

TM:

and I was very active in poetry, reading poetry, and acting and singing, all that kind of thing. And I took very much interest in acting, actually, after seeing most of Gibson Kent's productions, and again after seeing some films like JIM COMES TO JO'BURG, of which the starring actor there was my teacher. Actually, he taught us a few things about acting, and I took very much interest in that.

PD: Could you tell us a little about that person?

TM: His name is Thomas Ramahopa, you know, he's one of the first black film actors in SA, he was there in JIM COMES TO JO'BURG, he was starring with Dolly Rathebe, and again, he did this, he was in DINGAKA, and er with some other guys, and with Ken Campu and with Sam Willi and all. And so, he was very active actually, but he was a teacher and -

PD: Let me just ask you, what part did he play in JIM COMES TO JO'BURG?

TM: Actually, he's the guy who was running - the thief, getting into the dustbins, and everything -

PD: OK, that was MAGIC GARDEN.

TM: Yeah, THE MAGIC GARDEN, and in JIM COMES TO JO'BURG too, he was there. It was THE MAGIC GARDEN, yeah. Where he was starring with Dolly Rathebe, yes.

PD: Then in DINGAKA, what part did he play in DINGAKA?

TM: I don't - I don't correctly know by now, I don't, I don't remember, but he was there, he was one of these guys, the elderly people there. But now he was quite a wonderful guy, yes.

PD: Did you see JIM COMES TO JO'BURG in the early days, and MAGIC GARDEN?

TM: Yes, I saw THE MAGIC GARDEN, I think it was in 196 - 5, 6, and JIM COMES TO JO'BURG too, it was wonderful, it was a wonderful piece of work. And then, actually, most of this film made by the black actors in SA were taken to schools, for us to see all these films, they were hired by the schools, because we could see our own people doing the acting, actually. Because at that moment there was not much opportunity for black people to get into acting, we thought it's always an international thing, you know. An American thing, or an English thing.

PD: So people like Dolly were - broke the way for people like yourself, your generation -

TM: Yes, yes, they did, actually, they broke the way, because now we could take much interest from seeing them acting and seeing them onstage, and we thought to ourselves, We can do this too. See, once you hero-worship somebody else, you like to enact everything that he does, imitate him in every little aspect, you see, and then that's what we used to do. Sometimes we used to listen to some little sketch at school, little dramas, and we used to act like somebody we have seen in another production somewhere.

PD: And then there's the question of course, most of the cinema that you saw was really

white cinema, it came from Hollywood, but you were still presumably heavily influenced by that, maybe you acted out the roles that you saw, even in white cinema, would that be fair to say?

TM: Yeah, in a way, you would be fair to say that, because we learn at schools, we learn from observation, and what you see and try to imitate and enact, like you can -er, there are a lot of films like THE ROBE and THE TEN COMMANDMENTS whereby we would take a certain quotation from Yul Brynner, you know, talking to his and all that, and really behave like Yul Brynner and do all these little gestures, and that's how we learnt, because we never - we don't have schools where we can learn acting and all that. Maybe at this present moment, it's coming up. But now before, there wasn't, at all. We just had to learn from observation.

PD: Can you tell us a bit about the Gibson Kente experience, how you got into that, we're primarily interested in the film version of HOW LONG?, so if you could tell us a bit about that.

TM: Er - actually I joined him in 1974.

PD: Can you mention his name?

TM: OK, yeah - I joined Gibson Kente in 1974, I was just fresh from school, after finishing my Teacher's Diploma, and like I'd taken much interest in acting, and having seen Ramahlopa with - Thomas Ramahlopa - and er with all his encouragement and teachings, little teachings about acting and all that, I took very much interest in all that, which is why I joined Gibson Kente. And coming to him, well, I've been with him from 1974 until 1981. Whereby, in 1976, (crackle on mike) it's then that we started writing HOW LONG? Actually converting it from a stage play to a film, because now there were a lot of people that thought, even himself too, Gibson Kente, thought, he er - HOW LONG? is going to be a wonderful film, because it tells all the atrocities that are inflicted on black people by the system and by the police, and all that kind of thing, it was a wonderful story then. And more especially that it has been banned - the play itself was banned twice, and was still uplifted, banned again, uplifted, and it was very touching. And all I can say, it was a wonderful piece of work. One of his best works. That's why now he has taken an interest in making a film about it. And then he called me, because I was in, I was one of the production managers then, he wanted me to do some little writing for him while he was just planning, plotting and that sort of thing. That's actually how I gained experience of how to write for film, er, for cinema. And um - the story line in HOW LONG? like I say, actually it shows from the black point of view how the system of apartheid is all about, because it's very bad on us. It's so heavy, that now, you cannot argue anything, you just have to accept what you want. With now all this kind of job opportunities which we don't have, and we are under-educated, most of us, because we don't have money, and most of other people are just school drop-outs, because of lack of money, and again the system of education is not the same, it's not equal, and that's all what the HOW LONG? depicted. It told the story from the black point of view. And it was a wonderful story.

PD: Can you put it - as I understand it, it came out what year, what year was that?

TM: 76. Yes.

PD: 76 was a difficult year - so it came out in a context, and if you would give us that context of 1976, and how the government reacted.

M: At first, they didn't mind that much because the ban on the play was uplifted. And they turned the script to the censorship board, granted them permission,

Gibson Kente come in to shoot a script. It's then that we started writing it. But then during that year, it became difficult because of the late Tsietsi Mashinini and Khotso and some of the school, I mean, the school kids, didn't agree with this Afrikaans as a medium of instruction to all schools in all subjects. And so, at that time, we were shooting the film, just in Soweto township, and in town again. But it became difficult when the riots started. We couldn't do anything. And more especially that now the government, they just stamp their feet down and say No. "No activities, we don't want to see people together, we don't want to see anybody shooting anything." It's then that now they decided, Gibson Kente and some of the investors, decided that we can go and shoot in King Williams Town, of which now, every township in SA, they all look alike, and so it won't make much of a problem. So we went there, and shot the film, but just towards the end of the film, they detained Gibson Kente. The police. And so, after his detention, then there was a guy, his assistant director, Ben Moyi, that finished the whole production, and after completion, it was confiscated. The film was confiscated. So we don't know where it is by now. But it was a very difficult year, really.

PD: And you yourself were saying, you were also detained - was that in connection with the film?

TM: Yes, it was in connection with the film, because most of the people who took part in the film, were taken.

PD: Yeah, if you could just say that "I was detained in connection with the film -"

TM: Ah-ha. Yes, I was detained too, because most of the people who were connected to the film were just taken at random, because they saw as a political media, of which it influences now other people, or even the school kids, to go on rioting and all that kind of thing. So, I was taken with others, but without any charges, we were just detained only for three months. (Laugh) Thereafter we were just released, without any charge, really.

PD: Now didn't someone, was it Moyi who died in connection with that, who was in prison and then died?

TM: That was Chief Mamashile, Ernest Chief Mamashile, who was the finance director of the film. The following year he was - actually, the very same year, they called him, the police arrested him and er they discharged him from there, er still again they wanted him, and he went with his lawyers to to the police station, and from there they just detained him. And he spent only about two days there and he died in detention. And because of his involvement again, in the whole thing. Like I say, the government at that time saw it as a medium of encouraging the students, and again assisting the school to go on riot.

PD: So that was not simply a question of censoring a film but a question maybe of teaching you a lesson, I don't know if the Chief was murdered, or if he died accidentally, by being beaten up, but in any case the effect is one of censorship, to make people think twice before they make such films.

TM: Yes. Yes. It was now actually like using - he didn't die accidentally, because what they said later is that now he hanged himself, he committed suicide in jail. And that guy was huge, was very huge, you can't just hang yourself with the string of a shoe. I mean (laughs) I mean, it's a naive thought, really, of saying that kind of guy could have done that.

: Thinking back on it, what effect did that have on you, obviously you spoke about it.

TM: Yes, it touched us very, it touched us very much. Not specially me, it's then that I thought to myself, No, it means that films like this or whatever productions we can do for ourselves are not right, so we've got to let another - a white man do something for us. Write a story about me, and yet I know myself better than he does. See what I mean. So what's he going to write, only assumptions of what a black person could be like, or should be like. It's not going to be a true story about myself. So I felt that now, it will be wonderful writing something about myself, writing something about my situation, about my people, which would be authentic and true. Down to the point. Not to let somebody write something about me, meantime, meanwhile, he doesn't know me, anything about me.

PD: So then you came to the question of MAPANTSULA, I'd like to know a bit about the history of that, whose idea it was, how, how the script evolved, whether it was intended to be political from the beginning - could you tell us a bit about that.

TM: Hm, hm. Yeah, well - coming to MAPANTSULA, myself and Oliver Schmitz, and actually before I met him, met Oliver, I was with Haynes Films, doing some educational dramas for students and all that. And I met a certain girl called Robin Hofmeyr, who thought my acting was OK, and my translation of the script from English to all the vernacular languages was good. And she said, "Why can't you write a story, write a script on your own? There's a guy who'd like to get somebody who can write something and maybe we can shoot that, and use as a pilot to get some money. And maybe we can boost you up to, so that you should be recognized, because we don't have much, er, many film-makers, black film-makers in SA".

D: ...suggested that you should do a script. Can we back up a bit?

TM: OK. So Robin suggested that now at least I should meet Oliver Schmitz, who was very much interested in film-making, because now he was only working as an editor, and he thought that maybe it would be great if we combine and do something for ourselves. And now well, after meeting Oliver, in 197 - 1983, yes, after meeting him then, we talked about it, we talked lengthily about film-making, and I told him, "Look, I've never written a film before, and I don't know how they are written, but I have an idea of how to write and to act and all that." And he said, "OK. I'll give you books. You read books, and as long as you have the story in your head, put it right. Then you've got a script. And we can shoot it and make a film." And then I wrote about a 30 minutes' drama, of which we shot on 16mm, to use that now as a pilot of getting some funds from wherever, I don't know, he was , he did some moving, really, to get some money. Abroad, in West Germany, in London, and he went to, I think he went to Switzerland. And from there, after making that pilot, drama, he went abroad and it's then that he met Pierre (?) Montocchio, Max Montocchio, the, the producer of the film MAPANTSULA. Then they wrote me a letter, it said "Tom, look. Go on writing. Here's an idea, let's talk about the black people, how they suffer, but let's not concentrate on the so-called - you see, the -the direct nice people in the political arena. Let's talk about just normal life. It can be any other person. Let's concentrate on them." It's then that I got the idea of Panic in MAPANTSULA, and writing about him, stealing, and all that kind of thing, and how all this politics doesn't affect him, because now he's living from hand to mouth. Like we have people who tell you, "Look, I don't want to get myself in politics because I'm working for my own people, I'm working for my children, and so if I'm arrested, they're going to suffer." So he was that kind of a person - Panic. In MAPANTSULA. And so but now he wasn't that very much, not only that now he didn't know anything about politics, but he didn't want to take part in it, until accidentally he found himself in politics now. After him getting arrested. So er it was then that naturally me and

Oliver started working on the film. So it was very different at first.

PD: What strikes me most in the film is first of all the character of Panic, which is very strong, and then the authentic nature of the situation, for me it's probably the first film where I'm convinced that this is a black township, and this is life in a black township. It's very authentic in that way. Growing up in a township, of course you grow up side by side with criminality -

TM: Yes, growing up in a township as a youngster, you grew up with er, with all these people, the gangsters, and all and we ourselves, as kids, would like to imitate somebody stealing or doing anything, if you see what I mean, but not wanting to do it professionally, but now, it's only, just some kiddish play and some silliness of kids, actually. But er there are those people that grow with that, that are in that, because now they don't know how to get jobs, because of illiteracy. They don't have some kind of education, because you want the job, you go there for interview, they tell "What experience do you have, what standard did you pass?" And unless you have gone to school and can show your papers or your CV, then you don't have anywhere to go. So instead, we go on stealing.

Dan: Make it a career -

TM: You make it a career. As long as it can work for the first time, the second time you get used to it. And it's already a career now.

PD: Yeah, what we see in MAPANTSULA is really a black man who preys on the white population, I think every act of criminality, especially the more serious ones, are aimed against the white population, whereas in fact it's probably true that criminals prey more on the black population than on the white population, I don't know. But anyway, it's also an expression of protest, in a way it's an expression of protest against -

TM: Exactly -

PD: - against the white population, against white law.

TM: Yes, yes. Actually, it is. Because in the sense that though you may not know politics much, but you know where the money comes from. Like most of the people tell you that "Now, look. If you want to go or to get money, go to the white man - he has money. Go to town and steal in town. Don't come and maybe steal from your own people, because your parents are going to work, to work for you, and then when on their way back, you mug them and take their money, the very same money that's going to support you, that's going to feed you, it's unfair. So why don't you go to town, because that is where money is." And one will tell you, "They've got banks, there are rich white people there, they go in Mercedes cars and all this, they are very rich, and that's where you can get money." So that it's now, in other words, it's a protest already. So maybe you grow with that kind of mentality, that the white man has the money, and he has cheated us, if you see what I mean. In other words, you are trying to repossess, like most of the world are repossessing, what is rightfully yours. (Chuckle)

PD: Now, you had to produce a script which you had to submit to the authorities, is that accurate?

TM: The script that now we took to to the censorship -

Yeah, so, er - taking the script to the censorship, you've got first to take the original script, you take it to censorship, they approve of it. After approval, then you can shoot the

film. Of which now they are going to send somebody who is going to monitor as to whether you are shooting the correct script. Or you are shooting correctly what is in the script you have submitted. Then after completion, of shooting and editing and all that, you just have to take the film for censorship again. They compare it to the very same script that you've given them before, to see as to whether it's the right thing. And after that then they'll tell you as to whether No, they'll confiscate it, or they pass it. So at first we took the script that was false, we just had to write against our story like, taking now an advantage of most of the films, the TV drama films that were made then, there were very many, many productions were shooting, so we knew that now they will not monitor every little thing that we wanted to do, and more especially that after signing it, they approved of it, and so we started shooting. But we had to make it fast. Because we shot the whole film in 7 weeks, instead of maybe in 3 months or so. Because we were all rushing time. That's why now I was acting in the very same film, playing the lead, and again, I did direct the second crew. Because now we were chasing time. But before they will get to know what kind of script we were shooting, then we should be finished by then. And really it happened that way. Because after completion one way, it was the final stages of pre-production, editing and all that, they came, and they demanded the film. They came to the editing-table thing, "We want that film". So, "What film?" So we are made to understand that now it's a political film, of which somebody has maybe said something to them about the film. Well, I would say, from the production side. Er - but we gave them a video set to go and look in it to see if maybe it's contravening any of the acts, and to see if it's against the government or whatever. So they took the film, the cassette, from there, and whilst they were concentrating on the cassette, then we managed to take the film out of the country, to London. To where actually editing was done, finally, mixing and all.

PD: You had finished shooting -

TM: We had finished shooting everything in Soweto and Johannesburg.

Dan: Now during the shooting, this was during the State of Emergency in SA -

TM: Yes, yes -

Dan: - the townships are tense, the police are patrolling, can you talk about the experience of shooting against that background?

TM: Yeah, like I said, we got permission to shoot the script, though it was a false script. Not the original that we were shooting, and taking advantage again of most of the productions that were working in the townships, see what I mean, because now there are the SABC-aligned productions and of which now they've got permission to shoot anywhere else. They are all now under the State of Emergency, but as long now as there is approval, a go-ahead, then you can do that, they knew that we were shooting just a gangster story, so they didn't worry much about us. So again, we took advantage of many productions that were shot at that time, right in Soweto. And under the State of Emergency, they, but now, it didn't worry us that much. They didn't even come - they were just patrolling sometimes, the townships, the police and all, but now they didn't give us any problem, so that's now the advantage that we used, actually.

Dan: But in the film, you were able to re-create what the State of Emergency was like, what it was like actually -

TM: Yeah -

Dan: They were very realistic - talk about that as one of your objectives.

TM: Ye-es, we were able to do that, I was able to do that in the film, because -

Dan: Could you say what you were able to do?

TM: (Laughs) Why I was able to do that, it was because of, we ignored the State of Emergency, at least -

Dan: Maybe you could say -

TM: So while we were able to re-create the State of Emergency in the film, - (crackle)

We were able to re-create the State of Emergency in the film, because I mean it's exactly how things are in SA, and again we didn't want to worry much about what will they do if they come and see all the riot scenes, and again all the police actors that we put there enacting the very situation, of State of Emergency and the riots and all that. We did not worry much about that. So what we told ourself is, Just to do everything as soon as possible (crackle) before they come to know. You see.

PD: Black here -

TM: Because we knew, we read about er, CRY, FREEDOM, with Sir Attenborough making the film, and we knew, like we were reading, that now, the character, the black character who's portraying Biko, it's not the main character. It's not the main character. Because now the main character is Donald Wood. That's why - well, I wouldn't like to criticize many films, because that's where I've got to learn from, the mistakes they make, it's my teaching. See what I mean? But, er, well, I saw it again in London, and I saw that now, really, the character there is Donald Wood. Unlike Biko. Biko appears only about er - only a quarter in the film. The whole story's for for Donald Wood. So, according to me, I wouldn't say that now it's a Biko story. It's a Donald Wood story about Biko. I would put it that way. So that now we were very conscious about that. So that now we thought, and actually we were making a black character, not a white character, to be er supported by the black. But now this black character who is in the lead, and he can be supported by a white and whatever. Not on racial basis, but on the story-line base. Yes.

TM: I found her very very much satisfactory, because er when a thing is er I knew that now it's not a matter of racial conflict that now we are against, the main thing is that we've got to get everything equal. It's not every white man who's bad. Or good. Like it's not -

PD: The question of collaboration.

TM: The question of collaboration actually with Oliver Schmitz in writing the film and making the film, I found it was very - it was wonderful. And of which now that's why it gave that to what MAPANTSULA is at the present moment. And er - because now, the main thing is we're not fighting the racial discrimination and all that. All that we want is opportunities for everybody. Opportunities for everybody. If you are white and black, we are people, we're human beings. Why should there be any difference? There's no difference between us. If only you are educated more than me, then you must take that position. If I'm more than you in education, then you've got to be my, my inferior. That's how things should work. And that now this is usual that now we are not fighting any person, actually, in particular. It's only the system that we are fighting. So that's why my collaboration with Oliver, it was wonderful. And still I'm going to work with him in many things.

PD: Who's idea was it - Dolly's role in the film she plays tremendously well, I think. Who's idea was it to have Dolly play that part, and maybe just describe your assessment of her role and her playing of that role. And describe the role a bit as well.

TM: Ye-es. Um - actually, it was me who decided that Dolly should come into the film. Because at that moment, there was already a casting director. Oliver's never worked with black people before, he was only an editor, and Max Montocchio too, he was just fresh from London, A Capetonian, and they've never worked with black people. And like I'm long in the field of acting, I'm associated with a lot of actors, both black and white, then they made me the director, casting director. That's why now, most of the characters is the people that I know that can do justice to the works. That's why I got Dolly into the whole thing, because I know the character that she plays there Mama Dise, who's a person who is working for the kids, who's struggling very much, but still, as a landlady, she still needs money. See what I mean. Because of now the the the the present situation of politically whereby er elderly women do wake up and go and work, now the widows, the widows who work somewhere else to feed their families and all that, in order to pay rent sometimes. So that's why now the character that she plays I thought to myself, Let it be her. Because she's a single parent at the moment, and she knows what sufferings is. She knows how to fend for the children.

PD: OK, and her last acting role in the cinema was 25 years before in MAGIC GARDEN - could you mention that? There's that big gap.

TM: Yeah, the last time she appeared in a film it was 25 years back, before MAPANTSULA, but it didn't make any difference, because like she she's a star on her own. She's singing, she's sung with a lot of people, the Hugh Masekela, the Miriam Makebas and all that, even before, they made a lot of working together. And of which now it made her authentic, it made her what she is. She has all the characteristics of a hard-worker, as a star. She's not only in singing, or in acting, because most of the time she's working in TV productions, she's acting mostly TV productions. And that's why she just managed to sustain the acting ability. And the qualities of an actor that she has.

Dan: More especially, though, she was probably the first female known star in SA.

TM: Yes. Yes. Yes - she was the very first female star in SA. And now, again, in MAPANTSULA, it was a boost for the film. (Crack) Then she was still very young, now she's old, but she still has the vigour, she can I mean equal any other actress in the world. She has the ability really.

Because at that moment there was not much opportunity for black people to get into acting, we thought it's always an international thing, you know. An American thing, or an English thing.

PD: So people like Dolly were - broke the way for people like yourself, your generation -

TM: Yes, yes, they did, actually, they broke the way, because now we could take much interest from seeing them acting and seeing their costumes, and we thought to ourselves, We can do this too. See, once you start watching somebody else, you like to enact everything that he does, imitate him in every little aspect, you see, and then that's what we used to do. Sometimes we used to listen to some little sketch at school, little dramas, and we used to act like somebody we have seen in another production somewhere.

PD: And then there's the question of course, most of the cinema that you saw was really