

Interview with Arthur Maimane London, December 1989

PD: What was the experience of an African going to the cinema in the 1950's?

The cinemas in South Africa were always of course segregated, like everything else. There were black cinemas, white cinemas. Among the black cinemas, there were cinemas that were regarded as being for colored and Indians, and ones for Africans. Ones for Coloreds and Indians being in the areas where the Coloreds or Indians lived, say like Fordsburg in Johannesburg. They were not very keen on having Africans going to their cinemas. The thing being..... we wanted to go to their cinemas because they got the films earlier than the African cinemas, they were more comfortable cinemas.

But South Africa's segregation, or racialism if you like, was such that there was the African at the bottom of the heap, then the Colored and the Indians, and the Whites at the top. And the Coloreds and Indians didn't want us to particularly in their cinemas, because we were sort of downgrading their cinemas, so we always got the worst seats in their cinemas. Whatever you paid, you sat right at the front, the first few front rows, you'd have to stare up at the screen. But they didn't actually stop us. Obviously of course, they were much more expensive than the African cinemas in the townships, where I can remember as a kid -- sixpence or ninepence -- to go and see a double feature with a serial, which was very good. In those days of course I didn't attempt to go to the Colored or Indian cinemas because they were a long way from where I lived.

Our cinemas in the townships was Monday and Tuesday, you had the same double feature and serial. Wednesday and Thursday you had a different double feature and serial. Friday and Saturday another one. So if you had the money and the time you could see six movies in a week and three different serials.

PD: Do you remember the names of any of the cinemas?

Yes, when I was a kid when I lived in Pretoria, I lived in a township called Lady Selborne. And the cinema there -- there were two cinemas there - one was the Coronation Cinema, and the other one I can't remember its name, quite close to each other. And you'd get queues for the matinee. Little kids who've either ducked out of school at the end of the school period queueing there -- some didn't

have enough money. When the first film started, you'd go up to the box office and say "look, I'm short twopence or threepence, can you let me in. " You can come in after the first film....

Then in Johannesburg when I was a student.... there were the cinemas in the townships like Sophiatown, which had the first sort of good -- in terms of comfort -- cinema, which was called the Odeon, in Sophiatown. There were a couple of others -- slum cinemas -- one called Balonsky's where sort of, amongst other things, it had a gallery at the back for the cheaper seats. And the people up there, sort of all the ruffians, throw bottles or cans down, or even pass water on the people sitting below them. One of the nasty things about that cinema, was that at the intermission you didn't see a second feature until the owner decided he'd sold enough soft drinks. You get intermission -- ten minutes, twenty minutes, thirty minutes -- and people shouting ' come on, we want to see the next movie. Of course, in the Colored or Indian areas, they have much more posh cinemas if you like, properly ranked seats so you didn't have to look around people's heads to see the screen. These were the ones where we were not encouraged to go.

PD: Do You remember any of the films of that era?

Yes, the serials -- when I was a kid, up til the age of about 13. There were all kinds of serials, "Zorro Rides Again" "Zorro Rides Yet Again," all American of course -- "Spysmasher" and uh, "The Green Mantle" and uh, a lot of Westerns, Buck Jones, Tom Mix, and all uh -- sort of Wild Bill Hickok, names I haven't thought of for years. And uh, the serials were usually 15 episodes, so uh, they had uh, you were hooked for the next 15 weeks. One serial on Mondays, there was another one on Saturday. Oh yes, "Dr. Fu Manchu" was another of the popular serials. And of course the cinemas would bring them back over and over again if they were popular. They'd show 15 episodes over 15 weeks, and a few months later, rerun it again. There were kids who just went to see serials, never mind the film. Especially the difference being that for a lot of kids whose English wasn't very good, they couldn't follow the plot in a feature film, but in a serial which runs 15 minutes, it's all action, you don't really have to listen to what's said, you just follow the action. So they were particularly popular.

But even for those kids whose English wasn't very good, the cinema was an education in itself. They improved their English from

watching feature films, even the serials, to the extent that of course because all these films were American films -- well 95% were American films -- the English that was spoken was Americanized English, you know, American expressions. Even those who could manage or try to manage American accents. So you got catch phrases -- I'm afraid it's a long time ago, I can't remember them now.

Especially the gangster movies which were very popular, a different genre in themselves -- the cowboy movies which again, simple to follow the plot, and the gangster movies, some of them became cult movies. The famous one which every black South African would mention, it's been mentioned so many times in books and so forth, which was called "PANIC IN THE STREETS." The first movie which any of us saw Richard Widmark playing a gangster. That was the one catch phrase, because he used to eat -- either eating apples or sniffing from an inhaler. Wise like uh "here's some money kid, buy yourself some nice clothes. That kind of hammy stuff. But again, this kind of movies, they were popular -- you know, back next month by popular request.

DR: They did have some real influence, didn't they?

Sure. Yeah. These films were influential, not just in the language, but in the way people tried to dress. You see, say for instance, Widmark in this particular movie. He wore a hat, raked at a very snappy angle. And after that, everybody who wore a hat, who could afford to buy a hat, wore it at the same angle. And then you had Humphrey Bogart wearing his trenchcoat with what not - a turned up --and again. In fact trenchcoats of that kind got to be known in black South Africa as "Bogarts," because that was the Humphrey Bogart trademark. And everybody who could afford to get one -- the bigger the lapel the higher you could turn up the collar. So uh, not just simple things like a raincoat or a hat, but.... sort of Florsheim shoes or uh -- since all of the films were American, or most of them were American, all the fashions we saw in them were American fashions - apart from Stetson hats and also the Panama, the snap brim Panama hats that uh, if you could get one, or if you had the money you sent to America for it you know, sort of mail order.

PD: In African Jim, were there nightclubs like that, or was it taken from the cinema?

Just taken from the cinema. There were no nightclubs as such. The nearest thing to a nightclub in black South Africa, urban black South Africa was a shebeen. Which was just an illegal drinking place, and there'd be music playing if it was big enough or the room was big enough, some dancing. Otherwise the nightlife was in dance-halls where you know, chairs around the empty floor a band on the stage, and that was it. So when a film set in South Africa, in black South Africa depicts a nightclub, it's again something we've all seen in movies and it's replicating that with no personal experience of it. All the nightclubs that were in South Africa were white nightclubs. I did manage to go to a few myself. At a certain stage when -- if the management was a bit on the liberal side -- but they were white nightclubs. Even though a lot of the entertainment in the white nightclub was by black entertainers.

PD: Maybe you could tell us how you saw African Jim and what kind of impression it made on you and your fellows.

Films like "African Jim" followed -- I suppose that somebody -- whoever made those kind of films -- "African Jim," "Jim Comes to Joburg," "Magic Garden" -- They realized that the black audiences wanted to see black faces on screen. And they realized this because anytime the first all -- what were they called -- all-negro American films came to South Africa, "Cabin in the Sky" "Stormy Weather" and so forth, the film ran for weeks, there would be a full house every day because these were black actors, performers -- If they were performers you know - Bojangles, Ethel --- Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, we knew them from their records. And to actually see them on screen was a great thrill for us. So some white businessmen decided you know,-- make some money, make some look -- why import them from America -- make them cheaper here and make a bomb out of them.

So however bad or indifferent these films were, -- and the first ones were not very good -- they got full houses for days and weeks on end because not only were there black people on screen, but black people you knew or you saw in the street occasionally, even if you didn't know them personally. And uh, so everybody went. As I say, a lot of them were to put it mildly, indifferent, because uh, the actors, well there were no trained black actors, which is why most of these films were musicals. Because uh -- black people who could be called stars or anything like that were -- were musicians, singers, and so these all turn all to be musicals, very much I suppose like the

American ones -- all negro cast American movies -- Stormy Weather, Cabin in the Sky -- they were also just straight forward musicals.

But despite the acting by the local talent not being very good, that didn't matter. It was just that a film shot with people you recognized, on streets that you knew, you know sometimes it was difficult to hear the dialogue because people were shouting "hey, that's my street, I live down that street. You know, that kind of thing. So it sort of -- they became like home movies. And that was a great catch for us. I can't remember them in much detail, what the plot was -- The plot didn't matter, it was just to see on screen your own surroundings. People you knew.

PD: What about "Cry, the Beloved Country." What kind of impression did it make on you?

"Cry, the Beloved Country made a great impression on everyone because -- again -- what I was saying earlier -- it's shot in familiar locations, but it had you know, professional actors, big names like Canada Lee, Sidney Poitier. And so, it was for us -- well I speak for myself -- the first professionally done which was like all the important films that we saw, except again, it was about us, shot in our locales.

And uh, the novel itself had been around a few years. I'd read it -- as a prize at school, in fact when it first came out and I read it. And we had misgivings about the novel because it is a liberal white South African's view of black South Africans he didn't know as well as he thought he did. It was a good novel. It did a lot of good things in changing some people's perspectives, but then the film, I mean -- the excitement began when it was being made. They had to keep crowds away, not to get into shot. And then when it came out again, house full every day for weeks on end. And uh, it was even with the reservations I and others had, it was still a very moving film.

You know, to see Canada Lee playing, uh, what was in the novel, a very sort of what I guess Americans, uh, would have called "Uncle Tom." And Canada Lee gave him much more dignity than the straightforward Uncle Tom who you know sort of doffs his hat to every white person and is very polite and so forth, does not get angry. And of course Sidney Poitier, uh, who as the young maverick priest, In fact I believe that uh.....

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

O.K. I'll pick it up myself. What we found, or I particularly found impressive about the film of "Cry, The Beloved Country", as opposed to the novel was that whereas in the novel the old Umfundisi, who comes from Natal looking for his son in Johannesburg was what in those days in America would have been called an Uncle Tom. You know, very respectful of white people, doffed his hat, never raised his voice, never raised his eyes hardly. But as played by Canada Lee, he gave him a dignity that made him more the kind of person we could relate to.

And then uh, Sidney Poitier playing the young priest, uh, he gave it more the kind of uh, well let's see, Canada Lee played the old man, an old man from the country, Poitier played the young priest as a young man from the city, you know, who was streetwise -- whether the expression existed in those days. You know, he was a streetwise guy and he did raise his voice against white people. The great line which I believe he came out with, uh, where he's shooting the scene where he says to a white person "where can I wash my hands" -- you know, with great anger and emotion. I can remember people cheering in the cinema when he came out with this whiplash line. And of course it made one of my friends, Lionel Ngakane, who was then a young man, no acting experience, and he played the boy in the movie. And it was the last time South Africa saw him.

But the impression the movie had generally was uh, unlike the ones that had been made in South Africa by South African companies, which as I said earlier were indifferent at best. This was a professionally made movie, that we could feel proud of in that it showed our situation more like it was rather than all these musicals where it was song after song after song with not much of a plot. And what little plot there was, was a joke. You know, those were exploitation movies. I know that's been said as well about black American movies like "CABIN IN THE SKY" and "STORMY WEATHER" that they were also exploitation movies. But we didn't see them as exploitation movies. And neither did we see "CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY" as that. Because it was the first serious -- if you like -- film about what it was like to be black in South Africa.

PD: Can you talk about Lewis Nkosi and that group.....

Yes, well "COME BACK, AFRICA" was shot the year I left South Africa. But Lionel Rogosin was doing his "reckie" for it before I left, so I knew him before I left South Africa - - while he was still working out how to make the film. And I knew him because like so many other people -- journalists, photographers -- who came to South Africa, they came to the Drum office first. To find out what it's like on the black side and for us to open doors for them. Which is how Lionel came around and he met Bloke Modisane and Lewis Nkosi, who helped him to write the movie. And Can Themba who appeared in it. I didn't appear I suppose only because I was out of the country at that time. Nor did I think of myself as an actor.

In fact the one scene, uh, -- interesting thing about the film, that uh, Lionel used uh, like previously -- there were no trained actors, professional actors if you like, black ones anyway. So he found people who he thought you know, he could direct them through the movie. And uh, they did fine uh, well they did as they could. They came across quite well.

But now the scene in the shebeen where there is a great debate between Can Themba, Lewis, Bloke and a few other people. That was not acting in that that was what happened in shebeens every night. You know, long philosophical arguments about everything and nothing. It was our sort of place of entertainment. You have a drink and you talk to people about anything from the latest crimes in the township to the state of the nation and the state of race relations and so forth. And Can Themba as he came out in the film, very intellectual and uh, iconoclastic. And uh, Lewis, very young, brash, which he was then. He had just come from Durban to Johannesburg. Well, not just. He'd only been in Johannesburg a couple of years and was very young. Uh, and uh, not quite then, sort of -- of the township. You know, he was -- in South Africa, in the urban areas, there was a saying of differentiate between the city born people....

Interruption

There were in Johannesburg particularly, but in most urban uh, in cities if you like, uh, the Africans were classed into two social groups. There were the city born people, the street wise, and then the ones who'd come at a later age into Johannesburg. Now if you take uh, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane and uh, Can Themba, is that Can Themba had been brought up in Pretoria, which is only 30, 35

miles away from Johannesburg. But uh, people in Johannesburg regard it as a small town, not as bad as coming from the sticks, the actual sticks on the farms, but it was small time stuff.

And Lewis came to Johannesburg from Durban, that was even worse. Four hundred miles away from Johannesburg -- the further away from Johannesburg the less streetwise you are thought to be. Whereas Bloke was Sophiatown born, you know, he was the leader, sort of native -- that was his patch.

The scene in "COME BACK, AFRICA" in the shebeen shows -- to some extent, this difference in their backgrounds. Can Themba, the sort of intellectual, he was a school teacher before he went into journalism -- he was the intellectual iconoclast who believed in nothing and so forth. And uh, Lewis was the literary intellectual who quotes from books. He used to walk around -- the only person who would dare to walk around Sophiatown carrying a pile of books. Because that was the mark of somebody who didn't belong, or somebody who was trying to appear to be superior that he can read books, these thick books, not comic books. But he got away with it I guess, because he worked as a journalist, worked on Drum. Whereas Bloke was the Native Son of Sophiatown. And was much more accepted -- I guess is the word -- by everybody in Sophiatown. He was one of them. Sort of -- not a Johnny-Come-Lately.

PD: Did Lionel seem fresh or different than any of the white men you'd dealt with before?

Well, -- he came with his first plus,

DR: Maybe you can start by saying Lionel.....

Lionel's first plus was that he directed "On The Bowery." A few of us had seen "On the Bowery" and so, yeah, we knew -- this is a guy, a serious filmmaker. Two, he was an American, and an American who is in the film business, for us who had been brought up on American films, you know, he was away and running before -- as soon as he got off the plane and introduced himself. And also of course, there was the attitude, the difference between white South Africans and white foreigners, the white South Africans were the people oppressing us and there was a belief that all white foreigners were much more liberal in their thinking and in their attitudes than our own local white oppressors.

So, he had those three things going for him and therefore we viewed him with sympathy from the start. And then talking to him, he didn't have the patronizing attitude we found amongst white liberals we knew and regard as friends. He had this fresh outlook. He didn't have opinions - he wasn't opinionated about what we should be like or what South Africa should be like. He was asking questions all the time. He didn't have preconceptions. Which, if I remember correctly, all he knew when he arrived was that he wanted to make a film about black people in South Africa.

And the plot for the film that he finally made, "Come Back, Africa" came out of asking questions, talking with us, drinking with us. We took him of course into the townships, as we took local white people who wanted to go, who were curious enough to want to see what it's like -- well obviously they can't see everything, but they can see -- unlike, uh, most white South Africans, you know, most of them don't even know where the townships are, they've never been within miles of them. And as far as they know, they don't realize the degradation and the poverty in the townships. Only black people they know -- when they come to town to work for them -- how they live in the townships is unknown to them. But Lionel was curious enough to go into the townships, to find the story for his movie.

PD: How would you evaluate the film now?

Yes, on the whole, "Come Back, Africa" still looks authentic thirty years later. But like all the movies that I saw as a kid uh, they come back on television now, sort of, and I say to my wife, might see that again, I remember seeing it when I was 14 years old. And I see it now, and well I've grown ---- styles of making films have changed and they look pretty amateurish now, most of them. "Come Back, Africa" still holds its veracity but I can now see, because of my own experience of making documentaries and having seen hundreds more films since 1959, I can see a lot of small things which possibly people out of South Africa wouldn't notice. You know like this guy who has come to work in Johannesburg because his family is starving in Natal, and his wife turns up and she's so smartly dressed, you know, straight from poverty on a farm. And she's very smartly dressed. And I don't blame Lionel for it. I can guess what happened. The woman who played this girl refused to uh --- she didn't want to be seen wearing the kind of clothes she didn't normally wear. I mean it's like, I know from my own experience -- you say to somebody, I

want to interview you tomorrow for television, and they dress up for the interview. They don't appear as they normally would appear, which is what you wanted. But on the whole, "Come Back, Africa" still hangs together. Uh, but it is innocent uh, in style and also in uh --the plot, not so much the plot but the dialogue, a lot of it, looking at it now, you say no no, that could have been said better. Uh, uh, that kind of person surely even thirty years ago, uh, wouldn't have done what he's shown to be doing the way he's doing.

PD: Can you compare and contrast "Come Back, Africa" and "Cry, The Beloved Country."

Yes, uh, "Come Back, Africa" I think because Lionel Rogosin arrived in South Africa or in Johannesburg, with no set ideas of what kind of a film he was going to make. He decided he was going to make a film about what it is like for the black person in Johannesburg. And the story built up from talking to people like us, Lewis and Bloke who helped him to write the script. It was more like a documentary of things as they are, whereas the other movie, you know sort of was written as a novel by Alan Paton about how he saw uh -- the nation as a whole, the race relations in the nation. There's the same central character, somebody who comes from the countryside into Johannesburg and is puzzled by Johannesburg and has problems in Johannesburg.

But now, whereas in "Cry, The Beloved Country" Paton is using that vehicle of the young man who comes to Johannesburg to raise larger questions, larger issues of black white relationships, in "Come Back, Africa" there's hardly a white person in it. You know, it is about what its like living in the townships and finding a job in town. Working for white people, the uh -- relationships between black servants and their white masters. He's not trying to raise the big universal issues about you know, wither the nation kind of thing, which is what Alan Paton was trying to do with "Cry, the Beloved Country."

(Question about Sophiatown)

Sophiatown has now sort of become a legend, to some extent a myth, you know, in that it's now thirty years since it was bulldozed by the government, but it lives on, you know, as the place in South Africa -- just very odd for a small place like it was, it was population, nobody knows exactly, but I'd of guessed about 20,000 people lived there.

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

Thirty years after Sophiatown was bulldozed by the government, it still lives sort of -- in the realms of mythology now. I become a bit doubtful of talking about it now because I don't know how much people will believe me that what I say is what it was like. You know, because so many people have heard so many different stories about it. But it was a fantastic place, and fantastic is the word for it. It was a small, if you lived there long enough, so small that you got to know most people. Population maybe 20,000. And uh, if you didn't know their names, you recognized their faces. Say uh, that one, that guy lives in Gerdy street, that one lives in Gold street and so forth. It was compact. In acreage pretty small, but uh, congested because uh, the thing that made Sophiatown different and why it was finally destroyed was that Africans were allowed to have freehold property uh, there.

So the freeholder would build a house and then the room at the back, he'd build if he could afford it, there sort of rows of rooms or just shacks, and rent them out to other people. Pays his mortgage and provides him with income as well for his own living. And so uh, in any one plot of land, where in a white --uh uh--suburb would be living one family, you'd have ten families or a dozen families all living cheek by jowl there.

And so uh, there was a lot of street life. Because uh, I mean uh, a family with four children lived in one room - a bedroom, kitchen, bathroom - the lot. And so uh, the only way you could get out of this congestion was to go out on the streets. So the street life was very vibrant. The streets were only empty late at night. All day long, you know, if you know the place and you knew the people, to walk a hundred yards could take an hour. Because uh, people would be stopping you, there would be gossip here, a few questions there. And so on, or you'd listen to the gossip or ask your own questions, which was for us as journalists was very useful in that uh, we knew, we --- as journalists sort of belonged at the level uh -- not quite with the criminal classes and not quite of the decent people.

We were sort of a band between them. We could communicate with both sides without actually belonging to one or the other. You know,

and uh, so we used to pick up our stories because we knew people -- you walk into a shebeen, people tell you things, you walk down the street, people say "oh by the way did you know that this happened" or whatever.

But the social life was on the streets or in the shebeens. And on the streets, you know, sort of every street corner there was the turf of a particular gang. You'd be sitting on the veranda of a corner shop and you could work out that if -- late at night -- when the violence builds up, you know that if I walk down the street, the gang at the next corner under them that safe - not that one, I don't know the gang there very well, it's not safe. The turfs were sometimes larger than that. I had one instance when we wrote an expose of one of the gangs in Sophiatown and my life was threatened. And I spoke to another gang of the same- with the same kind of clout. I said, 'look I'm in trouble with the Americans,' as this gang was called. And I was talking to a gang called the Berliners. And they said don't worry we'll look after you, just keep off their turf. Anywhere else in Sophiatown you don't have to worry about anything, we'll look after you. And uh, now I could do that, because one, I said as a journalist, neither criminal or decent in that sense, that I could mix with both groups and be accepted by both groups with their own reservations obviously.

But the life -- it was a great place to live. Dangerous, violent. You know, uh, you know, if -- the trouble about being regarded as one of the decent people was that you were therefore regarded by the criminal class as a victim. You didn't have any protection if you like. They could victimize you, and there's nothing you could do in retaliation, unless like I did, I had friends in the criminal class who could pick up sticks for me. I did have an instance when this guy was almost killed because he belonged to one gang and he punched me once, nothing serious, just one punch, a sore lip. I walked into a shebeen and I was asked by a guy from a different gang. He said, what happened to you, and I told him the story. Oh yes he said, I know that guy, we'll fix him, don't worry. And this poor guy was almost killed, he was stabbed several times. The next time they met -- oh, you the guy who punched Arthur --- what more can I say.

PD: The destruction of Sophiatown...

Sophiatown doesn't exist anymore now because --- one reason being it was the only freehold area for Africans, and the government, the

Nationalist Party government had come up with this idea that no black person can own land in what they called white South Africa, which is 87% of the country. And so they had to get rid of Sophiatown for that reason and move the people into what is now Soweto, where they lived in municipal houses. Where at that time you could buy that little house provided by the municipality but you didn't own the land on which the house stood, which is a very odd way of owning property. But the other reason, which is the one that they gave as a major reason was that Sophiatown was a black spot, because it was in the middle of a white area. In that, if you go back to when Sophiatown was first -- became a black area at the turn of the century, Johannesburg itself was pretty small, and it was about five miles outside the center of Johannesburg -- in the middle of nowhere, then.

And as Johannesburg grew and the white suburbs spread, they came to surround Sophiatown and Western Native Township which was next to it, and Coronationville, which was a Colored area next to it. And uh, the government said we must get rid of these black spots. We can't have these black people surrounded by white people -- or being a black spot in a white area. And so they moved the people out forceably, you know sort of -- and moved them to what was called Meadowlands, which is now part of Soweto. And uh, it was bulldozed and they built a white suburb on it. And I don't know if it was a sense of humour that they called this white suburb Triomf, which is Afrikaans for Triumph. So Sophiatown is gone and Triumph reigns over Sophiatown.

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