wouldn't have done anything against you." So I had been giving this man, who was a known criminal, all the money, transport, to and fro and yet he had been completely sort of loyal, and helpful, towards me.

Davis: What happened when Korda came down to research or reconnoitre "Cry, the Beloved Country" - he saw your film?

Rutherford: Yes, he saw the film -

Davis: Maybe you could start by saying "Korda came down -"

Rutherford: Yes, well - after the production of the film, when it was actually finished, and we were starting to release it, it got more and more attention from various people. One of the people who appeared on the scene was Zoltan Korda, because he was coming out to see the lie of the land to make "Cry, the Beloved Country" from the Alan Paton book. And he saw the film and said that he didn't think there was any talent in Africa, which I thought was very unfair, I remember we had some interviews in the press, and I felt very strongly that there was a lot of talent, perhaps some of the talent which we had been using was still a little raw, but there was a lot of ability there. And so I was very disappointed really when he decided to make the principal actors those from the United States. Of course, that was Sidney Poitier and er, Canada Lee, at that time.

Riesenfeld: Did he actually say that in public?

Rutherford: Zoltan Korda said "There is no talent amongst the African actors", which I thought was wholly shortsighted and impatient, I mean he obviously did not look very carefully, because even at that stage the talent existed, it existed, as I said earlier on, more in the townships, the white people didn't see much of that talent, but we'd already found a lot of it for "Jim", there was no question that if he'd really made a serious effort, I'm quite sure he could have created some more African stars. It was an opportunity.

There were a lot of, of course there were a lot of amusing and irritating incidents during the making of any film, there always is, and one of the things which was quite amusing was - I can't remember now whether it was the director, or soundman, or somebody heard these men in the street lifting a very, very heavy object, and they were singing, and he said to one of the black members of the crew, "What is it they sing," I mean - and this guy said, "Well, it's a lifting song," he said, "What do you mean, a lifting song?" And he said, "They just sing this song when they're lifting a heavy object." And somehow or another we all got intrigued with this, and said, "Let's reproduce that on film," it had a marvelous kind of rhythm to it, and it was really inconsequential, it wasn't in the script at all. And so eventually we got this, it really looked marvelous, these guys were picking up this huge crate, and they were shoving it into this lorry, and that's really amusing, and very nice," so we just forgot about it, we went on with the film, it was just sort of edited in as an incident in the film, which had, actually it was very artificial, it had no real meaning. And then one day when we were sitting, er, looking through the film in the projection room, and I was with one of the black assistants, and I said, "Listen, you know, we



never have found out what those men are really singing." And he said, "Oh, you didn't know. I said, "No, I don't know", he said, "They were singing, 'To hell with those goddam white men who make us work so hard and pay us nothing.'" Or words to this effect. So we - "What are we going to do?" We decided, Forget it, we would just leave it in the film. And of course it amused the black audience enormously, because they said all sorts of thing about white people in this long rhythmic song that went on.

Riesenfled: I want to go back and do one thing again. You said you wanted to make the film as a response, to counteract the influence that you saw from American films on blacks in South Africa. Can you start there and take us all the way to essentially where you were driven out of business by the larger production companies.

Rutherford: OK. Well, really, the whole story is kind of sad. I mean, we started off with very naive, very idealistic, we saw this situation where the African population were being fed these miserable films, I mean, they were full of violence, they were full of trivial lives, as I say, they were the cheapest kind of film you could get out of Hollywood, gangster films, stupid kind of cowboy films. The image that the Africans were being given was the worst you could possibly give them, no wonder that they had at that time a lot of sort of superficial mimicking of the way white people behaved, I mean, they were dressing like these stupid people in these American films, they were often mimicking the kind of robberies that they saw in these films, there was no question about that, and it really was a case of where you could see quite clearly that they were mimicking the poorest image that they could find, and they were imitating the violence and the sort of way of life which probably never existed but existed in the idea of the Hollywood film director's mind. I'm not saying, certainly "Jim" was not a realistic thing in its place, but we tried to put something in its place which had some of those elements which were entertaining but were were not not so so miserably really. And really we all worked very hard, I think people were really quite sincere once they got this idea that we could eventually build up a small black film industry. We thought in terms of doing commercial work, we were going to do shorts and promotion material, things like that, the usual way in which people make a little extra money in the film business to keep going. And then try to get money every now and then and make a feature film.

Riesenfled: So that you thought that if you could create an all-black film industry you could counteract that Hollywood image?

Rutherford: Yes. We certainly thought that if we could create a black film industry that they would gradually take over with their own personality, with their own identity, I mean, it's a buzz-word of today, but I mean that was what we hoped, that they would do, and then they would completely forget about this image of the American type of film, worst American type of film, and we would hope that they would, I mean, we hoped that eventually we would get stories, all sorts of real information that would come out about the African way of life.

Riesenfled: You said that at that time you felt that that was your political contribution, that was a political act for you to do that.

Rutherford: Yes, at that time it was a political act, it was so contrary to anything that they were getting, and it seemed to us like a way of making a contribution towards African society at that time, as I said, unfortunately, we were very naive. We couldn't foresee how terrible the situation was going to be. And it seems to me now like fiddling whilst Rome burned. Within a very few years it became a very terrible situation. But we met up with the worst aspect of the film industry, too. The type of competition, the unscrupulous attitude towards us which the distributors, the cinema-owners, all those people showed, they showed complete cynicism about any of our ideas. The African Films threat to break us up

worked, I mean, eventually we couldn't hold on, we couldn't manage to do enough work, get enough money in to have an independent situation. So gradually we all went our different ways. I left the country and went back to England, so did the cameraman, if I remember, I think the soundman took a job with African Films, people just dispersed. It was very sad, because of course nothing came of it, I mean, there is no real film industry today.

Riesensfeld: How aware were you at the time of apartheid, and of the injustice that was there in South Africa, how aware?

Rutherford: Well - yes and no, we saw this situation, but it seemed as though it was getting better all the time. It certainly didn't stand out in the way in which it stood out later on. But of course, the pay difference, for example, between a worker who was white and a worker who was black was still enormous, and shortly after that, I became disillusioned with the whole film industry, and I returned to Africa, and went into partnership with somebody who was farming, I went sort of to the other extreme of my nature, really, in that sense. But there we certainly saw how poorly the farm-workers were paid, and I used to get into long disputes with my neighbours because I was paying three times what they were paying, and they were quarreling, and it's horrible the phrases that these kind of people would say, like "Oh, you're spoiling the natives," I gave them sleeping accommodation, I had them built proper bunk-houses and things, like that, which they didn't have on the farms, they were expected to go and just build their own little rondavals on some part of the farm that wasn't being used for agricultural purposes. And they were very poorly treated, there was no doubt about that. On the other hand, in no way was there the kind of violence which one saw later on.

Riesensfeld: What about going into townships then, what did you see, what was the experience like?

Davis: Were you afraid at all?

Rutherford: When we first went into the townships, not at all, we could go into the townships quite without any fear. I had friends amongst the black people. Sure, the contrast was pretty horrible, I mean, Alexander Township existed in those days, and it was a shanty town, there was no doubt about that. There were some better buildings, and there were some shops and things like that, but very little, there was extreme poverty there. But I don't think there was - well, I say there wasn't the degree of violence that you see now - but it did exist in fact, I just remembered then one incident where the police were finding some illegal brewing of beer, which apparently was for some reason an offence against the city laws, and the policemen who went in to get these people were shooting wildly, I mean, they had no reason to shoot at these people. I don't remember whether they shot over their heads, or whether they injured anybody, I certainly didn't see that, I think they were just shooting wildly to frighten these people, but I mean even that was an act of extreme provocation. But that was unusual at that time it was unusual.

Davis: You said that the municipality at the time was very helpful towards the making of the film, can you tell us what the attitude was?

Rutherford: Well, we had to get permits, of course, to work in the streets, shooting in the street and things like that. And they were all interested, all favourable towards, Oh, what a good idea, this is marvelous, we're very pleased to see this happening.

Davis: Can you begin again and just mention the word "municipality".

Rutherford: What happened was that we dealt with the Non-European Affairs Department of Johannesburg, which was the municipal organization dealing with everything to do with what were called "Non-European", I don't know if they still use that phrase. But that was black Africans. And the people in those offices and the people in those jobs were always people who were really keen on working for Africans. It wasn't a case of restricting Africans, as it later became, it was more people who were trying to improve their situation. And it was with education. But that changed very rapidly under the Nationalists. But even the - I remember the Minister of Native Affairs, I went to that man, because I wanted Dolly Rathebe to get a passport, because they felt that she should have the opportunity of leaving the country and going somewhere where she'd earn really good money. And so I went through the process of helping her to apply for a passport, and the Minister then was very helpful, and said "Oh, what -" you know, "-certainly help to get this", and got the passport for her. She later decided - or at that stage, she decided not to go, and so I didn't have to do anything more, but there wasn't the attitude like there would be a few years later. With tremendous restrictions.

Davis: So that, supposing the film industry had started, it would have suffered both from the authorities and from the Schlesinger organization. It probably could not have survived.

Rutherford: I think it probably could not have survived, no, in view of what happened, a) as you mentioned, commercially it would have been very unfavourable to the commercial organizations, they would have fought it, and they would have had the power to fight it. Which we didn't realize, we were too naive to realize that. And I would think, with the Nationalist regime, they would have seen it as a subversive force, which indeed it would have become, of course, I mean, if it had gone on from that stage where we were thinking, as I say very simple-minded terms of entertainment, if the political situation remained as it did remain the way it was, it would very quickly have changed into a very political organization, it would have been, could have been very instrumental in helping Africans, if they were making their own films at that time, and I'm quite sure the Nationalist government wouldn't want to have anything to do with it, they would certainly have stopped it, I'm sure.

Riesenfeld: Looking back on "Jim Comes to Jo'burg" today, what does it feel like, does it feel like a total fantasy?

Rutherford: Looking at it now, it seems so unreal, it does seem like a fantasy. It's very difficult to cast your mind back, I mean I have shown it, I think I mentioned I've shown it to a black audience in a university, and they were horrified, they saw it as though it had been made now, they couldn't see it in the historical context as anything constructive at all. Because they just interpreted it as another patronising attitude towards black people. They couldn't see that at that time, apart from this business, which I think was an unfortunate mistake of using the white people at the end as employing the black people, I don't see why we couldn't have had black people at the time, people just walked into that without thinking about it. And that created a sort of patronising effect. But otherwise it suited the psychology of the audience very well, because they identified with a waiter, you know, somebody who was in a very simple job, people who were doing this kind of thing who could then suddenly become recognized as an individual. I'm not thinking so much of just a commercial success, I think the fact that a black man or a black woman could be a popular singer was really news to them. I know there was entertainment in the township, I've said that, but the idea of them being on a film - as we know, a film has a tremendous emotional effect on people, they have these sort of ideas of filmstars and so on who look back on

that early time of the Hollywood, they became icons of the world, filmstars, so at that time, it meant that those black people who had starred in that film were put in that category, in their minds they became the equal of the Hollywood filmstars, instantly. Just by being in that film. So that had a tremendous effect on their own morale, and on their own ego. Which was one of the very constructive things about it. But it's very difficult to see that now, as Isay, you really have to project yourself right back into the historical circumstances, because today, it looks so trivial. And all the lack of technique and things become very evident to me as a much older person looking at it and seeing what could have been done even with the little money we had, cinematically it's hardly a piece which one can look at with any kind of pride.

Riesenfeld: Someone we interviewed described it as like one of their home movies, it was like a home movie for them, they could relate to the people they saw on the screen. See people they knew.

Rutherford: Oh, yes. Well, of course, in that sense, the population was pretty small, I mean, it's not a very big country, it's not a very big population, really. So that people could, especially in Johannesburg, City, at any rate, they would certainly see characters that they knew, and this would add to this whole feeling of identification with the film. It was their film, so even though we made it in those days, and now it would be difficult for a black person to see it like that, now, I think in those days, a black South African did really see it as their film. Which was a very satisfactory part of it.

Riesenfeld: Which is really why you did it.

Rutherford: Exactly. Oh, yes. That was certainly what was in our minds, because when we had all those original discussions, we thought, Alright, we could make a film which would get a prize at Cannes if we were lucky, or get achievement somewhere else, I said, Well, what's the good of that, what good is that going to do black Africans? And even if we had made a film which was describing the - , and exposing the very worst conditions, that Africans were living in, and showing, because there were, as I said, in the townships, a lot of appalling conditions, in that country, we'd still be speaking to the converted in another country, we wouldn't - I doubt very much whether at that stage a documentary would have done much good. I think all it would have been done, we've been able to get the benefit of it by having done, which would have been entirely to do with us, and not with the African population. Rightly or wrongly, I don't know, in the long run that was the argument, that was what we felt we should be doing, we would be doing this entertainment film for for those people.