

Appendix: Interview with Zapiro

(Giles' Bar, Parkhurst, May 8 2004)

Q: Your struggle credentials give you a special outlook on today's politics, and the license to attack ANC policies from an insider's position. Your basic loyalty to the liberation movement doesn't inhibit your hostility when it comes to the government's Aids policy, to the arms deal, to Thatcherite economic policies. Is it hard to manage the tension between your political identity and the failings of a government which shares that basic identity?

A: You know, a hell of a lot of what I would say on the subject is summed up in your question. That's a good summary of exactly how I feel, in terms of my background, in terms of the tension that does exist. I do find it hard -- so I'm saying yes to all of the above. I find the tension very difficult to deal with.

Because maintaining a balance between criticism that is positive and criticism that is quite destructive is difficult. Of course occasionally one wants to go in feet first and really let them have it with both barrels. There's also the other kind of criticism which is a little bit less barbed. The kind of thing I was talking about earlier when I mentioned the Jeremy Cronin article ... the excitement that I do have in exploring the dilemmas ... and there's much more empathy in that. Empathy is a word that I would use very strongly here. You're identifying with the person who's faced with a very difficult choice.

The transitional time, and the new democratic order, have posed very difficult questions for people who've moved from struggle into power. And I do empathise with them -- both because I think many of them are very good people and because I share some of their struggle background -- and I see how difficult it is. So I'm not always trying to destroy what they're doing. Not at all. But I often find it very tough to deal with.

In some cartoons you express the ambiguity and complexity of an issue by narrating your own conflicting thoughts on it. Do you sometimes wish you could equivocate more often?

That's a very difficult question to answer. I am interested in the ambiguities and complexities. Whether I wish I could explore them more ... I think if I did that too much, I think I would lose the reader. Because in a way I'm trying to break new ground by doing at all. And I think by articulating for myself, having heard Jeremy Cronin's theory that that's what I was doing, by then saying yes, that's right, that's what has interested me, and then reinforcing that in me, saying I'm interested in those dichotomies and dilemmas, I was taking quite a step. I don't think I could do a lot more of that, because I think you do need unequivocal statements. You do need advocacy in cartooning. And I really believe in that.

Does it bother you that political cartoons must generally express one simple strident opinion, which may be reductive or make what turns out to be an incorrect assumption?

Ja. I'm probably going to battle to think of specific cases where that happened, but I think that is a feeling that I get. It's something that has happened. And I agree with you that if you're not doing the kind of cartoons we've just been talking about, the ones that are exploring grey

areas in a way that hopefully is interesting, a lot of the time one is making a fairly definitive statement about something that may turn out to be simplistic or a little bit off the mark.

So yes, that is a feeling I would identify with, but on the other hand, I feel that I've managed – and other people may assess this differently – to be on the mark more than off the mark. I often think of a strike rate, both in terms of cartoons that work, and also in terms of content : does the content prove to be ... kind of ... sharp. And I hope that I've got it right more times than I've got it wrong. Well ... I hope a lot more times!

You seem to have accepted that social spending is up and that therefore the government's centrist economic policy as moved far enough to the left. e.g. Manuel striptease cartoon. Does the Aids issue, by virtue of its urgency, displace stronger criticism of other aspects of government policy?

Another very interesting question. The answer's yes. The Aids issues make me so angry, and I feel they are so urgent, that I do a greater proportion of Aids cartoons than I probably should do. But it is a major issue, and there are good things the government is doing, which I haven't always tackled in cartoons. From my point of view as a cartoonist is that it's always harder to do positive stuff ... positive stuff that doesn't have a real hook to it.

The first part of the question was a statement, and I'm not sure that I agree entirely with the statement. I'm glad you liked the striptease cartoon, and I enjoyed it a lot and got a very good response with it, but I didn't feel – and this is where interpretation can come in, I can't control what you think, or what other readers think – I didn't think that that cartoon was saying it's enough. I said "All the way!" At the end, the last panel said "all the way!" We want to see the rest come off, we want to see you go further. I'm not satisfied yet – you're doing better than you were before but the criticism of Thatcherism is still there. And the next one I did, almost a year after that, was the one where he is standing in front of a garage, and he's got his keys ready, and the car he's about to get into is labelled 'RDP', and it's completely disused and covered in vines. And he says "I didn't realise it had been so long!" And he's still wearing his Thatcher outfit. So there's still that tension.

But it's interesting that the economist Nicoli Nattrass wrote something very critical of me after that cartoon that I did of Trevor with the car, the more recent one, saying exactly what you said. That even Zapiro seems to have accepted this new government line, hook, line and sinker ... and then I met her at a function and I said, well, I can't control what you think .

An example of the cartoons I was talking about earlier, in which you have to make an assumption, was your response to the Hefer Commission -- you seemed to be certain that Ngcuka was never a spy in the runup to the inquiry. How would you have treated Ngcuka had Maharaj and Co produced clear evidence that he had been a spy?

That's a dynamite question. I don't know. I would have had to ... the carpet would have been pulled out from under me, and that's what I would have showed in the cartoon, do it self-referentially ... and everybody else, there were many people like me who felt that this was a big sham, a smokescreen, a smear to draw attention away from their own indiscretions.

And as it happens, just by the way, when I was detained in 1988, the first person I met at the police station that I was taken to before being taken to Pollsmoor, was Bulelani Ngcuka. He was detained on the same night as me, and he mentioned that at the Hefer Commission as it happens. And I was so impressed with him as a person, and I just had a total gut feeling, through everything I knew about him, his work with Nadel, I said no, this guy is totally above board, no two ways about it. And so sometimes you have those feelings and you have to go with them. I had a feeling about Robert McBride ... that he was being set up. And I did cartoons that said that.

But when it came to Alan Boesak, I went for him immediately. Because all the feelers I had put out, and all the things I knew about him, I felt "guilty!". One does have to shoot from the hip, very quickly, and more times than not you get it right, and I've had a pretty good run on that score.

Do you produce different kinds of cartoons for different editors? Do your editors try to influence the direction of your work?

I wish my answers to all that you put to me in that question could be an unequivocal “no”. Because I suppose if you were 100% confident in oneself, you would always be 100% consistent. But I’m filled with angst and self-doubt a lot of the time. One thing I can say is I don’t waver from my political point of view, between newspapers. Definitely not. On the other hand, one can’t fail, to some extent, to be influenced by the kinds of things you know that editors respond to. When you have a looming deadline and you have two possible ideas. And you’re not 100 per cent sure of either of them but one of them might be something that the editor would be more interested in than the other, then you can get swung a little bit in that regard. But essentially I like my work to be read as a continuum. So it’s not as if that cartoon is inconsistent with my other work. Bit of a complicated answer ...

Your early work was quite strongly influenced by Derek Bauer. At what point did you shed that influence, and was it a conscious departure or a gradual thing?

All through that struggle period when Derek was producing that brilliant work that he did for the Weekly Mail, I was very strongly influenced, both by him and by his influences like Scarfe and Steadman. And then when I went to America and studied in New York, I continued to be influenced by Derek ... not that I was seeing his stuff at the time ... I actually saw some of his Weekly Mail stuff. But I was getting a whole lot of other influences ... from comics ... I studied under Will Eisner in comics, I studied under Harvey Kurtzmann, and then a very momentous semester of independent study under Art Spiegelman, and all of that influenced me both in terms of the understanding of comics and how I could pull that into my work, but also the simplification and editing that I saw some of the American cartoonists were really good at. Making things clearer.

And I remember having an exhibition of some work that I had been doing during the struggle period, in New York, and there was one of those ‘blinding flash’ moments. When one of my drawing teachers, he was teaching me life drawing, came in and looked round at the stuff on the walls, and he said, “I’m not into politics,” and this was a guy whose lifeblood was drawing, a brilliant artist in terms of rendering what he saw. And he didn’t even go close to the drawings to see what the issues were. Which for me was sacrilege – I mean that was *everything* ... we were focused on the issues!

And what he said was: “Too grey. I look around here, and I see grey. “ Because there was too much stuff that was too similar. He said, “ you want some white there, you want some black there, you want some contrast here. “ He said, “You’ve got to find that.” And I looked around and said “God’s truth, he’s right!” And so that was part of it. The comics, the simplification, and that comment, made me start thinking, “I’ve got to make my style more accessible.

And there’s one other thing. Steadman, and Bauer following Steadman, are kind of anarchic in their political approach, I think Bauer even more than Steadman. Very anarchic. Destroy everything. Treat everything the same. I was very disillusioned by the work that Derek produced in the beginning of that transitional period. I thought Derek was superbly brilliant in that period from ‘85 to ‘89 but I still disagreed with him politically, because I was very much a UDF supporter, and he was kind of, “attack everything, destroy everything”. I disagreed with him.

But I thought his work really fell down in ‘91, ‘92. I just felt that he couldn’t come to grips with the nuances and complexities of the new South Africa. Of the changing South Africa, the transition. And I said to myself, I actually clearly articulated that idea to myself that I wanted a style that was more accessible for people, that people will respond to, where I can do a sitcom if I want, where I can do something that empathises if I want, where I don’t have to destruction and blood and spatter and sharp and distorted and grotesque. And that was probably one of the most important understandings that I’ve had, and I think that accessibility is something that I worked at very hard over the next few years.

Would you say that it’s a problem shared by someone like Steve Bell? His work for me is consistently preoccupied with hostile attacks on Blair and Bush at the moment, and who seems incapable of varying his subject matter and approach ...

I find it hard to criticize Steve Bell. I love Steve Bell's work, I think it is brilliantly thought through and brilliantly done, but if I were totally honest and since you've phrased the question I might have to give you a begrudging "yes". There is an element of that. But that said, I think Steve Bell must be one of the most successful cartoonists in the world doing that kind of constant harsh criticism, because his stuff is so funny and so consistently brilliant, that he pulls it off.

When you were still refining your style, did you have any trouble arriving at caricatures of major figures that weren't simply variations on those of cartoonists who influenced you, like Bauer?

I think of only two people that I battled with in that way in South Africa ... PW Botha and Buthelezi. Both of which, my original caricatures of them were hugely influenced by Derek Bauer. And I found it hard ... when somebody defines something, in the way that I was then able to do Mandela later, and get that iconic figure of Mandela dancing, and all the young cartoonists copied that ... I found myself unwillingly and sometimes unwittingly copying Derek's personifications of those two figures.

Do you think that cartoonists in general have more influence on public opinion than editorial writers? And if so, why? Do you think you can significantly change the way people think about an issue?

On the first question, I can't give a definitive answer. It varies ... some editorial writers are very powerful, and the same can be said of cartoonists. Second question: yes, I think that is possible. I gave one example this morning, of Khulekani Sithole's plan to house prisoners in disused mine shafts, the brain cavity cartoon – that one I hear actually affected things.

When Madiba came from Switzerland and had to present this failed Olympic bid to the ANC caucus and everyone was very down, and I had drawn that cartoon on the bid, where you had the guy on the Parade saying "Athens se ma se poes" ... that cartoon, people latched onto it as something they could laugh about and say it's actually OK. We have to understand that maybe all of our symbolism and all of our miracles are not necessarily going to carry through entirely into winning over the world on every front. And in a way if a cartoon articulates something like that it can enter the public consciousness...

Does your job sometimes depress or exhaust you? The fact that you often have to respond creatively to bad news? Do you sometimes wake up and think, "I can't do a cartoon today!"?

Your questions are like John Perlman's. These long involved questions that have lots of facets and nuances ... yes to all of the above. You phrase that very well, and yes.

But not often?

More often than I'd like. I'm serious. There's a lot of angst, and self-doubt and second-guessing. And a lot of ... when are the police going to come and take me away, I'm a charlatan, what am I doing here?

Which cartoonists do you rate as the best in the world at present, and which do you rate as the best ever?

Um ... I cannot answer that question. I can give you some of my favourites: Steve Bell, Tom Toles, Tony Auth ... one of the funniest is Mike Peters ... hilarious but not always politically that sussed ... Mike Lukovic, Alan Moir in Australia is very good, Plantu in France ... but I have reservations about him, I don't think he always nails his colours to the mast enough.

About your comment on Plantu ... what's your take on controversy surrounding your cartoons: Sharon/ Nazi cartoon, the Embedded Journalism cartoon, Catholic Bishops as pricks? Do you enjoy the controversy, and do you think cartoonists are generally too timid, and unwilling to take risks and be crude or outrageously provocative?

Two out of those three cartoons, I've enjoyed the controversy, because I think I can absolutely stand by what I said, and that's with the Catholic bishops one, and with the embedded journalism cartoon. With the Sharon one, I stand by the political sentiments in it, and I'm appalled by the way people refer to it as "The Nazi cartoon" as if there was a swastika in the drawing, which there was not. I've had such personal angst over that, and my family and I have had so much criticism that I find that ... I wouldn't turn the clock back and not have done it, but I haven't enjoyed it. I haven't enjoyed it at all. The criticism of Israel, which I will continue doing, and which I am compelled to do, is not enjoyable for me, but it's something that I will do.

Are there some faces that are impossible to caricature? What makes them so?

The most difficult faces to caricature are young children. One you don't want to really distort their features, and secondly their features are not very distortable, it's hard to discern what makes them different from other young children. The blander the face, the more difficult it is to caricature. Young women are often hard for a similar reason, a little bit easier than children, but they don't have beards, they're not bald, they don't have lines and furrows on their faces. And it gets hard to do. The more a person has those things, baldness, lines, furrows, mustaches, beards, big nose, big ears ... the easier it is to do.

And the interesting thing is that some people develop those things in a fairly harsh way, but they're not people one wants to attack. And I always thought Dullah Omar was very interesting character because he had a very severe face, but he was actually a very gentle person. And I thought a lot of the caricatures that people drew of him, even some of mine, were more severe than I wanted to see him as. So you can sometimes get a little dissonance between the soul of a person and how they come across.

Your style of caricature is generally quite gentle and affectionate, even when you are caricaturing someone who you are consistently attacking, like Bush or Manto. Do you sometimes wish you could indulge in a truly venomous hateful caricature, in the vein of Bauer or Steve Bell?

I don't miss it so much anymore. In a way I've been through that phase, during the apartheid years, Botha and others, and now I find the challenge is to get the vitriol coming out of the content, rather than necessarily through a savage drawing.

Can you describe your daily production routine ...

Wake up about quarter to seven, start listening to the radio, the early part of the morning gets divided between listening and doing my child duties, I have two children and I have to get them ready for school and make their lunches and drive my daughter to school, so there's a little bit of a battle at that point. I have to give them attention, so ordinary life intrudes on the cartoon-making, and then when I get back to my studio I read the papers, and start listening to talk shows instead of the hard news and the talk shows give me a bit of an insight into where people are going and what people are thinking about things.

And then I would hope that by sometime in the morning, I've got my idea, but I also have to do all my clerical stuff and all my responses during that period. If I'm doing well, then I will be already drawing by lunchtime. Doing the rough drawing, and then start inking after lunch. That's the way I tend to do it, filling in all the other stuff while listening to things, generally a mixed bag, and then evenings I spend with my family, but I still try and watch a news broadcast or if necessary tape it for the next morning. I'm doing six cartoons over five days. At one point I was doing seven cartoons over six days and I hated that. No weekends. Not good. But now I'm much happier doing six.

Tell me a bit about the UDF calendar you designed in eighty-six or so ...

At that time I saw myself an activist first and a cartoonist second and I was part of the Claremont branch of the UDF. I was a little bit less involved, but also involved in ECC activism. So those were my primary two things. And I had this idea – I had already by that stage in 1986 had two cartoons published in the old Weekly Mail. So those were the only newspaper cartoons I had done. And I had this great idea, I thought I could encapsulate the

struggle – at least the Western Cape struggle – in one drawing, and I thought people would be into it. And I knew it would be some sort of major opus for me. And it did turn out to be that. It took me about three weeks of drawing – solid drawing. And another week to get the thing published. It was hard to find somebody because a lot of publishers were too scared. So we went to a couple of publishers who did struggle stuff. And I tried to sum up all the types of activities that were involved in getting a meeting together ... bussing the people from the townships in from all the different areas. You had a few whities who were involved in certain areas of the struggle ... and essentially they were archetypes slash stereotypes ... I suppose the difference is that a stereotype is often a derogatory one ... So I did try and get archetypical people, based on amalgams of people that I knew from all my struggle activities. And there were some real people there the arch Tutu was in there, and Boesak, Fatima Meer. And some of them drawn from memory, because I didn't have an archive of images at that point.

Essentially the drawing style was mimicking French "cute" posters, especially Jean Jacques Loup, and probably to a lesser extent Mordillo who was Swiss. But its really Loup was the guy I was looking at, to get that kind of cute style with a lot of things happening. And I thing an important thing to have when you do that is to have a strong overall theme to get all those things to work. I think too often in those cartoons there's just a million things happening and not a central focus.

The central focus was entering that hall, with the big banner on top which said "UDF Unites, Apartheid Divides" and then you had JoJo Shapiro on the roof, he is also named Jonathan, and we actually got mixed up with each other at one point, and I got detained because of him, and then he got detained because of me.

And then I'm in there, so its very autobiographical, I'm walking into the hall with my then girlfriend who's now my wife, and I'm holding a book of drawings of me with police as pigs (*** "I draw what I see" story) which was also self-referential because in the poster there were police drawn as pigs, both in uniform and out of uniform. And my sister is in there, with her computer paper, because the police thought that, in those days before the Internet, her computer was connected to both Lusaka and Moscow, which I've always thought would be a kind of a James Bond feat, because there was no way! And she was detained, because they were trying to get her list of stuff.

And you've got a casspir and a buffel, and different kinds of soldiers on board -- one is incredibly young, with a dummy in his mouth, to a certain extent empathising with the whities who were trying to escape from the army, getting sucked into it ...

And what happened was that people got hold of the calendar and put it up, and found spaces where I hadn't written anything and wrote their own slogans on it, which was great, I'd love to get some copies of those.

And after this thing was published, immediately the security police came around looking for me and I had to go into hiding for a few weeks, and then disguised myself, I had a very effective disguise, which I stayed in for about three months. After six weeks after publication the calendar was banned for "furthering the aims". There was a little ANC flag in there, and "MK is coming".

And the bus in the poster you'll see is green and gold. But there was a strip of black at the bottom, and that was the one thing that the lawyers persuaded me to change. They said just take out the black – it is too obviously an ANC flag. And I reluctantly changed that, and with great difficulty, because I was using inks.

And they convinced me to take my signature off, but I regretted that afterwards, because it made absolutely no difference – the police were there the next day anyway ...

And so many people said to me, "Hey, I'm so glad you put me in the poster, and I'd usually kind of nod and say yes, but meanwhile it wasn't them, it was somebody based on three or four people, but they thought, well, this is me!" And that's great, because they kind of identified with it.