

INTERVIEW WITH MYRTLE BERMAN

"COME BACK, AFRICA"

BY

PETER DAVIS

[TAPE : SIDE A]

MRS BERMAN: [Indistinct].

MR DAVIS: [Indistinct].

MRS BERMAN: But the name on the [indistinct] stuck.

[INDISTINCT - TAPE DISTORTING]

MRS BERMAN: Now this [indistinct] was the cultural attaché, and he got in with [indistinct] and [indistinct] we were invited, and Monty [indistinct].

[INDISTINCT - TAPE DISTORTING]

One man I wanted [indistinct].

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MRS BERMAN: [Indistinct].

MR DAVIS: Do you remember the - when you went on tour and you went down to Natal and you had a car accident? Do you remember that?

MRS BERMAN: Yes.

MR DAVIS: Can you tell me a little bit about that.

MRS BERMAN: No.

MR DAVIS: You can't remember anything, because Lionel in the manuscript said

touched on that.

MR DAVIS: Right. I'm just going to sort that now. And something that seemed to me very strange in reading the manuscript is, how little mention there is of Ellie in the manuscript. Just a couple of times and then maybe once he sort of mentions that she was pregnant at the time, and that ...

MRS BERMAN: That was Jonathan.

MR DAVIS: Ja. That seemed very strange to me that that - she had a very active part in the film, did she not, she was ...

MRS BERMAN: She was always around, because Lionel depended on her, and she did the [indistinct], he was always Ellie this, Ellie that, and so on. And, in fact, she had a really rough time. She - I don't think at the time - because they were fairly new together when they were here, and she was completely overridden by Lionel. I don't think he considered her needs for one second, that everything was what he had to do, and his times were so awful - I think were just times that she didn't even see him. And we were aware that, you know, she was young and very exploited if you like, but unaware. She was going along with everything, but we used to sort of meet as families, so Ellie was very much part of it. And, all the time that Lionel was here, it was Lionel and Ellie, Lionel and Ellie. And then we went to Israel, we met up with them, and we went away together, and we could still see the dynamic was the same, even though he wasn't working there, you know, he was a person who was not aware of his feelings, he was a bottled up guy, and he gave Ellie no support in her feelings.

Subsequently, I met her in New York when she had left him, and then, of course, she just burst out and told me how awful his side had been, and how terrible South Africa had been for her, how she was plunged into the situation, and no support given to her by Lionel, which I could verify. And she just got shot of the whole load of feelings as to why - and she was so anti him, she didn't want to have anything to do with him.

MR DAVIS: Ja, I was in correspondence with her, and at a certain point she had had enough of going over it, you know, and didn't want to go on any more. I sent her the manuscript for comment, and she sent me back some comments for it, ja.

MRS BERMAN: Yes. And I remember another time I saw her, she said: Now it's over, now I can get on with my life and make another life for myself. And, I don't know how successful she was, because I heard odd rumours of her being ill at the end. I don't really know what happened to her.

MR DAVIS: She was a dancer.

MRS BERMAN: Yes, I know.

MR DAVIS: Right. And she's still interested in dance, I think she teaches in some way maybe, but she is involved in dance [indistinct].

MRS BERMAN: Well, I hope she's [indistinct].

MR DAVIS: [Indistinct].

MRS BERMAN: Did she ever marry again?

And he used to give her the most impossible things like: Ellie order lunch for the cast. This and that and the next thing. And she was always there to pick up that sort of task, and she had the kids too, but she had a nanny. But I thought she had a really difficult life. The cameramen were very nice to her.

MR DAVIS: Do you remember there was a ...
MRS BERMAN: The German one.
MR DAVIS: [Indistinct].
MRS BERMAN: Yes.
MR DAVIS: Swiss.
MRS BERMAN: Yes, Swiss he was. What was his full name?
MR DAVIS: I think they called him Fred ...
MRS BERMAN: Fred.
MR DAVIS: ... that was [indistinct].
MRS BERMAN: It was Fred, yes.
MR DAVIS: If you remember anything about him specifically, or about Emil*.
MRS BERMAN: No, Emil, I remember a lot more about, because Emil became interested in South Africa, and he had a lively interest and a questioning mind, whereas Fred, my feeling about him was that he was here to do a job. He wanted to do a competent job, and that was it, the surroundings didn't really touch him in the way they did Emil. It really ...

[END OF TAPE : SIDE A]

[TAPE : SIDE B]

MRS BERMAN: ... he was involved too with someone who was politically aware, and he was so keen and eager, you know, he had that lovely enthusiasm about everything that he was doing. He really was a most delightful young man.
MR DAVIS: I think he's still delightful. We've had [indistinct] e-mails, and I can see he's a lot of fun.
MRS BERMAN: Yes.
MR DAVIS: And I hope I can meet him some time. I think he apparently taught in the States for a while as well, he taught [indistinct]. He's a big name in [indistinct].
MRS BERMAN: Well, I'm pleased he is, because he was quite sensitive. I thought that Fred was nothing like as sensitive as Emil was. Although I think that Fred was the senior man because he was older. I think [indistinct] spelt out, but there was just that feeling that he was.
MR DAVIS: Right, because he certainly made more - he made more films at that time.
MRS BERMAN: Actually, you know I think the kids had a rough time. I think they didn't see a lot of their father certainly, and not all that much of the mother. Although Ellie even used to take them around - take them around to them wherever they were, and they were difficult kids, because they wanted attention. I think Jonathan was the only one that reasonable placid as baby, but the other two were little hell cats.

MRS BERMAN:

I was - Monty and I were arrested after Sharpeville, and we then became very involved, and we - when we came out of jail, and we formed an underground organization, and underground sabotage organization and we were blowing up pylons and pass offices, and training people in the use of dynamite and so on and so forth, and linking up with other groups, and we tried to work with the ANC - we did work with the ANC, we did two jobs, sabotage jobs with them. But, they decided they wanted their own organization, so they came out with ...

MR DAVIS:

[Indistinct].

MRS BERMAN:

[Indistinct]. And - but we said to them we're still willing to work with you, so we did jobs with them. Now Monty was actually banned. He was restricted to the house for - no, he wasn't, but that was the threat that he would be under house arrest. He was banned from meetings. He plus one other constituted all that he could have, more than one was already a meeting. So he was for that reason very much at home because he couldn't go out to anything like a meeting. At one stage he started to get careless and said: What the hell. Because he was banned, the ban lapsed, then he was re-banned, so this was quite - I think it was in two or three years of time, so he decided that he was going to go and do a cultural talk at the centre of the Union of Southern African Artists on African culture and white culture, or something like that, and there was an informer there to inform the police and in two twos he was arrested. Now, he was arrested and charged, and he had our lawyer there, he had Sydney Kentridge as the barrister, and to cut a long story short, he got off with a sentence of guilty, but a fine and six months suspended sentence.

And at the end of that, the man who was our police minder, they allocated various policemen to various people, and we had a young man Coetzee, who subsequently became head of the whole show, he was an interesting man, very intelligent, very good looking, who used to walk around with [indistinct] in one pocket and [indistinct] in the other. And he used to refer to us as Monty and Myrtle, and we used to play games with him. He 'phoned me and he said: Myrtle, I've got Monty in jail. And I would say to him: Mrs Berman to you, and you've got Mr Berman in jail I understand. And we would proceed like that. And he said to Monty and to the lawyer: Come and have coffee with me. Which was not the sort of thing that you usually do but, there was something in the way he said: I've got something interesting to say to you. So, our lawyer, and there was a man called Bill [indistinct], and Monty went and had coffee with Coetzee, and he said to him: Look, we have got a spy right at the top of the communist party, and we know that you're not communists, you're all the more dangerous for that, because we doesn't know where you fit in. And you are going to be top of the - or amongst the first batch of house arrests. So, you know, I'm just giving you this warning.

.....

when we were active, they would come into the house, which was in Sandringham, Johannesburg, and they would hunt for dynamite under our kids beds, which wouldn't be a natural place to hide dynamite, and they would get into the ceiling and so on. Meanwhile, the man who did it was the then head, he was a very cultivated sporty man who played tennis with a good friend of mine, and his daughter had had polio, our daughter had had polio, and we were mates in a way because of discussing the problems, and all the time his men were ransacking the books, the house looking for dynamite. It was kind of contradiction.

But we did know that our use was limited, that in fact, if we didn't get out, if more came out we would be sitting in jail for a long time. So we decided to get out. So we announced to them that we wanted to get out, so they gave us an exit visa finally, which is a one way ticket, and you have got to give a guarantee that you don't come back, otherwise you sit in jail firstly for three months, then they increased it to six months. So we took exist visas, we then had a struggle to get our kids passports. Now they were ranged from 3 to 9 in age, four of them. And we had to threaten to go public before they would give them passports, and they had big security code numbers, their passports, it was quite funny, these kids.

So, that's the pattern, we got out on a one-way passport. We stopped off in Israel, because I'd never been there, and my sister lived there. And I wanted to look at it, I wasn't so keen on going to England, which I thought was class ridden. I'd been there studying in '47/'48. And, the first Israeli who said to us the only good Arab is a dead Arab, I thought: Oh, we've not come from one scene to come and live amongst this, so we made off to England. And that's where we worked for 33 years. Still actively involved in looking after the political - Monty went back under cover secretly. It was quite tricky. And the ARM lasted until - again, they were careless and the police lumbered them and one person cracked and gave away most of the names, exactly as the Rivonia [indistinct], we had Piet Beyleveldt, who is in the film, do that.

MR DAVIS:

What does ARM stand for?

MRS BERMAN:

African Resistance Movement.

MR DAVIS:

Okay.

MRS BERMAN:

And one of the reasons [indistinct] didn't like it, he said you need an African name, and at the time was right, he was quite right.

MR DAVIS:

Did you manage to live okay and you got work okay in England, and that worked out?

MRS BERMAN:

Mmm.

MR DAVIS:

What was your husband's work?

MRS BERMAN:

Well, he ended up by being a - what they call here a clinical psychologist or a therapist over there, and he was also an acupuncturist.

MR DAVIS:

And you worked as well overseas?

MR DAVIS: I'll check my notes.
MRS BERMAN: Yes, [indistinct].
MR DAVIS: Well, we will go back over that first lot, because it's much - it's quality - we want. Dodgy there.
MRS BERMAN: [Indistinct]. Are you all right?
MR DAVIS: Okay. Yes. Now, Lionel gives a description of the farewell party, do you have strong memories of that, which was held at your house.
MRS BERMAN: Well, I don't have strong memories of it. The reason I don't have strong memories is that we had had so many. Which one was the - Lionel's farewell party? That wasn't the one when Monty was ill?
MR DAVIS: No, he doesn't mention that.
MRS BERMAN: No.
MR DAVIS: He mentions that you gave them a Basutho blanket as a ...
MRS BERMAN: That's right.
MR DAVIS: ... farewell gift. But then there's an interesting thing with Morris. Remember Morris, who was part of the crew? And in describing the party, Lionel describes Morris. And then Emil when he read the manuscript, he commented that the thing that's missing is that Lionel had a fight with Morris at that final party. Do you remember that? They actually had a fist fight, and ...
MRS BERMAN: No.
MR DAVIS: ... Emil said he was quite shocked.
MRS BERMAN: Oh, yes, that's right. I think they went outside, yes.
MR DAVIS: Because [indistinct] than even that.
MRS BERMAN: No.
MR DAVIS: And Emil was completely shocked, it was completely out character, and they had worked together all this time. Obviously there was a tension there that Lionel gave in to at that point.
MRS BERMAN: Well, I can't imagine Lionel doing that.
MR DAVIS: No, it's very out of character.
MRS BERMAN: Morris yes, I can remember Morris quite well.
MR DAVIS: Morris apparently was somewhat moody and ...
MRS BERMAN: Yes, yes. I remember the fight, but I don't remember what led up to it, what it was about, or anything else.
MR DAVIS: No, there were a couple of ...
MRS BERMAN: Except the surprise.
MR DAVIS: There were a couple of incidents that Lionel describes that didn't seem to contribute towards his dislike of Morris, but it doesn't seem to be a very convincing cause for the fight. And also, interestingly enough Lionel does a long piece about coloureds, they fit in nowhere in South Africa.
MRS BERMAN: Yes, because ...
MR DAVIS: A very dubious kind of analysis, but he does do that. I mean, dubious and dubious, but an insufficient analysis as I say
MRS BERMAN: You know I had the feeling that when we were in Israel, and we arrived there absolutely broke, because we'd - well, we came with \$500, I think, or the equivalent. I think it was still pounds, I can't remember, but

MR DAVIS: Okay. Can you remember the occasion or what it was? Was it a special screening or was it being ...

MRS BERMAN: Yes, it was a special screening. Well, it was special for me because I hadn't seen it before, so maybe there were other people there. But I only remember, I was like [indistinct] with embarrassment, I couldn't bear watching myself. And I still can't watch that film simply because of the way I put myself over in it.

MR DAVIS: Ja.

MRS BERMAN: Because they had given it screenings over the time when I took care not to be around. I think I've seen it - I saw it another time, it was about twice [indistinct].

MR DAVIS: [Indistinct] dog.

MRS BERMAN: Well, he was doing acupuncture and therapy, and he was working voluntarily in the day hospitals doing acupuncture for people with arthritis and rheumatism, because there is just no way of treating them, and acupuncture is wonderful for bringing relief. It doesn't cure the condition, but it lasts - it lasts for a variable length of time. But, he became known as the Sangoma of the needles, people used to seek him out.

And I got involved, as I say doing a trainers jobs of jobs on anti-racism, which was a field I was particularly interested in, and had already worked in the UK. And from thereon in we went on Julian's farm, whose [indistinct]. And I went on to work with the [indistinct] service and train their people in anti-racism and so on. I started working in the field, and I was doing a lot of work in Namibia, working with the civil servants from the Premier's secretaries, who had come from the bush and knew nothing about government, and had to give a leadership role. And that was very challenging exciting work.

MR DAVIS: And you're still active now?

MRS BERMAN: Mmm.

MR DAVIS: Well, can we start again from the beginning now that we've got [indistinct] no background, I'm sorry to do that to you, Myrtle, but it really is desirable from the point of view of quality. Okay, so let's go back to where you first met Lionel, how that happened.

MRS BERMAN: Well, you've made me change as to whether or not we first met him at this party, but didn't really connect with him, just met him. Or, the whole thing took place - in my memory the whole thing took place at a consulate party. Now, it may have been the consulate party saying goodbye to [indistinct] and Jean and Malcolm, and maybe then the two are combined, but I do remember a discussion on the film, and talking about film making. And Monty saying this to Lionel, because he was American: You know the one person I'd really like to meet in the person who made a film called - couldn't remember the name. He said: Myrt, what was the name of that film about the down and outs in New York? And I said: On the Bowrie*. Oh, yes. And Lionel eyes widened and said: But I made that film. And then, of course, they kind of fell into each

that it was - that was just a cover for something, that he had hoped it would be more serious. But he was terribly vague how to go about it at that stage. How to get away from the tourism image, because he'd shown - he had told the government. I mean finally he just produced a non-tourist film, and the government discovered too late what was going on.

But, I have a memory of coming back to our place and showing Lionel Monty's film, and Lionel being ambivalent about it. And I don't know whether or not he saw some competition but, nevertheless they agreed to work together. But, what finally resulted was that I worked together with Lionel, because I was working in the Union of Southern African Artists, which was an organization designed to look after artists' rights and royalties and see that they got a square deal, and consequently I knew a lot of people and a lot of people who acted, played and so on. So, that together with my political background enabled me to find people to act in Lionel's film, and that of course was after he'd got a script together. But I didn't know until you told me that this script had been done by Lewis and Blake*. The script was fine, except as I say for the white bits, they were not really good.

MR DAVIS: Are you much - [indistinct] you are much stronger in dismissing the cliché portrayal - I don't know what they wrote, but you dismiss it out of hand as ...

MRS BERMAN: Oh, that was when I came to rehearse it. When I came to rehearse it and I saw what the script was, I said: My God Lionel, this is terrible. No one talks like this. No white madam would talk like that. As Lionel said to me: Then how would they talk? and I said: Well, I will show you. And I promptly demonstrated my version of how a madam would deal with this particular situation. And he went for that.

MR DAVIS: And your acting experience up to that point, how were you persuaded to take that part?

MRS BERMAN: You know I can't remember that. I don't even know if I was persuaded, or I just offered.

MR DAVIS: But you had no restraints about doing it.

MRS BERMAN: No, we were all amateurs, that was the whole idea that we weren't going for anyone professional, although I think Zachariah could have been a professional. I think he turned in a wonderful performance.

MR DAVIS: Ja.

MRS BERMAN: But, no, we were all amateurs, just donating our time and services because we thought it was a valuable project.

MR DAVIS: Do you recall - we didn't talk about this before - but anyway, do you recall how Miriam Makeba was roped in at that point?

MRS BERMAN: Oh, well, you couldn't have a film without having Miriam. And, of course, [indistinct] and all the Africans had anything to do with it, insisted on having a shebeen scene, because everything happens in shebeens, and you couldn't have a shebeen scene without Miriam singing. So she'd come from King Kong don't forget, so she was already famous

- MR DAVIS: I think it was her first role was, wasn't it?
- MRS BERMAN: Yes.
- MR DAVIS: But when King Kong went on tour, did she go to London with it?
- MRS BERMAN: No.
- MR DAVIS: She didn't go there, okay. Ja.
- MRS BERMAN: Peggy went, and Peggy could not fit over role like Miriam, and neither did she have the voice. So it was, you know - it was second-rate performance from a point of view of the star. Miriam was still okay, but it was a shame.
- MR DAVIS: Let be just check back and see. Please start again, I'm sorry.
- MRS BERMAN: That one scene in the garage of our house, it was already kitted out as the - as the bedroom for one of our domestic staff, so it was a large room, and the story line is that the police arrive and haul Zachariah out, and they haul him out, but first - so he comes out in - bare, stripped at the waist, and he wore trousers. And some of our neighbours, because the [indistinct] was lit up of course, so some of our neighbours thought: Ah, there's an orgy going on and they 'phoned the policy, and that's what they said: There's an orgy, there's a nude black man roving around outside the garage. And there's an orgy going on. Because, of course, his wife was clutching him. So the orgy - there's enough to call the police coming in, and there they were confronted by a mock up policeman, by the way. But, we were constantly being hassled by our neighbours, they couldn't work out what was going on with the filming. And it was - all they knew that it was unacceptable, they didn't like it, it was not what should go on in South Africa. And particularly when we served alcohol. We had finished for the evening or the afternoon or whatever we were doing, we would bring out some wine, and the fact that we were giving black people wine was definitely against the law, so our neighbours would send the policy scurrying in, so then we would have someone who always was on the lookout or had a listening ear, and everyone would quickly get rid of the alcohol. So we had lots of parties.
- I mean Lionel threw a great party, the one you mentioned with Morris. You know with a typical party sometimes we used to have musicians there as well, and they would play, so we would have a jam session, and I've got a lovely shot somewhere of the cops standing at the door like this, you know, against the door jams, and just listening to the music themselves.
- MR DAVIS: Now the shots you say you have, is that one you actually have or one that you got rid of?
- MRS BERMAN: I don't think I have it any more. It might just possibly be in one of those, but I will then have to look.
- MR DAVIS: About the US [indistinct] attaché how sympathetic he was. I will try and track him down, and why he was sent home.
- MRS BERMAN: Well, he was very interested in the arts, and he was very supportive of any artistic venture that went on, and he used to facilitate some as

was getting too involved. There's a boundary by the authorities that says be friendly but don't get too close, don't lose yourself. And they reckoned that he was losing himself in the event and getting too involved. Which is what happened with Trevor Huddleston as well. That's why Trevor and Martin Jarret* [indistinct], they were called to [indistinct], for exactly the same reason that they were getting so involved in the political scene, it wasn't their role. So, I'm afraid that's what happened, or so we were told. You know a lot of this is hearsay, so for all I know his term might have been up, and that this was the story that went around, the facts that we heard that he had been recalled.

MR DAVIS: I can probably get the straight story from Tom Carris*, I will e-mail Tom when I get back. Ja.

MRS BERMAN: I just remember him - sorry, I have a vision of him, you know, with curly light hair and slight. Light brown hair, but I cannot remember his name.

MR DAVIS: I will track it down.

MRS BERMAN: Crazy things, like Lionel came to London, he took us all to the Savoy Hotel for breakfast, all six of us, and he produced a dress for each of my daughters, and it was the most exquisite dress. I'm sure Ellie had something to do with it as well. But, that's just [indistinct] how generous he was. You know he was just willing to have a good time, he would spend money, and also be generous to the kids.

MR DAVIS: Were you were aware that he came of a quite wealthy family?

MRS BERMAN: Oh, yes. Yes, I knew the whole family background and his whole history, and we were part of his relationship with his father. He used to share with us what was going on, and so we were kept abreast on all that.

MR DAVIS: Okay.

MRS BERMAN: There were a few politics that were [indistinct] that they behaved themselves. You know there was very much a feeling, don't rock the boat because you might effect the balance that we've got at the moment and the support for Israel, because the [indistinct] were very pro-Israel, because they understood why people wanted a homeland, they saw the similarity between themselves and Israel, and they supported Israël. And, by support I mean that they were very generous in getting money out of the country. Because after the United States, South Africa was the second most important funder of Israel, and that determines a lot about how the official Jewish organizations reacted

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[END OF TAPE : SIDE B]

* Spelt phonetically - correct spelling not known.