JOHN MATSHIKIZA (second interview) NEW YORK CITY, May 30, 1992

JM: I played Mapetla Mohape, in CRY, FREEDOM, I was offered the part um - when I was offered the part I um I was optimistic, but obviously discovered on reading the script that Mapetla like all the other black characters in the film were reduced to something very minor, very thin, and er characters whom you don't get a three-dimensional idea of at all. Mapetla Mohape, of course I never knew him, having lived out of SA for all of these years, but I certainly knew of his reputation along with the reputation of the other people involved in the the Black Consciousness Movement, etc, it wasn't simply Steve Biko who represented that whole mood, that er developed among the black students particularly in the mid-'Sixties, Mapetla Mohape, Abraham Tiro, Mampela Ramphele, these were all individuals, powerful individuals in their own right. As I say, Maptela in the script, and Peter Evans in the script and most of the - all of the black characters in the script, I would say, including Steve Biko, do not come across as fully rounded human beings, not anything like as strongly as Donald Woods does, Donald Woods actually has a family, has a wife, he has children,they have ups and downs, they have concerns beyond the crude politics which is generally being represented in terms of SA history. So I played Mapetla, but there wasn't a great deal to play with.

Q: Feelings among the black actors about this?

JM: The black actors, actresses in the film discussed it at various times, I was one of the London-based actors, who was selected from there by Richard Attenborough, and we also met up in Zimbabwe with Denzel Washington who of course came from the US, with Zakes Mokae who came from the US, with local Zimbabwean actors who played smaller roles, I think we all had feelings about it to different degrees, er didn't particularly discuss it in detail with Denzel, particular basis, um I think a lot of the younger southern African actors and the people involved in the production were very conscious of the fact that this was very under-representative, certainly a lot of the people who were living in Zimbabwe, for example, or non-actors who I discussed it with in London before accepting the role, or even after accepting the role, people who had been involved with Biko, with Mapetla Mohape, in the Black Consciousness MOvement, felt very strongly that it was not good enough.

Q: Shift of emphasis from obvious black hero onto a white hero?

JM: As far as I can judge, the emphasis remained on Donald Woods because the imperative of Hollywood or of the movie business, distibution business, means that you have to have a white central character in order to sell a picture, otherwise the bulk of the audience supposedly worldwide, the bulk of the audience will not identify, cannot identify with a character like Steve Biko. I have a problem with that, I disagree with that quite strongly. I think at the time CRY, FREEDOM was made, there was particularly in the US, but also in other parts of the world, a big rise in interest in the issue of SA, I think there was a great readiness, particularly in the American public, to find out what really was going on in SA, beyond the documentary footage that we'd seen on the television, I think the fact that characters, people like Biko, Mohape, others, suffered in a very personal way, it had finally got through to world audiences, the extraordinary personal crises for example that Winnie Mandela went through over the decades, I think that was very high on the public consciousness, so I think it was quite a strong miscalculation to say that a film about human beings in SA who happened to be black would not have been a saleable film in the US or in other parts of the world. Richard ATtenborough's postition when I discussed it with him was that - he never actually put it in those terms, he never actually said, you have to have a white person at the centre of the story in order to sell it, he said rather he, he put it rather differently, saying that it wasn't his role, his place, as a white diretor to make a story about black people. Now, I have a problem with that as well, because it says something challengeable in my view about whether or not you know white people can ever understand and therefore speak about or speak to black people, or vice versa, I believe that we do know plenty about each other, and er we all read books, we al if we're lucky enough to grow up outside the Bantu Edcuation System, we all grow up with a certain amount of knowledge that is the same, therefore I don't really go for this idea

that a white director cannot research, investigate and create film that is truly and widely a film about a character like STeve Biko. Or for that matter, Mampela Ramphele or Mapetla Mohapé, etc.

Q: Political impact of the film, co-optation of black agony and of blacks' own determination t to resolve that themselves.

JM: The idea that's given in a film when the story's turned around in this way when er the black character who, or the black characters who are the cause of the story disappear into the background, and the white characters, who are the investigators, literally the discoverers of this history of some major thing that is happening in their own country, when Donald Woods steps intothe centre of the frame, the implication, it doesn't need to be stated in the movie, because the the impact of the movie of course is subliminal, so for the audience, particularly for the non-SA audience, which is going to be the bulk of the people taking in a film like CRY, FREEDOM, the black, the struggle of the black people, which is the most significant struggle in SA, appears to become something that can only be resolved by - yet again, by leadership from a member, or members of the white community. It's a very ancient idea in SA politics, in SA representations, and we know from very recent films like THE POWER OF ONE, that it's an idea that isn't by any means dead, this idea that black people willnot liberate themselves by their own endeavours, they will always need to be led by a white person, that's really unfortunate, and it ultimately serves to maintain the status quo in SA.

Q: Schizophrenic film.

JM: It was quite evident from reading the script, but even more evident from seeing the finished product that what was achieved with CRY, FREEDOM was really two films, very strangely it's vey strange to sit through the whole film, and realize at the end of the film that you've forgotten what - I realized that I'd forgotten what the first part of the film was, and I had to sit through it again to remember the detail of that. That's really unfortunate - I'll have to rephrase that -

It's quite ironic that CRY, FREEDOM is made by a British director, and a British-American production company, and claims to be a film about a liberal view of SA, in the best possible way, and yet it's a film that ultimately very precisely mirrors the schizophrenia of SA as if it is bred in SA's own soil. In the sense that it is very distinctly two different films, which is strange filmmaking to begin with, you have the first part where you do get some idea about STeve Biko and the black world that he lives in, not a very detailed, not a very clear idea, because you see very little, you learn very little about the people, and you have the second half of the film, or rather the second two-thirds, probably of the film, which is very much about Donald Woods and family in a white suburb, which has absolutely no connection with whatever reality which we have a glimpse of. By the end of the film, you've really forgotten what that other reality is all about, and your focus is very strongly on the dilemma of a white family in SA. It's unfortunate, it's quite typical of SA, and the film in a strange way isn't doing anything to suggest that there is an alternative pssibility in SA, which is precisely what STeve Biko and the people he was working with were attempting to say to white SAs, that this is a country that we all live in, we have to take each other into account,we have to come to terms with each other's history, but also our history as people with different backgrounds living in the same spot. And therefore let's intersect a whole lot more. Far from it, there's no intersectionin the film of any deep kind.

Q; Description of you're being taken to newspaper office.

JM: Mapetla's story is told as if he was a fairly silent shadow at Steve Biko's shoulde who very seldom expressed himself, expressed himself in one scene at a kitchen table in a township where he articulates to Donald Woods some of the problems of SA, upon which Donald Woods invites him and um Tangiwe to take up employment in his newspaper, so Donald Woods is therefore appearing to make one of the boldest moves in the whole movie, inother words he is

allowing these people access to a medium which will allow them to articulate themselves for the first time. Um - and so there is the scene where we walk into his office, are introduced to these shocked white journalists who are nevertheless obliged by their editor Donald Woods to accept the new situation, and that these black people will be working inside his office, and expressing themselves from there. The um - OK, that's again a Hollywood simplification of how things happen, I think in terms of explaining things about SA, again it's dangerous, because these people were and are articulate not at the behest of someone like Donald Woods, they were university students, highly educated, and continued with their education, and using their way with words to express something about their history to develop for the benefit of the black community,for the benefit of the whole society, some understanding of what the problems were in SA, and how those problems should be dealt with. Donald Woods was not giving them their first platform, they wrote in student journals, they spoke at student conferences, and generally spent a lot of time developing their articulation of the whole situation, long before Donald Woods or his audience came into contact with him.

Even more, the idea that journalism is a new thing for a black person in SA is actually outrageous, because there actually have been black newspapers um not just in the AFrican languages, but there have been black journalists writing in English going right back to the 19th century, very articulate um representatives of the situation of the people of SA, people who've travelled outside the country and been able to - (noise)

The idea that Donald Woods introduced the possibility of black people being involved in journalism at all is not just wrong but outrageous, considering the fact that there had been black journalists and black newspapers articulating in all of the black SA languages, as well as well as in English and inAFrikaans since the beginning, since early in the 19th century, probably. And magazines like Drum Magazine, which had very, overwhelmingly articulate writer I mean like Can Themba and my father Todd Matshikiza, and Kesi Matsisi, etc, etc, who develop a very vibrant style of their own, and ways of looking not just at black society but at white society. There's a long tradition of journalistic articulacy in SA. And to - clearly peopl like Biko, Mapetla, etc, would have been influenced by the works of these people in an earlie age, and to, again, to present the idea that um they needed to be introduced through this whole new section of the so-called white world is just unfounded.

Donald Woods was working in a small eastern Cape town in SA, it wasn't even a major national newspaper that he was writing for, and so there's another aspect in which he is elevated to great heights, you know, on 70mm, or whatever it was. Again, a misrepresenatation, and yes, there wereblack journalists on the more major newspapers in Johannesburg, already at that tim the Rand Daily Mail, the Daily Star, etc. Um - it's expanding quite a small story to quite a large scale, and then taking that and then giving it the authority of being definitive about being definitive about the condition of politics, journalism, conflict in SA. Very misleadi I think I would say in the same territory, you know, the whole way of forcing the Soweto Uprising, as it was called, the explosion of very young students in Soweto which spread all o over the country, the use of flashback in that second half of the film where we have forgotte all aboutwhatthe black world was, and we've got very involved in the kind of Swiss Family Robinson escaping from their pursuers through SA, er, it's a strange false device to impose the Soweto Uprising which took place after Biko was killed, (sic) and after Mapetla was killed, in order to regain some kind of authenticity for the movie, at a point at which has kind of surrendered it.

Q: Blacks as victims who need an outside force to save them.

JM: Mapetla very shortly after he starts working on Donald Woods' newspaper, there's a very brief scene where he's seen by one of the white journalists being bundled into an unmarked car by security police, and disappearing, and from that point on he disappears from the film and disappears from history. That is sort of what happened to Mapetla, but not quite, becaus he certainly was arrested by the Security Police, and he disappeared into detention, and no

doubt into interrogation and torture of the same kind that Biko underwent, and was next heard of as a corpse, and eventually became a martyr folk-hero for the people of SA, not the kind of victim who is portrayed in CRY, FREEDOM, who was on the point apparently of getting a new career on a white newspaper, and becoming a human being in the proper way, and then disappeared unfortunately never to be heard of again into the hands of the white police, it's a, again, it's a not straightforward representation of what actually happened, it doesn't give Mapetla the authority of his own voice, his own confidence, and the - wideness of his um the width of people who knew him, who knew what he was and what he represented.

Q: Insistence on African as victim, rather than the agent of change.

JK: Most movies about or coming out of SA do portray black people as the victims of this appalling system, yes, indeed, they are victims, but um as many people have said, they are not just victims, they are also very active people, it's very evident that whatever changes happen in SA has come about not because De Klerk or anybody else has had a blinding vision in the night and had an overnight change of heart, it's come about because there has been consistently, ever since there was wide colonialism in SA, imperialism, invasion, whatever you want to call it, there has been consistent resistance on the part of the black people of SA, which has taken various forms, which has not been very widely represented, but it's certainly is part of the ongoing folk-memory of the people of SA, so one generation of resistance, to coin a phrase, passes on to another generation, and the resistance to any kind of oppression continues. That is the history of SA, and we wouldn't have arrived at this prese state if it wasn't for the fact that there has, there have been you know the Mandelas, the Bikos, etc, who just never let off, never gave up the fight, continued to inspire and yeah, SA has indeed become ungovernable, therefore it's for that reasonthat some change had tobe made. Some accommodation, compromise.

Q: Own return to SA.

JM: I hope, now that it's finally possible to return to SA that I can continue doing the kind of workthat I have been doing in exile, namely as an actor, a writer, a director. My particular interest during the last several years has become film, I think that film is such a powerful medium, it's such an exciting medium, and it's a medium that has the possibility of representing far more than it has in the past the reality of SA, the stories, the history, the humour, the tragedy, all of those things, um I'm interested in writing and in developing ideas for film, and I hope therewill be the means to do just that in SA in the future, I don' think that the means are readily available immediately, I think that certain of the laws have changed, butcertain of the structures which prevent people in my position having access to media likefilm, television, even theatre, those things are still very subtly in the hands of the same people who've been in control of them over all these years, and I think it's quite another areaof the struggle for people like myself to move in and set up things and find ways of getting distributors to take an interest in stories which we would write and attempt to tell from very specific kind of SA viewpoint. There have bene indicators that it is possibl to achieve this kind of thing, the film I feel most strongly about is MAPANTSULA, of course, which firstly is a very interesting collaboration between a white and a black filmmaker inSA, and certainly is the first SA or non-SA film for me that actually looks like it is set in SA and feels and sounds as if it is talking about really generally SA stories, and not obliging us to take on board a character who is heroic and has no complex side to him, so that that central character of Mapantsula is very double and multiple edged, and I think that i a much more honest way of beginning to talk about what black SAs are than attemptting to make them always a victim-hero a la Sir Richard Attenborough's version of Steve Biko, with all due respect. MAPANTSULA certainly showed the way, unfortunately it's still probably the only one of its kind that's out there and has probably been around for 4 years now, perhaps more. I know thatits makers are still having struggles to distribute it, and it's a lot easier to get a film like, what, THE POWER OF ONE, or TERMINATOR THREE inside SA than it is to get a film like MAPANTSULA distributed there. Whatever the reasons are for that. Um - also I think it continues to be very hard for filmmakers, even filmmakers who've had the success of

a film like MAPANTSULA to raise the finance to do it again or to take the process one step further, I think SA finance is terribly cautious about how SA is represented, and um it appears, I don't know if this is really the case, I don't know whether - I'm sure this is something that willchange over time, but MAPANTSULA remains at the moment. And um as we all know, was made under very tricky and underground conditions.

Q: Creating works for a new society?

JM: The post-apartheid era is going to present all of us who are writing in any form with huge challenges. To find new ways of expressing what we feel about SA, what we feel about the world of which it's part, I think the argument about the aesthetics of it will continue to rage foralong time, the side which insists that art has to have a strictly political function in relation to the condition of the people in SA, and on the other hand the side represented by Albie Sachs saying quite recently that Art has to get past this revolutionary phase and become something that simply speaks of how, what happens to people, let's stop talking abut war and so on, let's start talking about love and what we do about it, and what it means, um it's a great challenge, it's an exciting challenge, I think it's a challenge that has to be out there, I think indeed that we do have to find the new SA - beep, beep, beep...