

Interview with Lewis Nkosi. London, December 1989.

PD: What was it like growing up with films in South Africa?

Well, I have to say, to begin with, I was cut off from films not because of any physical difficulties that I would encounter in trying to go to see films. I was cut off because my family was very religious and they wouldn't let me go to the cinema. But of course I was hearing all these rumors about this fantastic life that you have access to by going to the cinema.

PD: You were overmodulating, please begin again.

I have to tell you, when I was growing up, I first of all was cut off from the experience of going to the cinema, not because of any physical difficulties I might encounter. But simply because my parents were very religious and would not allow me to go to see films. And I was listening to stories from other children who had been to the cinema and telling how fabulous these experiences were of seeing lives in other countries. Eventually I just had to rebel as most children did and steal away and try and go to the cinema. And this is how I began my elicit experience of enjoying films in South Africa.

PD: What kind of films did you go to see?

Of course, I won't say they were thoroughly bad films. Amongst the B-type film from time to time you came across films that tried to give you an authentic experience of what life was like in other countries. And other countries really meant the United States of America. This was our source of cinematic images. And the wonderful thing about these films, no matter how bad they were, no matter how cheap they were, is that they gave you some indication of what other white lives were like. Since we were cut off from any experience of white lives. We didn't know how bad men could be to white women or vice versa. And suddenly there we were seeing Richard Widmark beating up some floozy in a cinema. And you say, 'oh, so white people can do things like that. And it robbed them of this mystery about what white lives were like. You had access, suddenly had access to some of these lives. Of course the Western was playing out certain myths that were not so distant from what we had experienced ourselves in our South African context, what we knew of our history. So there it all was again...the bad Zulus against

the good English and vice versa. And all this sort of came together to give you just some vague idea of how things could be other than they seem to be in South Africa.

PD: When you went to see a cowboy and Indian film, who would you identify with?

I remember vaguely that I definitely identified with first of all, the weak. That is to say, people who were unarmed, not because they were particularly black, or because I knew anything about Indian culture versus white culture. But simply because they were unarmed and I saw the same forces ranged against them, the same technologies ranged against them, but seemed to be in play in my own particular situation.

So it was automatic to side with them and I have to say that it is possible that the color element also came into it.

PD: Did you ever see any Afrikaner films.

No. What I recall about our experience of cinema in South Africa is that almost all the films that were available for blacks were importations from abroad (repeats line again for sound)

No, my recollection of the experience of going to the cinema in South Africa was that the kinds of films that we saw were almost completely importations, mostly from either America or Britain. So we didn't see very much of our lives in specific terms, in South African terms. Everything acted by analogy with our experience. So if we saw a film about Indians and white Americans, we could simply compare with our own experience. Of course there were a few films like..... based on the pioneers in South Africa, made by British filmmakers. That gave us some indications of what kind of films were being made about our lives. But there were very few films that I saw myself that were about Africa as such.

PD: Were you conscious of having your image excluded?

That's an interesting question, because when I think back, the way we related to the American film, even if it was a cheap B-type film, the way we reacted to it was that these were experiences or images about people. And while I don't recall any black South African who was trying to be like a white South African hero, whether it was Paul Kruger or whoever, there were an awful number of blacks who wanted to imitate the style of white American film stars, who

wanted to wear the same clothes. And of course, if the American film also had blacks, or it was about black life, in Harlem or in the South, then the impact was all that much greater. Because then the identification was quite immediate.

There's another dimension of course to all this. The fact that blacks were not allowed automatically to go and see any film. The films were graded in terms of white, mixed bloods, and Asian South Africans, and at the bottom, blacks. And I remember that a schoolteacher who was black was graded I think according to the age group of a certain white child. If a white child beyond a certain age was not allowed to see that film, you could depend on it, the blacks were almost automatically excluded from that kind of film. Especially if the films had any any wicked implication of sexuality.

PD: So you're talking about a form of censorship....

Yes. This censorship was deeply resented by us, and when I was growing up after high school, reading about some of these films and wanting to see films that at this stage in my life I probably would have thought they're not worth so much trouble. But at that time, we deeply resented not being able to see those films. And I can remember being smuggled into Asian cinemas, and we were allocated a certain number of seats so that we could share the experience of watching certain films that were automatically available to Asian viewers. So that was a source of bitter anger, because of course you read about how some of these films were being made much of abroad, New York, Paris, London.

DR: Can you talk about the classification system?

You see, for the black African in South Africa, it was not possible to go to any film that arrived in the country. The films were actually graded in accordance with a certain hierarchy, the pyramid. At the top you had the whites, and then in the middle you had the colored, the mixed bloods and Asians, and at the bottom, the blacks. Also for the whites, films were graded according to their age groups. So certain films were not for child viewing. But I remember that a child of about 12 or 14 was given the same grading or permission to view, as a grown-up adult black African. So this was a source of bitter resentment for us. Because if you're only going to see a children's type of Western, it means you were excluded from a whole variety of films that everyone abroad was excited about.

You had to save up or steal from your family or sell some sweets in the street to save up enough money to go to the cinema on Saturday. And the cinema houses as far as I remember were owned either by whites or by Asians. And most of the cinemas that served the black clientele, were owned by Asians. But of course they themselves were obliged to carry out the dictates of the South African state. So they had to observe certain regulations.

PD: So you never went to a mixed cinema.

It was entirely out of the question that you could actually go to the same cinemas as white people. Occasionally the mischievous missionaries would import films that were supposed to be morally uplifting, films with a certain historical message which were shown in special church halls where a number of white people would also come. But those were far between.

PD: Do you remember any film that you thought was subversive?

Honestly, I can scrap the bottom of the barrel of my mind but I can't recall any.

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

PD: Would it be fair to say that this was your popular literature...

Yes, when I think back to those days, the most astonishing thing was that we were almost totally cut off from any kind of reading outside the school textbook, the libraries were mostly closed to blacks. And you did not have the experience of reading for pleasure, you read for exams, you read schoolbooks. The film came in to rescue us from a complete lack of nourishment for the imagination. We don't just live by what we do, we want images of what we do, so the cinema came along. And almost every African child who could afford to go to the cinema would fill in that gap by going to the cinema. We had of course the American comic, like Superman and so on. But those too were feeding into each other since most of the comics that we saw were an actual reproduction of certain sequences from the cinema. So the two just seemed to just overlap. When you had finished your

comic you wanted to go in and see the real thing, Superman flying into the blue sky.

PD: You had access to the fabulous but not to serious literature.

It would be fair to say that except that even the unserious may take on the element of seriousness if they have the capacity to transform children's imagination. So that the children want to model themselves on other people, they want to look like somebody else other than who they are. Let's face it, the lives that the blacks were living were pretty appalling. And one could not wait for the revolution to come along and rescue one from this kind of impoverished life, so anything that came along to provide the fantasy was most welcome. Young people would stand at street corners discussing the lives of film stars that they had seen as if they were neighbors. ' Oh, did you see Richard Widmark, how he punched that guy' And it was as if they knew these people, their brothers or people across the street. And the same thing happened to girls, they wanted to dress like all these famous film stars and they wanted to attract boys the same way. And of course some of the influences were pretty deleterious one must say. But these are some of the experiences of some kids anywhere in the world in Paris or New York, who grew up on films.

DR: What about the fads that some films started.

I would say for example that one of the films that have entered into the mythology of urban black culture in South Africa was a film like "Street With No Name." Richard Widmark, his brassy toughness, speaking through the corner of his mouth and chewing on apples. After seeing these images hundreds of black boys, what we might call the lumpenproletariat, are chewing on apples at street corners and hailing girls as they walk by. It was the style that captivated the imagination. Certain people who did not have much money, if they could live by their wits, they could have the doors open to them, they could have the best girl next door. Then there were films that were very much important for blacks because the images they presented were very much akin to their own lives. These were films especially about black Americans.

Two important influences on black culture in South Africa, when you look at films about South African blacks, is jazz music and the popular cinema coming from America. And when you saw a film like

"Stormy Weather" and you saw Cab Calloway wearing those baggy trousers with a chain running down the side of his thigh, pretty soon you had guys in the dance halls wearing the same kind of "zoot suits." I remember when I was working in Johannesburg, there were young people, young boys were actually writing to America, they got hold of something like Esquire magazine, and cut out the catalogues showing special shoes like Florsheim shoes. And when these boys were going to parties at night, they would pull up their socks and show you these shoes. And they used to call them "can't gets", because you couldn't get that shoe in Johannesburg they said. 'This one comes straight from New York, it a 'can't get'. It was the influence of the films, and watching people who were very much like you, who were black like you. But you weren't told very much about their poverty stricken lives, you were shown how stylish they could be. So these young boys also wanted to imitate people like Cab Calloway and so on. I remember, I still remember certain lines that keep coming back to my mind. Like someone had borrowed a suit, I think it was in the same film that Cab Calloway was in. And he's dancing so well, and the man who lent him the suit gets jealous of the girls he's collecting and says "hey man, don't turn around too fast in my suit." To show he had lent the suit to this man, cut him down to size a bit. Things like that used to make us laugh, but they were very much part of life in Sophiatown and Alexandra township and so on....

The images that seemed to connect with the urban life in South Africa had a special conduit which lead directly from Hollywood into the South African townships.

PD: Were your parents born in Johannesburg, or were they immigrants?

I was brought up by my grandmother. My mother was born in the urban area, but she died, and my father, they both died pretty soon before I was a mature person. So I was brought up by my grandmother, and grandmothers tend to be more religious and also more conservative. So I was pretty much on a leash until very late, and when I realized what one could get one's hands on, there was no stopping me.

PD: I wanted to ask about the tension between the traditional and the urban culture that you were brought up in.

I don't know what the places in South Africa would have been like in that time. In Durban, and I suspect in a whole number of cities in South Africa at that time, there was a cheek by jowl juxtaposition of the traditional and the urban. So that people were constantly coming in from the rural areas with a specific set of values which people living in the cities were still able to recognize. Only the younger generation, which was consciously rebelling against those traditional values would have chosen to ignore them, or to select the more Western values or the more urban values. But I would not say that they would not know anything about those values. They were very much conscious of it, the impact was almost immediate. And from time to time you are simply farmed out. I was farmed out at a very early age for two to three years at my aunts in the village. And that's how I learned a little about Zulu life in the villages.

The generational gap was quite obvious when I was growing up. In a sense this is dramatized in a film like "Cry, the Beloved Country." What was interesting about its reception was that my generation were very much against the Priest, who seems a morally good man, and were very much in favor of the brother, John Kumalo, who seemed to represent their way of feeling. When I was growing up there were all these people who had been to the war and they were very proud of their experiences of having fought against the Germans. And some had been to Burma, some had been to North Africa. And we could not understand what they had gained by having fought for democracy. Since when they came back, they were put in the same situation that they had left behind. They were almost as destitute as the people who had never been outside the country. So we despised them in a way. We were much more hostile to the concept of sacrifices to save democracy, as it was called, when we saw no fruits of those sacrifices at home, nothing in fact but an acceleration of racism, an enhancement of the power to impose even more restrictions on black lives. So we were not very much interested in..... and I dare say this was a very simplistic attitude....it was pretty much our feelings about the whole issue of fighting against the so-called Nazis.

PD: Did you make the comparison between apartheid and Nazism.

For us it was very easy at that time to make the comparison between the rise of Nazism in Germany and the rise of the National party state, the apartheid state in South Africa. And there seemed to be no difference between the two types of racism. Not only that, we

soon learned that some of the people that were then ruling us, had been incarcerated in the British camps for having advocated the same Nazism that we saw being replayed and being re-introduced in South Africa. It was very clear to us that it was the same disease that was coming into play in South Africa, and it had in fact not been destroyed. Certain ruling groups in Europe had simply destroyed the power of Germany to conquer other countries. But racism as such had not been eliminated.

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3 Nkosi

PD: How did you experience the first years of apartheid as a black person? How was it different after 1948 than before 1948?

I'll tell you, before 1948 I went to a school in Zululand at Eshowe. A school run by the Lutheran missionaries. I suppose I became a very good Lutheran. But what I recall about that school was that we had two American girls, white girls. One taught me English, one taught me geography. We had a Zulu who taught us geography. We had a Zulu who taught us the Zulu language. We had two Scandinavians, and my mathematics teacher was from England. That seemed to be an incredible United Nations for a school in the boondies of Zululand.

(interruption)

So, we felt slightly privileged to have teachers from all over the world. We didn't feel that we weren't having as good an education, even considering our own degraded aspect. We still felt that we had access to the best brains that could be made available to us. We were writing the same exams as white kids and so on. And when the apartheid state was coming into being, and we were being told that missionary schools were going to be closed because they were teaching black children to be black Englishmen and so on. And that we should be as Verwoerd put it, 'educated above certain forms of labor.' So we realized exactly what was in store for us. Of course there had always been racism and segregation of one kind or another.

I remember when I was growing up in Durban, I wanted to read books and once I tried to penetrate into a white library and I was told very quickly that black kids were not allowed to borrow books

from this library. So you were always walking around certain parameters that were there as borders to exclude you from enjoying certain amenities. I used to love walking by the seaside. And probably this is reflected in my book "Mating Birds." The sea was so important to me. But I remember, when I tried to walk on the pier, very soon there would be some white person coming up and saying 'black boy, what are you doing here.'

So, the cities at night, after 11 were suddenly out of bounds for us, unless you had permits. And I was a very much native boy and I loved the look of cities at night, there is something distinct about cities at night, whether you're in New York or London or in Johannesburg....Durban. And I wanted to be under the lights of the neon, and it just irked me that I could not walk about at night, and I was treated as if I was a criminal simply by being in the streets at night, when I saw so many white people around.

These are specific elements of exclusion that may be thought to be unimportant when you compare them with destitution, lack of food, lack of clothing, lack of housing and so on. But for a boy growing up and well, terribly much native, and wanting to penetrate into certain areas of lifestyles and of living, they were just as important I may say. And caused us a tremendous amount of bitterness. When a policeman told you, "get on the bus and back to the township, what are you doing in the center of the city at night. So the apartheid state made certain institutions, that were always institutions of segregation, that much more palpable. And the impact on you was that much greater than it had been before. In a sense one could say that those same missionary schools, just because they ameliorated that bitterness.

For example, me lying on the floor of what I called my mother, my missionary mother, and old white American woman who was my principal's wife -- who allowed me to lie around in her living room reading whatever books I wanted to read. Those kind of practices, possibly because they ameliorated our bitterness, made it that less important to struggle harder to change the system. So that the bitterness that came afterwards was probably important in demonstrating that until the whole system of apartheid had been eliminated, we were not going to have any peaceful lives, richer lives, as we were sometimes led to believe by the missionaries when they were very good to us.

PD: Can you give us a sense of Sophiatown...

The thing to say about Sophiatown is that it is almost impossible to explain precisely what it was that made it so different. People who see images of Sophiatown on film for example, and they see mostly hovels, dirty shanties and so on. They can't understand what was so great about it. The point about that little bit of Johannesburg was that it had a mixture of people living there who were not being segregated in accordance to their ethnic groupings. People had some freehold, that is to say, they could build their hovels to their specifications. And if they had more money they could build better housing.

So that, the physical part of Sophiatown, and what was legal and not legal was just different than the other townships that came into being, like Soweto and so on. And then there was a tremendous amount of excitement caused by a new urban generation. People in quest of the urban, in quest of the experience of being urban. I don't think that people, perhaps in the 20's in New York, had less of the same excitement when they moved into New York. And Sophiatown was the only place that provided the black person with almost comparable experience, apart from say--Alexandra. And most of the writers I worked with were living in....Sophiatown or moving in and out of Sophiatown.

So a whole lot of things coalesced around this township. And when we were meeting young white Johannesburgers, mostly students and young intellectuals, playwrights like Athol Fugard. We automatically would bring them to Sophiatown to see how we were living. And it seemed to them, and perhaps this fed back into us. It seemed to them that this was more of an authentic urban African experience than what they saw in other townships where the rule of the white location superintendent was supreme. And he was into every bit of your life. For example in Sharpeville, where you could not even bury your dead if you were in arrears with rent. Because the whole of the township was in actual fact the property of the government, or of the council.

So Sophiatown had a very specific identity. You could see that this identity was so specific that the only way to deal with was to destroy it physically. And this is precisely what the South African government did, by simply razing the houses down and moving people out of Sophiatown. The only place I know that had a similar

type of identity, comparable to Sophiatown, was District Six in Capetown.

PD: Could you give us thumbnail sketches of Can Themba and Bloke Modisane.

I laugh when Can Themba, Bloke Modisane and people like that are mentioned to me. Because they represented an identity that we considered to be associated with Sophiatown. And yet this identity was fragmented into specific compulsions, specific obsessions. For example one couldn't believe what kind of music one listened to when one went into Bloke Modisane's little hovel in Sophiatown. Here was a man living behind a fence and having only one room and everything he owned was in that room and packed in suitcases. In a corner of this room a little record player and stacks of various jazz records....Mozart. And suddenly you are walking into this yard and you hear Mozart and Beethoven being played. This man was obsessed with all these different cultural experiences. It seemed so improbable, so implausible.

And Can Themba represented something else again. Here was a walking teacher, a village teacher. Everywhere he went people wanted to listen to what he had to say. Because although he had been trained as a philosopher, trained in English literature, this man was capable of being a teacher to everybody. When he went into a shebeen, he would speak about philosophers, but speak with such vivid township language, using 'tsotsi' language, using little bits of Afrikaans, English. But in such a coherent way that made everything seem vivid and accessible to you.

And I had the great experience of living at the so-called "house of truth" where Can Themba held sway. And you would be woken up in the morning by this man reciting from memory long passages from Shakespeare. Out of fun, out of just love of language. And walking around the room and kicking your legs and saying, "come on boys, it's time to go to work," but also quoting snatches from Oscar Wilde and so on. And it seemed to me as a provincial boy from Durban, such a rich experience. And of course there were bodies all over the place in one room. Because Can Themba used to just bring in any stray young man who had no place to live. O.K. you can stay in my place for two months.... In fact there was no contract. There were people like Nat Nakasa and myself also stayed there. So it was a kind of place that was half an informal college and half a bed-sit or

chair.... and then provided entertainment fuelled by this incredibly intelligent writer. I don't think we've had a more intelligent, urbanized writer as Can Themba. It's a pity that he didn't write so much that was serious. But he had a certain kind of discourse, he was oral, he talked it out more than he wrote it.

PD: How did Lionel Rogosin get in touch with them?

Well, we were used to the experiences in Sophiatown. It was not just Can Themba and Bloke Modisane. It was myself, Nat Nakasa. For example Nat Nakasa and myself introduced Athol Fugard, the playwright, to Sophiatown. And some of these people would just live amongst us or spend a night or two nights in Sophiatown.

And Lionel, I don't recall how Lionel got hold of us, but he was introduced to Bloke Modisane first. And it seems plausible that he simply went to Drum Magazine, where most of the people from outside, especially if they were writers or artists, went to make contact with my generation of 50's writers. Because most of them were centered around Drum Magazine. So Bloke and myself were very close at the time. and it was natural that Bloke and myself would get to be very closely associated with Lionel Rogosin.

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4

PD: Can you describe Bloke....

When I think of Bloke, to me he was a walking paradox. Here was a man, to me he was a walking paradox. Here was a man right in the middle of the slums. And the first thing you noticed about him was how well dressed he was. He was always in suits, and beautifully cut suits. One of his nicknames... you'll find in his by-line on Drum, some Drum articles, was "debonaire." So he became Bloke "debonaire" Modisane.

And that was one aspect of him. And his hatred of slack in people's lives, the lack of access to certain good things, to beautiful shirts, beautiful suits and so on. At the same time there was so much in Bloke that was totally Johannesburg, entirely Johannesburg township life. A certain kind of devastating wit. His writing approximated to

that wit as anything else that I know about that part of his life. He used to annoy 'jazz people,' what we call 'jazz people'. Because he was writing profiles every week for Post in which, apart from writing about their music, he would also give you encapsulations of their personalities. Some of them very insulting. And sometimes he'd write about film stars.

And I remember one line he wrote for our newspaper that had to be slightly changed by the white editor, because he thought that Bloke Modisane had gone too far -- in which he referred to a certain film star that was sleeping around, I won't mention the name, as a "centrally heated tart." He could come up with lines like that as if he had worked on them for a whole week.

That was Bloke Modisane, he loved to laugh. But one didn't know until he left, and I was the person who saw him off at Johannesburg Park Station, one didn't know until he left and wrote the book, "Blame Me on History" just how bitter Bloke had been. So that statement about laughing to stop from crying, it seems a cliché now, but I understand it better when I look back on Bloke's life. He was bitter, but in Johannesburg it was all concealed beneath this facade of vanity.

And of course he was very popular with white Johannesburg girls. Because they could immediately make contact with him. If you wanted to hear Debussy, Bloke Modisane had it in his house. The problem is nobody in the whole of Sophiatown had records of Debussy! So I mean there was a constant stream of good friends visiting his rooms in Sophiatown. And sometimes we poor people benefitted from these visits.

PD: Would it be fair to compare the destruction of Sophiatown with the moral destruction of Can Themba and Bloke Modisane?

Well, I see it very clearly with Can Themba, I don't see it very clearly with Bloke. Because long before the destruction of Sophiatown, Bloke Modisane had already so involved with American culture, European culture, apart from his own. He had access to a whole lot of experiences, through readings, through listening to the radio, and writing about the entertainment industry. And he wanted to have a first hand experience of this. So he had been planning to leave South Africa for some time.

For Can Themba it is difficult to see him living in any other place except Sophiatown. So when I learned, having left South Africa myself, that he moved to Swaziland, I just couldn't believe he could exist there. It was going to be like a fish living out of water. And of course this is precisely what happened. It wasn't ever going to be the same thing. To watch physically, to watch Can Themba walking down Victoria Road in Sophiatown was an experience in itself. One was reminded of some of these Western cowboys with their thumbs stuck inside their belts, walking into a saloon, but the whole of Sophiatown was his saloon. And in a nice way because everybody loved Can. The girls fell all over him, and young men loved him. He was the only person, I might say, who was not so menaced by the 'tsotsi' elements. You know what the tsotsi elements, in our situation, how powerful they were. These were gangs of youths who menaced anybody walking the streets. Not only during the night but in broad daylight. But Can Themba was the only one who could talk to these boys and just be allowed to get away with anything.

PD: It was an exuberant atmosphere despite what was going on in apartheid South Africa.

It is fair. I do not for a moment want to say that Sophiatown was acquiescent in the social arrangement that existed. It is precisely because Sophiatown was so independent and so aggressive in its preservation of its own identity that it was destroyed. I'll give you one example. One day I was covering an ANC meeting in Sophiatown, at the square, just at the top of Victoria Road. And a posse of police, including white police, came to break up the meeting. And some of them were riding horses. And one guy, a member of the ANC living in Sophiatown, got hold of the whip from the hand of this policeman, and started slapping the hind of the horse. And the horse went berserk. And this man, he could have been shot. And this is the kind of attitude you found in Sophiatown. A feeling that this is our ground, here we stand.

And it was also very evident when Sophiatown was being destroyed. When people, organized by the ANC of course, started trying to escape being moved. One of the ways in which they tried to do this, and it was futile in some ways but it was an expression of resistance. The government would simply give notices to one part of the street that the families were going to be moved the following day or so. And (cadres?) would come in and remove furniture, everything from these houses, to another street. And by the time the government

trucks came to collect these families to take them to Soweto and places like that, they found nothing. And two days later the furniture was back into all of these houses. It was an incredible cat and mouse game being played. And Sophiatown lived like that with white Johannesburg, playing cat and mouse games with it.

PD: Can you describe the experience of working with Lionel Rogosin?

My experience with Lionel was tremendously exciting because Rogosin arrived in the country wanting to capture something of our lives. But unlike many people who arrived knowing precisely what it is they wanted to do, Lionel, I may be wrong about this, Lionel seemed to want to find out from us what is involved in our daily lives, how do we express ourselves whenever we do this. And so he spent a lot of time, he seemed to be in no hurry, a lot of time just drinking together, talking an awful amount. I must say, my experience of the 50's in Johannesburg was an awful lot of talk. So talking a lot and drinking a lot, and for us of course, European alcohol was illicit, it was prohibition days for us in the 50's. So Lionel, simply by providing us with white alcohol was already breaking the law before he had embarked on his filmmaking. But this enabled us to get to know one another. And to not only tell him about ourselves, but to hear a lot about his work in New York. For example, how he made the film "On the Bowery."

So suddenly there was that rapport. An American artist, who seemed a committed artist, coming to us and then suddenly discovering ways of presenting our lives to anybody who really wanted to know what we thought we were like. And after that we went around to Sophiatown, and I'm not sure that Lionel did not actually have to dive down to the floor of the car one evening because we were being followed by a police van. But he was taking all of those risks which a less than conscientious filmmaker would have simply bypassed, he would have wanted to get on with making something and then getting the hell out of South Africa. And a lot of the time we were going to his flat in Hillbrow, in the middle of Johannesburg. Eating, drinking, and again discussing the shape of this film.

So when it came to writing a treatment, because a lot of the film was actually improvised, the dialogue was improvised by the shape of what the story was going to be like. Bloke Modisane and myself had to work on the story treatment with Lionel. It seemed much easier after that, we still argued a lot. For example, I would argue with

Bloke about a presentation of a certain slice of life. At that stage I suppose, Lionel would take his choice. That's when his own short experiences of life in South Africa, what he'd read about it, and what he wanted to make, would come into play. Because he then would have to mediate amongst various visions or what was involved.

PD: You say it was a lot of fun. Can you remember any other specific examples?

I don't know whether Lionel would be pleased about these memories because once I was telling him in London about this experience and he said he didn't recall it at all. Well, Lionel had a very beautiful, delicate, Jewish girl. And I was very young, tending to be very romantic. And I was absolutely in love with her. And I simply just melted whenever Ellie was around. So Lionel must have been teasing me one night when we were going to Sophiatown, and he kept saying to me, "the Zulus are after my wife." And he too was drinking, he said "I must protect my family, my wife from the Zulu army." It just showed that we were getting to be so close as a family, that we were teasing each other a lot and laughing a lot. And the experience was good of course.

When we actually started to work on the film, we knew more or less the sensibilities of each one of us. And I recall also, the randomness which occurs in situations like that, how certain things happen. For example, getting Miriam Makeba for the shebeen scene, we hadn't planned to have her in the scene. I can't recall which woman singer we wanted, we couldn't get this woman singer. And I must say the reason was not that Miriam wasn't the best thing for that part. But we wanted someone who would look, I don't want to say degenerate shebeen singer. We wanted someone who looked declassé, and Miriam was looking very classe in those days... the top female singer. In the end, because we couldn't find a rough hewn diamond, we went for Miriam. And I'm glad we did. A lot of things that happened to her happened as a result of Lionel's film. Also because Bloke and I decided that Miriam was the best thing for that part.

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

PD: Tell us a bit about shebeens...

The shebeen in South Africa, when there was prohibition and you could not purchase white alcohol, was the place where you could get anything. It became more than just a place for imbibing European liquor. As you know, the shebeen comes from the Irish word for speakeasy, a place where you drink. And in South Africa, this was a place you could do this. It also became a focus for the cultural life of the community. If you were not an aspiring middle class person, and you wanted really to know what was going on among ordinary people, the shebeen was the place to go. A lot of gossip going on, a lot of political discussion going on. And the most important aspect about the shebeen was that it was also a levelling influence. That is to say, you found schoolteachers, intellectuals, ordinary workers rubbing shoulder with good and bad women, good and bad men. Everything was mixed up there. And out of this incredible mixture, you could get some idea of what was going on in the black community, as it focused very finely, because presented in a sort of microcosm of the shebeen.

And I always laugh about it, I put it in my book "Home and Exile," how one time we were taking Louis MacNeice, the Irish poet, around Johannesburg. And he seemed to us so impermeable to the black township, to the experience of the black township. Until Nat Nakasa and I, out of some sense of wicked fun, let's go to the shebeen. So we went to this Sophiatown shebeen where he had to step over funny stuff to get to the room. And after a few, Louis MacNeice seemed to come alive. And we discussed everything. Suddenly the poetry itself came alive, in the form of Louis MacNeice talking about his own culture, and we were telling him about ours. But surrounded by all the smells of Sophiatown, and that was really what the shebeen was really like. It was an incredible arena that could suddenly turn into a seminar room. And suddenly become also a brothel. So it was everything.

PD: How do you evaluate "Come Back, Africa"?

The remarkable thing about "Come Back, Africa" even if we have to make allowances for some of its shortcomings, the remarkable thing about it is this mixture of experience and styles of filmmaking that went into it. And also the collaboration between a foreign artist, a committed artist, coming into our lives and making a film. I say mixture of styles because you can see that film as a documentary, and at the same time it was not entirely a documentary. This was an invented experience. An invented story.

And then the people who became involved as actors, who had no training whatsoever. On the white side, people were playing white people in the film, were mostly progressive white South Africans. But they were so aware, so familiar with the brutalizing aspects of black and white life in South Africa, that they were able to project this so authentically, that to me a lot of it still makes me wince, as if I'm going through the same experiences. Like when I see Natalie as the white woman trying to hire a black servant-- what goes on during that experience is both so funny, so comic, and so tragic. The pathos and all these small bitternesses that come into that film are suddenly projected in one or two shots. And that is what I value about the experience of "Come Back, Africa."

And of course, "Come Back, Africa" in some ways does provide a documentary evidence, in a small way -- I must emphasize that -- of black art, of urban black art in the 50's. For example the writers in the shebeen scene, although we were taking certain positions in order to create a sense of tension and controversy and so on....

(Interruption)

But the atmosphere we were trying to capture was authentic, and I dare say that if a fire had taken place there, you would have eliminated some of the most interesting writers, not myself, I not talking..... like Bloke Modisane, Can Themba, from South African literature. That is what "Come Back, Africa" was able to project. People like Miriam Makeba, our musical culture, suddenly being captured in one moment in a shebeen scene like that.

PD: You pointed out that (Sophiatown) was there, but no one else saw it until Lionel came along...

It's always astonishing when you think about "Come Back, Africa" and you wonder why it had to take a white American from New York City to make a film like that. To come and see what was going on in our lives. And this may be a valuable element in the film. That certain people do not see what is there, not because they cannot see it if they wanted to, but because they refuse to see it. So that someone coming with a certain kind of ideological equipment, not in any concrete way, but in wanting to tell the truth about certain experiences, can suddenly see what has always been staring people in the face. And you wonder why they never come up with those

experiences. And this is the sense of exclusion that always amazed me. The sort of experiences that were excluded by other filmmakers -- what they wanted to tell about the story of South Africa. And if it is indicative of Lionel's approach, that in the end he was able to get away with a whole lot of things because these people could not believe that you make a certain kind of film. That is why when he told them he was making a travelogue film full of dancers and so on, the officials actually believed it. And the reason why they believed it is very interesting.

END TAPE 5

(On "Cry, the Beloved Country")

The edenic view of the rural areas seen always from the mountaintop... you get this wonderful scene in Alan Paton's "Cry, The Beloved Country" -- the narrator looking down on the valley of Ndotsheni. And these hills are beautiful beyond the singing of it. And this is the kind of language that stays in the memory of readers abroad, international readers always remember the descriptions of that countryside. What is also true about that countryside is that almost eighty per cent of it no longer belongs to the black people. That part of it that still belongs to the black people has been eroded of its soil because there's overstocking on very limited areas. Large, large acres of that land now belong to the white farmers.

And films like what you get in "Jim Comes to Joburg" never tell you that part of the story. Why these people are so persistently trying to penetrate into white cities. The other aspect of it which is a falsification of that experience is that these people are simply attracted by the glitter -- this is the favorite expression of white South Africa -- the glitter of the white cities. As if just having glimpses of these cities, I don't know how they get glimpses of these cities, they simply can't bear to be not part of that glitter.

Where in fact my experience of the countryside when I was staying with my aunt was that most of the rural people who had any hold on land did not want to leave it. And they were very sorry for the peoples who thought that the cities were the promised land. There was almost a contempt for people who looked upon Johannesburg or Durban as such -- as being better than owning a good piece of land, if it could give you a good living.

So the reason people really left the countryside was not out of their choice, it was because there was not enough land to maintain them. They needed to supplement their livelihood by earning a bit of money from the cities. And the interesting dimension of that part of filmmaking is the reversal now, which I'm afraid to say started with Alan Paton's own work. The reversal of the hero who comes to the rural areas from Johannesburg and discovers how good village life is, and then becomes seduced by village life and doesn't want to go back to where he came from, which is the township. That is a new myth, but part of the original myth that everyone wanted to go to the cities because they are attracted by the glitter, and now they are attracted by the goodness of life in the rural areas. And when you know that the South African government has been trying to reverse the tide and send people back to these poverty stricken areas, you know precisely why the South African government has been assisting in the making of these justificatory images. Just to tranquilize the minds of the viewer so that he accepts what is in fact almost totally false.

PD: What about Paton's liberal Christian solution to the South African problem....

A film like "Cry, The Beloved Country" for example, presents you with a problem, because some of the events are so implausible - like the return of the Priest to Ndotsheni convinced, still convinced that it is the fault of black people, if they are in the situation in which they are in. That in fact, I argue, is part of the film's intention. If these people who go to Johannesburg, if they had adhered to certain Christian principles, sustained by a certain kind of traditional culture -- primordial traditional culture that some how remains in tact -- even after an encounter with Western values. If these people had maintained those two distinct elements, then things which are happening in Johannesburg would not be happening to them. The prostitute would not be what she is. The boy would not have murdered a white man. What is lacking in all of this is a larger framework within which lives like that are waged and lost.

What happens when someone goes to Johannesburg is not that they simply choose to become prostitutes. If they had other means of making a living, they would make a living. And the reversal of someone going back to Ndotsheni, and this incredible meeting between the white man and the priest, in which the priest almost seems to be saying "so long as you are around, White Boss,

everything will be O.K." It reminds me of that film with Sidney Poitier, "The Defiant Ones" in which the blacks are enraged because Sidney is trying to rescue a white guy and he forgets that he really has to make his escape as a black man because the dice is loaded against him. And the Reverend Kumalo doesn't actually realize that the dice has always been loaded against him and his brother.

The other thing I always taught my students was how certain ideological figures are constructed in films. Like John Kumalo, the brother. In the novel, upon which the film is based, when you hear the words of John Kumalo, against Alan Paton's own intentions -- and this is what is interesting about artists, they can actually make characters say things that they themselves thought were not proper. Against Paton's own intentions, he actually puts words that move African kids, they identify with those sentiments. And the sentiments of which Alan Paton would approve, which would come out of the mouth of the Reverend gentlemen, the brother Kumalo, are almost totally degraded as far as the younger generation of Africans are concerned. So there's always happening in those films that tell you more about the filmmaker rather than the lives about which filmmakers are trying to create.

PD: The film can be interpreted as reinforcing apartheid....

You see, the village life, for a certain type of -- I don't want to call Alan Paton a white do-gooder, because he was a good man in many ways, I believe that. But for a certain type of Christian sensibility the village life has always seemed to represent something curative, something healing. That somehow if you could have kept these people away from the urban experience, maybe they would have been saved. What really they're worrying about is white lives. How white lives have to change if they really have to accommodate even the rural experience. Because the rural experience itself cannot entirely be contained within the countryside, whether you're in Ireland or anywhere else for that matter -- in the United States of America -- you can't simply keep the rural experience out of the lives of New Yorkers and so on.

So that dramatic encounter between white lives situated in the rural areas and in the urban areas, with an impoverished rural African experience, always means that someone has to create some lie about it. Even if it's an unconscious lie. He's going to exclude and lie by

excluding the fact that the land itself has been taken away, the blacks have been robbed of their land.

Where I lived at near the Drakensburg mountains with my aunt. I was watching this patriarchal figure, the grandfather or all the sons in this area, who was also a farmer, who could have made something out of his life. He owned carts for taking timber into the town.

(Interruption)

He lived in this symbiotic relationship with a white farmer who owned miles of land. But this white farmer was always trying to get more of this man's lands. And this man had about four or five sons, and he had to divide land amongst all his sons. So it got smaller and smaller with the white farmer trying to get more and more of it.

PD: If we take "Cry, the Beloved Country" at the beginning of the decade, and "Come Back, Africa" at the end, what has happened in that decade.

Well, between the appearance, or the making of a film like "Cry, The Beloved Country" and the making of "Come Back, Africa" a whole number of changes have taken place in South Africa. If we wanted to talk about it in symbolical terms, in relation to these two films, we could say that there has been a usurpation of the role of the Reverend gentleman by John Kumalo as the younger generation of Africans are concerned. Which they consider it to be a legitimate usurpation of his powers. Because he was supposed to be the signal figure for "Cry, The Beloved Country," for Alan Paton. And the man who becomes the signal figure by the end of the 50's is not Reverend Kumalo but his brother, in symbolical terms. But there are reasons for this as well.

Because the people who controlled self expression when it concerned black people were white artists, and what Lionel Rogosin represents is a shift from white people trying to express a vision for blacks and allowing blacks to express themselves, to be in control of their own discourse if you wish. And it is not as easy as saying the Africans now become filmmakers. But there is an alliance between progressive artists and the black people who want to say something legitimate about their own experiences. And this again you see in "Come Back, Africa" as against "Cry, The Beloved Country." There are some things in "Cry, the Beloved Country" that one can admire, just

certain fleeting images that seem genuine about city life. When you first see these characters moving about Johannesburg, and the seething anger in Sidney Poitier, the young priest. But what you don't get is an explanation of what is the source of this anger -- it is there. It's one of the genuine moments of authenticity in the film.

But with "Come Back, Africa," and I don't say it because I was a part of the film, with "Come Back, Africa" a whole lot of languages have become available for the filmmaker. What for example you see is not only black intellectuals articulating their own experiences so far as black life in the cities is concerned. You even hear African languages being spoken in the film, as dialogue, because Lionel Rogosin wanted to create that authenticity for the urban uneducated worker.

END TAPE 6

TAPE 7

PD: How did you experience Sharpeville?

Well, I was there. That is the first thing one has to say about it.

DR interrupts

I was at Sharpeville myself, with Nat Nakasa, as one of the two journalists from the Drum office. And we actually carried people from the ground. One girl we carried on a blanket, who'd had her shoulder smashed by dum-dum bullets. But I must say I'd been there earlier on for some weeks researching my story. And it had become obvious that something was bound to happen, and the reason was quite simple. The conditions were intolerable. For example, bodies being allowed to rot, and not allowed to be buried, because the white superintendent was not going to allow such things to be done until rent had been paid up. A lot of families were in arrears with rent just explains to you the kind of economic deprivation that existed in a place like Sharpeville.

PD: Can you consider Sharpeville a culmination of a decade of discontent?

Well, Sharpeville in a sense represents the culmination, the culmination of a decade that had been based to a certain extent on optimism. The idea that you could actually change South Africa through passive resistance, and the moral force of your argument, because sooner or later enough white people would come to your side. And Sharpeville represented a blunt attack on such sentimentality by the State. The State was just showing you that it would by no means accept any such a dispensation. So after that you have a new era which leads to armed insurrection. On the artistic side you have a complete disillusionment, which shows itself, not so much in different texts being produced, as some people like to think, but in the tone which no longer has the laughter of Can Themba or the urbane wit of Bloke Modisane, but an abrasive kind of anger finding itself in the textualization of South African politics by artists and writers. And only in the theater do you have a residue, that kind of élan, a spirit of fun mixed with the spirit of resistance.

DR: How was Sharpeville to cover as a journalist?

Well, to be at Sharpeville as a journalist was also a subjective experience for people like myself and Nat Nakasa. Because we had gone there in the morning, still burdened with the spirit of the 50's, covering South African politics was not no much pain as it was just comic. And each time you saw the police at work you thought, 'you know, these guys are just too absurd.' But by the afternoon we had been overtaken by the 60's altogether. It was a new era. We'd seen horror. It left us in some ways completely shellshocked, because it didn't even occur to Nat and I what we had seen, how real it was. And we went to the hospital to try and get some sense of the statistics, of the numbers of people who had been shot. And (we) saw bodies piled on top of one another, some bodies actually still alive, but mixed with dead bodies.

And I can remember seeing a white car driving toward us and people waving -- white passengers in this car. And Nat and I saying "Oh, Fuck Off!" to these white people. So that the seething anger was just coming to the surface. And it was only a second later that we realized that these were white journalist colleagues. And that shocked us that we had reacted so immediately to seeing white faces, because we are associating them with the horrible experience we have just had collecting bodies in the township.

And I must say it was only seeing the headlines in the Rand Daily Mail the following day that even though we were there, the horror of what we had seen began to seep through into our consciousness properly. We even went to dinner with Harold Wolpe and his family that evening and we tried to explain to him what had happened. And the way we must have explained it must have sounded half absurd and half unreal. Because I remember Ann Marie ringing the following day and saying "Lewis, you and Nat, how could you tell us so vaguely what had happened. You didn't explain..." Just the limits of this horror. So it must have been that we ourselves didn't register that horror properly.

DR: You wrote about a prediction that something would happen....

Well, it is amazing, but it is at the same time not amazing that one had already predicted that something like this was going to happen. I remember addressing students at the University of the Witwatersrand in which I said a crisis will come about this year, and it may be sooner or later. And then I said, perhaps the first people who are going to orchestrate this crisis are members of the Pan Africanist Congress. People who wanted to leave passes at home and march to the prisons. Because I could tell from my experience as a journalist moving around the townships that if such a confrontation occurred there was bound to be violent reaction from the police. I had already covered? in which we were badly beaten up by the police, and we were threatened with being shot by the chief when the passes were being extended to women. So there was that feeling by then that something was boiling.

And of course, Bloke Modisane, who was in the film "Come Back, Africa" had already left South Africa secretly, through the bush and the back routes. And when he arrived in Britain, he also said he thought that a bloodbath was coming to South Africa, and he didn't want to be there when it occurred. So it didn't require that much to be prescient about what was going to happen.

PD: You commented on the movement of blacks and whites in Magic Garden....

Some of the figures in these films in the fifties that you observe moving across the screen, what strikes you about them is the woodenness of their movements. And I don't think that is simply the result of their not being trained actors. There is a difference

between the randomness and lack of purpose that they are displaying, and the purposive manner in which whites are directed, who seem to have knowledge of social goals, of what is required and what should be done. And sort of bungling about of the characters. And that must say something about, not the black characters but the people who made those films. How they could not direct blacks because they didn't give them a sense of purpose, of direction of where they are supposed to be going. Of where they are. And their motivation is lacking and very thin.

PD: How do you interpret Shaka Zulu in South African terms?

The film I suppose is an attempt at a replay of history. But to me there is something just so synthetic about Shaka Zulu. It's as if it's really just manufactured in Hollywood, and also that it could be a film about any meeting between the white conquerors and the native tribes. There's nothing unique about the film as such, except on the surface the events we can recognize as something that actually took place in South Africa. It's full of useless surfaces and things which are simply falsifications of African habit. Like Shaka running around with two women at the same time. But it's not just that Shaka could have had any number of women, it's not that, it's how the film relates the story in visual terms in images. It puts them together in a way that....an African for example cannot go to bed with two women at the same time, at least in those days. He would have to visit each hut and give each woman a sense of being unique. So that when you see images like that you know immediately that they are just not right. People always want to portray Africans either as dancers or as sexual maniacs. One can say that you can find more sexual maniacs in European cities than in the Zululand of that time.

PD: Can you talk about the depiction of the Zulu warrior in films.....

To me I have an ambivalent attitude toward the portrayal of the so-called Zulu warrior in the same way that I have the same sort of reservations about the portrayal of certain Asian soldiers whom the British loved to elevate to a unique status as fighters. There's something about imperial powers that love people who give them a lot of hell. And also want to isolate them from the general experience of a whole number of ethnic groups around them who may have offered as much resistance as they did. So that in South Africa there is a kind of symbiotic relationship between for example what is going now, the harking back to the glory of Zulu heritage.

And the British, who want to tell themselves -- look what a great power we are to have defeated such a great people. Because in order to ennoble yourself, to extol your own unique powers, you must have a worthwhile enemy to defeat them, otherwise it doesn't make sense. So there you have it. And we're seeing again, in my opinion, my people being seduced instead of trying to work toward the creation of new structures, being seduced into this nostalgia of Zulu imperial power, as some people regard it.

PD: Dolly Rathebe and the night club sequences (in "Jim Comes to Joburg") could such places have existed in Sophiatown?

It is very difficult to imagine that Dolly Rathebe could have sung in a nightclub such as we find in the film "Jim Comes to Joburg." Those images seem to have been almost cut-outs from black American films, films made about Harlem and so on. And someone needed to borrow those images. Because in order to have the authentic images you would have had to either go to the shebeen, which was slightly sleazier than those nightclubs, or you would have had to go to dancehalls, which were much more dangerous apart from anything else, but were by no means nightclubs with white cloth tables and so on. And one thing you recognize immediately about a singer like Dolly Rathebe, that she was much more explosive as a personality in real life, than she is made to behave in the film. It's as if you also needed to tame those energies, to portray that kind of inauthentic nightclub scene.

END TAPE 7

TAPE 8

The idiom that was utilized by black South Africans came, some of it came out of black America, so there is no mystery why you could see someone like Dolly Rathebe who so closely resembles Billie Holiday in some of her performances. I have no problem with that, indeed in the 70's we saw the black consciousness movement, which was again exploiting another black political expression from America, and assimilating it to the South African experience. I have no problem with that. But there is something else that existed as an overlay, over that idiomatic expression, which ought to have been captured by these filmmakers if they wanted to present an authentic experience. First of all, you realize that the blacks, as a majority in South Africa exist sometimes without any self-consciousness, like

being conscious that the whites actually dictate the conditions of their lives. There are moments when they just exist in their own right. In the way that Black Americans can't because they are tied up in their existential experience of living as a minority in a white society. So you can't really merge the two experiences too closely without falsifying one. Unless you show also the major differences between the two experiences of Black America and Black South Africa.