

LIONEL NGAKANE

May 23, 1989

Lionel: Well, as you can imagine, one never thought of being an actor in an international sense. One went to cinemas and saw these films, but they were all Hollywood, with a few British films, -

Davis: My recording level was low -

Lionel: Well, as you can imagine, we grew up in SA, in Johannesburg, and one went to cinema, and one saw Hollywood films, or British films, but the thought of being a professional actor and being in one of those films, well it was, you know - you couldn't imagine it. And how I got into Cry, the Beloved Country, which was an international film was quite by fluke. Because at the time I was just starting to be a journalist, and I went for an interview, and I was refused the interview. So I went with the people who were being interviewed. And lo and behold, I was picked for a film test, and I had my film test, and the next thing I knew was that I was on the shortlist to play this particular part. And Sidney Poitier was going to be the one to play the part originally, and they were testing for people to play his mates, and Korda, Zoltan Korda, suddenly had the bright idea of having Sidney Poitier play a more important part than the other, and letting me play that part. So on the basis of that, I got into the film. But then I also worked as Zoltan Korda's personal assistant, which meant that I had to get involved in all kinds of things like even finding actors, and you know, casting and all this, and at the somewhere, towards the end of the film, he said, I think you should try and become a film director. Which was - I don't know whether it was the wrong thing or the right thing to say, but that fired me, and I said Yes. And I came to England, tried to go to film schools, but I didn't have any money, so I carried on as an actor, learning to be an actor because it was really learning to be an actor, but with that in mind. And eventually, er, in 1961, I started doing my first film, my first documentary, Vukanya Awake, which was a documentary on SA, just showing, at the time, it was just showing the conditions in Soweto, and some of the problems of Soweto. Er - political and social. And from there on I then moved on to make other documentaries and short feature films.

Davis: This was purely outside of SA, though.

Lionel: Oh, yeah. I haven't done, I've never made a film in SA, although I've made films about SA. But I've never made a film in SA. Because partly, one, I'm not allowed to go into SA, two, the kind of subjects I'd like to tackle in SA would be subjects that I'm sure one would not be allowed to make, I mean, they're not subversive, but they'd be subjects, social subjects, political subjects, about the reality of SA. But one would not be allowed to - I don't understand why the SA authorities are so scared of the situation being shown on film. I mean, they've got foreign journalists there who are reporting daily about the situation in SA, and yet when it's film, then they are scared. And even more so, even more scared when it is a SA, a black SA especially, making the film.

Daniel: Let's go back -

Lionel: Long story. How would you like to - ?

Davis: I suppose everyone had confidence in the director -

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Lionel: Well, we didn't know him. I mean, one can't say I had confidence, because I'd never been in a film, you know. But I mean, we got very friendly, and -

Davis: Were you familiar with the novel, before?

Lionel: Well, I knew Alan Paton, as a boy. Again, my father ran a boys' delinquent hostel, and the intakes from this hostel were from Alan Paton's reformatory. And Alan Paton was on the committee of the hostel. So they used to have meetings at home, and I used to meet him at home (slurred), this was when I was a small boy. And then one day I found myself, I said, er, Hello, and he said, Oh, you, what are you doing here? And I said, Well, I'm Zoltan Korda's assistant, and I'm in the film, you know, I'm being tested for the film. So, anyway, that was quite a nice coincidence. And also the area where -, the story of Cry, the Beloved Country, and Pimville, and Orlando and all this, the story was set where I lived. So one was aware of, conscious of the problems that he was dealing with in the novel.

Davis: So as far as you were concerned, it had an authentic feel about it?

Lionel: Oh, yeah, it was authentic, I mean, the monks, I went to the school, St. Peter's, and St. Peter's had to do with St. Cyprian's in Sophiatown, which is where Trevor Huddleston was, and the monks were the monks at St. Cyprian's. I mean, we actually shot in St. Cyprian's. I mean, the monks in St. Cyprian's were shot in the film, were shot actually in St. Cyprian's where the monks were, who were the teachers of the school, which was an Anglican school run by the monks. So in that sense, I mean, most of the things in that film were absolutely authentic. The situation in Johannesburg, which was the urban situation, and the situation in Natal, which was the rural situation. And that whole thing about the village and the boy leaving home, and all that, it still happens today. It's still what happens today, people leave the rural areas to go to the city, to try and better themselves. The scene of the miners in the train, that still happens today, migrant labourers, and the tragedy is that this thing of migrant labourers has been going on for so long that even today it's still going on. The film was made in 1950, and at the time we were beginning, we were saying, That has got to stop. But it still goes on even today.

Davis: When the film opened, was it very controversial in SA?

Lionel: I wasn't there, but what I know is that in fact I think the Prime Minister went to the premier. I mean, SA was very proud of that film. You know, they didn't look at it as a subversive film from the whites, you know, it was talking about the condition of the blacks, but I mean, everybody knows the condition of the blacks, and so it wasn't, they didn't feel it controversial. But that film wasn't made for SA. That film was made for the world, as a look in into SA. And from the SA point of view, it was perfectly alright, it was about these blacks who behaved this way, we know all about them, so it didn't matter. So there was no controversy in terms of that film, as I say, I think the Prime Minister, in fact, I'm sure, the Prime Minister went to the SA premiere of the film.

Davis: Was there any strong feeling at that time among black SAs that a black SA should have taken the part that Poitier took?

Lionel: Well, we talk about Poitier, and we forget the late Canada Lee, who was the star of the film, and that man's story is - I mean, he was to me, he was politically the right person, apart from being the good and great actor, black American actor, that he was, because at that time he was suffering under the McCarthy thing, and he hadn't worked for a long time. In fact, Zoltan Korda was very brave in getting Canada to play in this film, you know, because the film

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could have been, had no distribution in America, because he had been blacklisted. So you had Canada. And then you had Sidney Poitier. Then you had - I can't remember his name now, also a black American. Then we had a girl, a West Indian girl, from here (ie, London). And then we had another actor from here. Connor - Airdrie Conner. Now, you had these people, and for SAs in those days - and I think even today - they appreciated, one, there were black Americans, there were blacks from other countries, which is fantastic. Two, they were coming to deal with situations, and when you saw them, you couldn't tell the difference whether they were American or British or West Indian, or whatever it was, they were blacks. And they mixed with blacks. And they themselves, the Sidneys and the Canadas, appreciated the situation. And when they were there, they had certain experiences that made them even more appreciative of the situation. And er - for instance, they were not staying in hotels, they had to get a house outside town so that they could stay there, because they couldn't stay in a hotel because they were black. Whenever they went to white houses, one thing was, I possibly would be the only black, because nobody had blacks in their houses socially. So that they were not only in the film, but they, by being in the country, they appreciated it more. And the story became real to them, too. I mean, Canada, within a short time, suddenly became a SA, and it shows in the film.

Davis: People often use the word "liberal" with regard to Allan Paton, now they use it as a derogatory term. Do you feel in any sense that we should evaluate Cry, the Beloved Country any differently now for any reason?

Lionel: No, one, I don't think the word "liberal" is derogatory. It's another step, it's another situation in the political situation of the country. I would even say it's halfway (Laugh) between the right wing and the left wing. I mean, not the left wing, I mean the right wing and the democratic wing. I mean, when I say democratic, I mean overall democracy in SA, rather than democracy for whites. The film I think should always be regarded, I think it's a classic. Because it is the first of the films that are political. It's the first film, I mean, international film, made on SA to bring out the situation in SA. Yes, when we're looking at it today, let's not forget that it was written by Allan Paton, it was directed by Zoltan Korda, it was made by London Films. But for all that, all these people were not involved. It is the first, the forerunner of whatever other films which are concerned with the conditions the situation, political, social, economic situation, of the blacks in SA. So to me, it's a classic, it's the first.

Davis: Did you at that time see Come Back, Africa when it was first made, came out? Have you seen it recently at all?

Lionel: Er - I haven't seen it for a long time. But again, there was another situation -

Davis: - Maybe you could use the words Come Back, Africa -

Lionel: Yeah, um - Come Back, Africa was another kind of film. Because Come Back, Africa again dealt with the conditions. (Cough) But, um, the scale was smaller, naturally, than the Hollywood, I mean, British film, Cry, the Beloved Country. But Lionel Rogosin, I think, again, I salute him, for to come all the way to SA, and I think the word is "escapulate" - I can never say it (encapsulate) - but grab the whole situation, one, the township situation, the characters in the township, their conditions, their this, their that, then mix that with the young intellectuals, and see how the two mix, because, he may not have known it, but we always have suffered from a division, you had the people who had been to university and what have you, who considered themselves above, socially above the rest of the population. Er -

which is not the case now. But in that time, you had a new generation, the young, educated blacks who were involved, who were journalists, were this, were that. And Lionel mixed the two. And it's, it's a film of the era. Now whether - but it was, I think outside of the moral curiosity, inside was, you know, exciting, our image on the screen, that was the feeling about it, you know, image on the screen (mumble) But I don't think one would say Come Back, Africa today has had, will have as much an impact as, say, Cry, the Beloved Country as a historical document. But I think one, I will always respect Lionel for having come to see, to feel, and to give. But it's on a shallower level.

Davis: If we look at the span between Cry, the Beloved Country and Cry, Freedom, where Cry, Freedom again is a case of a British director going to SA with effectively an international team of actors and making a film about SA, has there been any kind of advance from, in that sense, in the sense that black SAs still don't have access to the means of film production not to mention, get into the question of distribution, simply, film production still has to come from the outside.

Lionel: It'll be for a long time that it'll have to come from the outside. (Cough.) Um - as you know, to make a film is very complicated, one, finance, two, distribution, three, the director and the writer and Now, in SA we do not have one, within the country, let's talk about that, within the country, within the country we don't have the kind of blacks who have had the training to tackle such an undertaking, a project. And we haven't got the money, I mean, you just talk, from script to directing to money to distribution to - you know, um - we, um, at the moment, I'm involved with African cinema, I mean, continent-wise - and now, television has helped, in SA, because we've got some technicians, who have been working for television - so that's helped. Um - also, we have the plays, the protest plays, political plays, which are for the townships. Some of them come out, like Sizwe Banzi is Dead and - but we don't have yet the people within the country and the resources to make an Attenborough-type film. Outside, again, we don't have many blacks who make films. Er - and therefore, you know, again, - but - I speak, you know, as someone who believes in the democracy, in a future democratic SA, and therefore I don't discriminate between white and black. But there are whites who are also involved in change in SA, and have got the expertise, or some expertise, and when you take a film like Mapantsula, there you've got collaboration between whites and a black, and out comes this film. So internally I think it is possible we will see after this Mapantsula, we'll begin to see more films, unless the government suppresses them, where you've got partnership between whites and blacks who believe in change, genuine change in that country, and that kind of partnership also helps in developing blacks, or Africans, into the media, into the film media.

Davis: What kind of part do you think the cinema and television play in the liberation struggle in SA, do you think it's a very important part that they play, or not?

Lionel: At the moment, it's not very significant part -

Well, cinema and television are not playing a great part yet, as much as they should amongst the blacks in SA. Let's take cinema first. er - you take a place like Soweto, which has got over a million people. I don't know - I think there are not more than two cinemas. The films that they see are films that, one, are the normal-run films, Hollywood, what have you. Two, censored. Alright? Now, we've got a situation where they're saying, blacks can go to white, all cinemas are open to blacks and whites, and what have you. But that doesn't mean a thing. Yes, the few top blacks who have got a car and can drive eleven miles from Soweto to the city, and have got the money to go in will go to those cinemas. But it doesn't open up cinemas for blacks. The ordinary cinema-goer should be the ordinary person. Er -

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So, in terms of just ordinary cinema, the blacks have got very little cinema. Secondly, when you talk about films that are relevant to them and their condition, er, No. Theatre, yes. We've got, you know, our own writers, at home now who are doing political plays. But, with cinema, no. However, there's a new thing that has arisen, which is being encouraged, and that is, video. To do video programmes. Now, video programmes can be made, you don't have to have a big unit, film unit, that everybody can see. So you can make your video programmes. And also, the other good thing about video is that they can have programmes from abroad brought in. Sometimes illegally (laugh). So that we've still got a long way to go, and it's not that we don't have the people, I mean, we were filming in Harare, and the whole - and it was an MGM film, and the entire equipment, electrical equipment, was brought by one black guy who knew how everything worked. He had been entrusted with this, to drive to Harare, and he was in charge of that equipment and all the electricians from Britain consulted him if anything went wrong, I mean, the technicians are there. And there wouldn't be any problem with getting technicians. But we need now, er, well, we need to train more people and what have you, but in the climate of SA, the political climate of SA, the government has made it quite clear that cinema is a dangerous - I mean, if they can close newspapers and magazines because they don't agree with what is published in those magazines, on the stance of the magazine, and put the editors in prison, you know, cinema, making even 16mm films, is dangerous, I mean, for anybody. You have suppressed, even Mapantsula - I hope I've said it right, this time, even Mapantsula they had to use a ruse. They said they were filming one thing, and filmed another. God knows what's going to happen, but I don't think anybody, going to be easy next time for somebody to make a film that way. (Telephone ring.) (Just the right time. Hello? Yeah. I'm OK, I'm just....)

Davis: Could you comment on the difference between the image of blacks in Cry, the Beloved Country, the part that you played was essentially of a criminal who is victimised by society, he becomes a criminal because of the repression of society, whereas Cry, Freedom deals with a black who, although he is a victim, because he is murdered, nevertheless is someone who has made a statement about his own personality, about black freedom. Is that something you could comment on? The image of blacks.

Lionel: Well, you're talking about two films, you're talking about Cry, the Beloved Country and Cry, Freedom. The image, yeah, yeah. One was in 1950, and the other, Cry, Freedom -

Davis: Maybe we can start again so we won't get my voice -

Lionel: Yeah. Um - we have two films, Cry, the Beloved Country and Cry, Freedom. The gap between them is 1950 to 1980 - whatever it is, 7. So we're talking about 37 years' gap. One was made in 1950, and - uh, the white, in Cry, the Beloved Country, who gets killed was for that time somebody who was looking towards the future and saying, There's gotta be change. But that was in 1957. (sic) Cry, Freedom is not - first of all, let us say it, Cry, Freedom is not - is about the white man, the story of the white man who gets victimised because of his friendship towards a black man of a certain type. But it's not about the black man. That's another story. The story of Biko has still got to be told. Uh - but this is the story about a white man. Now, it is not a white man who is involved politically in the black struggle. It is a white man who through his involvement with a political leader gets persecuted by the SA government. So, I mean, to me, it could be a story about any white man who befriends an African and is persecuted. It doesn't tell me about his commitment or his whatever, his commitment to the liberation struggle. We've had people who have been killed, we've had people who have been jailed, banned, persecuted, and still are completely committed to the liberation and democratization of SA. So, the two films to me are two different films. And I

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er - I think I did say, it's a classic, Cry, the Beloved Country is a classic. Cry, the Beloved Country, for its time, is well ahead of Cry, Freedom today, at this moment. And the image of the black man in Cry, the Beloved Country, was much stronger. It dealt with the black man in his situation, his daily life, I remember when we filmed in the slums, in the shanty towns, and what have you. And it was true, the shebeens, the illicit drinking-houses and all that, it's absolutely true for the time. You look at Cry, Freedom, there is the one scene of the bulldozers, in the township, in the shanty towns, but there is nothing that sticks to my mind as saying, This was, you know, there's the brutality of the police, I see it on television every day. In fact, I see worse on television. So it doesn't move me further in the situation of SA.

Davis: How important is it, do you feel for black SAs to be making films about SA?

Lionel: Absolutely essential. It's absolutely essential for anybody in the world that they talk about themselves, they write about themselves, they make music about themselves, they make films about themselves, I always say to people, If I have a toothache and I go and I tell you I've got a toothache, you may have had a toothache, and you know, you sympathise with me because it's aching. But you cannot feel exactly how it aches with me, I'm the only one who knows how it aches. And the same thing - nobody is as qualified to talk about the black situation in SA than a black, nobody will ever be qualified to do it. Technically, they might be better. But in terms of really feeling it, and saying it, I mean, I know that when I've got my SA friends and we're talking, we start talking about home, and the funny things, and the tragedy, and the this, and the that, I mean, it's all there, and nobody who hasn't lived in that situation can tell it, even if he can, a script is written but a black man, but there are those particular things that will never come out.

Davis: Do you consider yourself to be a SA first and a filmmaker afterwards, or - what are the priorities in your life? How do you balance a commitment towards the destruction of apartheid and your commitment as an artist overall?

Lionel: Me, my life is very simple. There's no complication. I'm a SA first. Everything comes after. I'm a SA first, I shouldn't be in Britain, as far as I'm concerned, I should be home. I chose to be a filmmaker, I shouldn't be making films in Britain, I should be making films at home, or from home. I'm asked sometimes to make films about SA, and it's very difficult. One, I haven't been there for a long time. So I must have lost a lot. Um - two, not being able to make them in SA, and have to use, you know, library footage, and things like that, I mean, you don't, it's not the same. But my - I'm getting old now, I don't know, maybe I'll die before then, but my big, big ambition is to get home and sit, we've a family farm in the Eastern Transvaal, and sit on the verandah with a typewriter and write a script, and it'd be a better script than I could ever write from England. (Laugh.) And make the film.

Davis: Every subject of value that comes out of SA, whether it's art, or drama, or film, is about apartheid in one form or another. Do you think it's possible at this time to make a worthwhile film about SA that doesn't deal with that?

Lionel: I think it would be impossible. If you're going to deal with black people, or black people inconjunction with white people, or social conditions, or whatever, apartheid will always be there. The country's built on apartheid, every facet of one's life, even when you're white, apartheid is there. So it's impossible to make anything in SA without apartheid you cannot cleanse, you know, bleach it and take apartheid out, because every facet, if you're talking about, even if you make a film about whites, apartheid will be there, because their

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servants will be black. If you're making a film in Johannesburg, you know, who sweeps the streets? Who are the nannies? Er, you know, the incidents in the streets, you're not dealing with apartheid, but it's there. And I think it's impossible to deal with any facet of SA without apartheid being there, because apartheid is like, I dunno, it's a package within which people live. Oh, I don't know, think of a football, and inside the football is - people, full of people, and the skin round it is apartheid. Whatever you do inside, you're enveloped by this apartheid.

Davis: What do you say then about people coming from the outside, and make films in SA which could be made anywhere, what is there function in this whole business, are they for or against? is it possible for them to be neutral, can they go there and make a film and still be neutral?

Lionel: You know, there have been people who have been going to SA and making films. Now, there are those who went there because it was cheaper, you had all the facilities, and you can make those films. Er - some of them have got nothing to do with SA. Some of them are a distortion of our history, from our point of view as black people, you want to do a thing like Chaka Zulu, you know, it's a distortion of our history. So, from that point of view, one deplores these people. Two, which is very important, when you really look at those films, and find out who really put the money, somewhere eventually you find that it's SA money, and if you go further, you might even find that there's a little bit of government money in that. Then there is the other side of this, that these films that are made in SA are made by people who don't care about SA, they're exploiting SA. We have said for years that we need, there should be a cultural boycott, and these people are flouting the cultural boycott. Instead of saying, We're with you, and we're not going to go and make films in SA, they say, Ah, it's easier and cheaper and (mumble) and some of them are naive - (beep)

Lionel: There are a lot of these people who go there to make these films, some of them really don't think about the SA situation, they're going there, it's a good location, it's cheap, and money is there. Others - (break)

Lionel: We have two kinds of people making films in SA. There are those who just see it as a good location, cheap, lovely sunshine, and also there's money. And then of course, there are those that I am sure are really, if you talk to them, you'd find that they are, well, I wouldn't say collaborators, but they are pro the regime in SA. And, er - but what makes one happy, what makes one really happy, is that when you find you have international stars, very big stars, who have declared themselves anti-apartheid. You have directors, producers, er - and companies who say they will not er make films in SA. And to me, that means more to me than companies who go to SA and exploit the situation there.

Davis: The character you played in Cry, the Beloved Country - relate that to the reality of SA, both then and now.

Lionel: In Cry, the Beloved Country I played the part of er, Absalom, who is the son of the old priest in the country, who leaves home to go to the city, where his sister is. Er - but when he gets there, of course, he gets, he's neglected by - I must be right, sister-aunt - anyway, neglected, and gets into (cough) sort of, kind of, with the gangs, and becomes a thief, and this, and eventually kills this white man, not because he was a white man, but because the white man found him stealing, and they happen to be carrying a gun. And this is sort of normal, when my father had a reform-, was running this hostel, we had boys exactly like that, who came from the country, came to the city to come and join relatives so that they could live or get education, or whatever it is, or a job, and because of the situation, found a difficulty either to get an education because of school fees in those days, or couldn't get jobs, and the next

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thing, they got themselves into trouble. And this is really what Absolom was. The only thing was, that then he goes and kills a liberal (laugh).

Davis: What about the death penalty part of it?

Lionel: Well, there's nothing much really.

Lionel: Well, as you can imagine, we grew up in SA, in Johannesburg, and one went to cinema, and one saw Hollywood films, or British films, but the thought of being a professional actor and being in one of those films, well it was, you know - you couldn't imagine it. And how I got into it, the Beloved Country, which was an international film was quite by chance. Because at the time I was just starting to be a journalist, and I went for an interview, and I was refused the interview. So I went with the people who were being interviewed. And lo and behold, I was picked for a film test, and I had my film test, and the next thing I knew was that I was on the shortlist to play this particular part. And Sidney Poitier was going to be the one to play the part originally, and they were testing for people to play his mates, and Korda, Zoltan Korda, suddenly had the bright idea of having Sidney Poitier play a more important part than the other, and letting me play that part. So on the basis of that, I got into the film. But then I also worked as Zoltan Korda's personal assistant, which meant that I had to get involved in all kinds of things like even finding actors, and you know, casting and all this, and at the somewhere, towards the end of the film, he said, I think you should try and become a film director. Which was - I don't know whether it was the wrong thing or the right thing to say, but that fired me, and I said Yes. And I came to England, tried to go to film schools, but I didn't have any money, so I carried on as an actor, learning to be an actor because it was really learning to be an actor, but with that in mind. And eventually, in 1961, I started doing my first film, my first documentary, Vukanya Awake, which was a documentary on SA, just showing, at the time, it was just showing the conditions in Soweto, and some of the problems of Soweto. It - political and social. And from there on I then moved on to make other documentaries and short feature films.

Davis: This was purely outside of SA, though.

Lionel: Oh, yeah. I haven't done, I've never made a film in SA, although I've made films about SA. But I've never made a film in SA. Because partly, one, I'm not allowed to go into SA, two, the kind of subjects I'd like to tackle in SA would be subjects that I'm sure one would not be allowed to make, I mean, they're not subversive, but they'd be subjects, social subjects, political subjects, about the reality of SA. But one would not be allowed to - I don't understand why the SA authorities are so scared of the situation being shown on film. I mean, they've got foreign journalists there who are reporting daily about the situation in SA, and yet when it's film, they're scared. And even more so, even more scared when it is a SA, a black SA especially, making the film.

Davis: Let's go back -

Lionel: Long story. How would you like to - ?

Davis: I suppose everyone had confidence in the director -