

The South Africa Report

When I proposed the title for my planned lecture at the Wits School of Arts at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg I had thought hard about what one could or should say as a guest in a country that had so recently overcome a truly disastrous past of racist domination, injustice and governance based on the violation of even the most basic human rights.

Thinking about our own disastrous past (of “Aryan” domination, injustice and governance based on the violation of even the most basic human rights ending in the Shoa) I decided on “Why should the past be our destiny” (you can read it on my web site www.danielis.info) and entrusted myself confidently to the message I read in Breugel’s “The parable of the blind men” from the Capodimonte Museum in Naples.

Little did I know how sensitive my provocative observation “why blindness could be a prerogative for leadership” could be as the lecture, a day after our arrival in Johannesburg, fell into the period of intense debate before the election of the new presidency of the African National Congress, the governing party of the New South Africa grown out of the struggle against the apartheid regime – a struggle I had followed with passion and hope when I lived in London.

And it was at the infamous “Drill Hall”, the place where the “Treason Trial” had assembled the leaders of the African National Congress, caged like animals, in a kafkaesque court case and forced them to learn their heightened sense of solidarity, that Aloisia Woergetter of the Austrian Embassy had placed my artistic residency: the grim location had been transfigured into a centre of cultural and social activity, the roof had come off the oppressive barracks and given way to a luminous square lined by pillars with the nameplates of the accused, - presidents, Nobel Laureates and ordinary freedom fighters in beautiful alphabetic equality, and leading to a pleasant exhibition enclosure where I spent three weeks with “my gentlemen”: Vuyo, Frans,

Joka and Msebenzi. In an effort to free the artistic creativity that is at the core of us all, we employed Chinese ink, pencil, colors, water and imagination on paper, timid at first, relying on ruler and eraser, then with growing freedom, allowing exuberant willfulness leading to veritable explosions of colors and splashing of black ink, until a certain maturity allowed each and every one to find his own visual language, his individual method to dominate the white paper and give it shape in their likeness. My fundamental belief in the equality of all humanity prevented me from anything like teaching. There was no proper instruction at Drill Hall, I relied on good company, sympathetic example and the most constructive form of enlightenment; conversation.

Conversation among respectful equals.

It touched everything, from how to treat a brush to Egyptian myth, from the doubtful ways of the powers that be to love, pain and liberty. It built trust and cohesion to permit an intense but relaxed atmosphere open to all.

And curious painters in spe did drop in, the youngest, probably 8 years old, who returned often and made it into the final exhibition, to gracious women exploring their sense of beauty.

There were surprising results, and the splendid exhibition that closed the residency surprised even their newly empowered creators.

The encounter with David Krut's TEAP (Taxi Art Education Program) team led to a spirited painting session for all. It points to a future for the Drill Hall activities, cooperation with this well conceived outreach program that brings art and hope (and is art not hope satisfied?), making the presence of imported mentors (like me!) superfluous.

In the mean time Susan had immersed herself in master classes and musical instruction in Soweto.

But first was a concert at Maseru in the kingdom of Lesotho, where she performed music by Bach, Bischof and Florey in the presence of the king for an audience without prejudice – for many of them it must have been the first classical concert, certainly the first containing only music for cello solo.

A master-class in Mafikeng, where a thriving string orchestra succeeds against unbelievable odds (no sheet music, few instruments and absolutely no money), sustained only by the imaginative dedication of their teachers – Susan wants to return to this surprisingly successful outpost of musical commitment, and I hope to help with a suitable collection of string scores (trios, quartets etc.) to be assembled with the help of friends in Vienna.

Back to Soweto – and to think that this grim township has become a symbol of what can be achieved in a short time, turning it in to a monument of hope for the new South Africa – and to the African Youth Ensemble under their Maestro Kolwane Mantu, teacher of a whole generation of string -players, Susan has found the right partners for a fruitful musical relationship where her knowledge and passion fuse with the abilities and fervor of a youthful but musically maturing group of players.

I have heard the African Youth Ensemble.

Ever since I dream about music making (or painters at work, for that matter) with the same spirit and fiery dedication in this old world of ours – never did South Africa appear younger, happier and freer than in this happy-making group of budding musicians.

Aloisia had initiated an encounter with the eminent publisher, book dealer and gallery owner David Krut – this citizen of the book - republic and I had so many interests in common that we started to talk as if we had always known each other. His New York art-space was just showing a Tiepolo exhibition (!) – I had visited that territory often over the last 30-odd years – my passion for Lovis Corinth’s etchings (10 of his works currently hang in my studio here) had him lead me into his wonderful print workshop and before long I faced a prepared copperplate, armed with the proper tools for a dry-point etching.

Two days of good work with his printer Mlungisi produced a more than decent trial print and the wish to continue soon – I certainly want to be back in this space conducive to intense work and the joy of creating.

There is a plan for a ”Leporello” of dry-points and a text is humming in the back of my head that could accompany it, bound into a small artist’s book, to be printed and published in Johannesburg.

There was a second act to this in Cape Town: where I found myself being interviewed by David in his bookshop and gallery at the fabulous Montebello Design Centre (an imaginative re-creation of spaces right out of an Arts&Crafts dream), the whole thing taped by the documentary film maker Revel Fox for the archives of his new Taxi Film project – somehow nothing seems impossible for David when he puts his mind to it.

Karin Reinprecht had introduced us to a play by Mike van Graan at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg: “Bafana Republic”, a grimly funny one-woman show about the event South Africa hopes will turn its fortunes in 2010 – the soccer world cup. Excited by the freedom of expression in lambasting the supposed salvation by soccer (would our stages be equally

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free, I wonder?) we returned for a public reading of “Brothers in Blood” dealing with religious and racial prejudice right now. It resulted in a night’s intense discussion, reverberating for a long time. To see Mike again in Cape Town was an unexpected bonus – he showed us a part of the town and gave us some insight into nagging questions about freedom, equality and prejudice caused by his haunting new text. Two days later he took us to SPIER, the new Biennale of Contemporary Art of South Africa, in its first edition, imaginatively set in lovely wine country with the help of a stark architecture of used containers. Highly professional, profoundly irritating when seen in the context of cultural globalization: artists here know all there is to know, technically they know no limitations, the limits lying simply where imagination cannot reach.

No wonder Revel fox had spent many hours filming events there.

People are the greatest riches our life knows. Accordingly the people we have encountered during six intense weeks of work and learning were, are and remain what I think about.

I would want to join them, again, in a country where the word “NO” was not heard once during all this time.

In fact, we will return as soon as possible.

To join them now, building a future worth living for, made possible by their dedication to humanity as a whole.

Venice, January 10th, 2008

Friedrich Danielis

P.s. To Pascal Tomasini, the French consul and director of the Alliance Francaise in Lesotho, I owe the information that the country’s population is actually decreasing, caused by HIV/aids – he used the words “dying out” .

We must keep this in mind, too.

But art is about a beautiful life, I think. Not about a beautiful funeral.