

## **STAFFRIDER : AN INFORMAL DISCUSSION**

*Mike Kirkwood*

*How did Staffrider start? Whose idea was it?*

In 1977, the year before I came to Ravan Press, I was talking to what is now called the Mpumulanga Arts Group in Mpumulanga, which is part of Hammarsdale Township, halfway between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. There was a group of about ten writers—Mafika Gwala, Nkathazo Mnyayiza among them—and the discussion came to the matter of regionalism: Natal writers, both black and white, felt themselves ignored by the big metropolitan centres. The Mpumulanga writers felt that there should be a magazine that would not only carry work from all around the country but would also give a certain amount of autonomy to the various groups of writers. Nobody wanted the kind of editorial policy that comes from the top: “We’ve got a policy. We’ve got standards. If you fit in with this policy, come up to these standards, we’ll publish you.” They wanted a magazine that was generated at the point of writing and functioned as a vehicle for a great number of writers.

While one could not say that this is exactly the point at which *Staffrider* was conceived—the need for a magazine of this kind had been expressed elsewhere—certainly I carried the ideas that came out of the Mpumulanga discussion with me when I took up the offer from Ravan Press, in 1978, to work for them. I wanted Ravan to have a literary magazine that would respond to the new creative forces inside South Africa. Not knowing where to begin with such a project, I got in touch with Mthobisi Mutloatse. I knew, of course, about the Medupe Writers’ Group, which had been banned in October the previous year. From what Mthobisi said, it was clear that there were a lot of individuals around who were beginning to coalesce into writers’ groups. He began to talk to people about the magazine, and from early on the discussions centred on the idea of groups that were based in particular townships and grew out of particular communities. We were not so interested in groups that consisted of a name, a couple of writers and an atomised structure. My first insight into how powerful and well-supported an arts group could be came, in fact, when Matsemela Manaka, who now works at Ravan, walked into the office, coming not as an individual but carrying with him, as it were, a whole group of writers.

If that sounds “populist”, well, the Ravan Press office was that kind of place in those days (and still is): the director, Peter Randall, had just been banned and it had become known as a publishing house that would not only listen to black writers but would do at least some of the things that black writers wanted it to do. So there were a lot of people calling at the office. And whenever anyone called—or whenever anyone wrote a letter—

*This interview was conducted by Nick Visser in the Ravan Press office in Johannesburg on 2nd and 3rd September 1980.*

*English in Africa* 7 No. 2 (September 1980)

we would say, "There's a magazine starting . . . this is the kind of magazine that we see it as being." And we'd always ask, "Are you in touch with a group of writers?"

*How did you come up with the name? And what kinds of implications does it have?*

Because we were trying to *find* a magazine rather than *found* one, because we saw ourselves merely as assisting in bringing such a thing to birth, we certainly didn't want Ravan to create a name. We weren't after a South African literary review, after all. When Mothobi and I were talking over various possibilities that had been suggested as a suitable name for the magazine, he mentioned that somebody—I don't know who—had suggested the word "staffrider". I said, "Well, what does that mean?" He explained that a staffrider is somebody who rides "staff" on the fast, dangerous and overcrowded trains that come in from the townships to the city, hanging on to the sides of the coaches, climbing on the roof, harassing the passengers. A mobile, disreputable bearer of tidings. The idea had a certain flavour that made it right for the magazine. It was definitely outside the bounds of institutional life in South Africa; it focussed on an area of experience—travelling to work and back—that is central to most black lives in this country; it incorporated the notion of a daredevil, somebody who would go a little bit further than most. I suppose we drew a comparison between the liberties the staffrider took with the law and the liberties we wanted the magazine to take with the censorship system. In any case, I have always been fascinated by the image of the messenger in mythology, and especially with the difference between the figures of Argus and Hermes or Mercury. Argus, with his hundred eyes, is associated in my mind with the domination of editors, sitting inside their offices, carefully sifting through the news they want to present. And, even more, with newspaper monopolies and the immense technology of news that turns even editors into slaves. Hermes, who is a bit of a rogue, a bit of a musician—and certainly a more refreshing, sympathetic figure—is associated with the newspaper seller, say; someone who is involved more directly in human communication, who stays very close to the people. Some of *these* ideas seem to be suggested by the name *Staffrider*.

That we wanted a name that comes out of black experience should not suggest that the magazine was intended to be an exclusively black magazine. From the start it was to be non-racial. We wanted it to carry black work without appearing to indulge in a kind of tokenism, picking up, in other words, a black writer as a "voice" that a predominantly white readership should "listen to". We wanted a magazine that carried black writing to black readers as well as white. I suppose there was an immediate danger of white writing becoming the token element, but Mothobi and I, from our earliest discussions onwards, had worked on the assumption that the kind of experience that was going to be turned into literature in the period that we were moving into was going to be black experience in the main.

*In the period immediately prior to Staffrider there wasn't a vehicle of expression to which black writers could readily turn. What there had been, a long time ago, was Drum magazine. In some ways you are different from the Drum of the 50s, obviously, yet in some ways there is a similarity. Was there a sense of inheriting something from that period?*

In the current issue of *Staffrider* there's an interview with Zeke Mphahlele in which he reconstructs the *Drum* period of the 50s and thereby establishes continuity between that generation of black writers and the present one. Although there was a variety of incidental links between *Drum* and *Staffrider* when we started—Mothobi was editing Casey Motsisi's work, *Drum* was helping Ravan to distribute it, for instance—it was certainly not in our minds to continue the tradition of *Drum*. The cultural history of South Africa is best represented as a heap of fragments which are cut off from each other; this is true of white culture, but even more true of black culture, where each generation seems to have been lopped off, stopped in its tracks, by exile, imprisonment or some form of cultural oppression or another imposed by the ruling cultural group. Each new generation has to start from scratch. This is particularly evident with the generation of *Drum* writers in the 50s. But, given this enforced absence of continuity from generation to generation, there are positive aspects to be drawn from such a cultural dispensation. There's a pride in each new generation that comes from the endeavour made by the new cultural activists. There's also a degree of resistance to continuity: the writers don't want to be told over and over again that they must realise that they are part of a tradition. They don't want to be hemmed in by tradition; they want to draw attention to the validity of cultural action in the present.

*I notice that Staffrider lists no editors. Could you tell us how the editing and the selection are done, and to what extent you respond to contributors in the form of criticism of their work?*

Obviously the people working in the Ravan office—and I'm one of them—do in a sense function as an editorial collective. There are about four or five of us who actually work on each issue. We often have arguments about what goes in but have, I think, always been able to arrive at some kind of consensus. Anybody who has extremely strong feelings against a particular piece would probably be able to prevail: if he or she held out for long enough, there would be absence of consensus. Within this unit, Joki Seroke and Matsemela Manaka are now accepting the major responsibility. We're getting an awful lot of material and it's certainly a problem to respond in depth. We try to keep in touch with writers, to answer their letters and, where possible, to offer a little bit of criticism. Fortunately a lot of writers come into the office; it's much easier to sit down and talk to them than to write lengthy criticism.

But the editorial process is not confined to this collective. We try to spread the decision-making process as much as possible, asking people outside the office for their opinions on work that's up for inclusion, and relying on the part played by the writers' groups. In a sense the editing process begins with the groups. They decide which of their works they want to put forward for the magazine. Of course it's true that we don't include all the works of a particular group but if a group were to say, "Look, you either publish all our submissions or none of them," we'd have to respond. We do feel that the principle of editing being done by writers in association with writers is a good one. So it's important to remember that when you talk about *Staffrider* you're talking about approximately 500 writers, not to speak of graphic artists, who both help to put the magazine together and, perhaps more important, help to distribute it. All the people who have had anything to do with the magazine see it, and would like to continue seeing it, as something

for which no particular individual is directly responsible. It comes out of a very broad-based cultural energy.

*How does material come in?*

Filling the first issue was simply a matter of contacting the various writers' groups around the country. Material flooded in. The number of groups seemed to double with each issue and, as you can see from the shape of the magazine in the early issues, these groups accounted for a lot of the material. So *Staffrider* did not need to sponsor poetry readings, say, in the way that *Drum* used to run a short story contest in order to attract contributors to the magazine. The readings were happening in the groups who were already contributing to *Staffrider*. People have a lot of fun going from one area to another to attend readings. I remember going to a Bayajula meeting which was attended by CYA [Creative Youth Association] in force, so that the poetry reading became a kind of Bayajula/CYA jam session. And there was a great get-together in Cape Town recently between the Guguletu and Soweto writers.

*Would you talk a bit about the trend towards group creativity?*

I would certainly see 1976 as one of the forces which created the momentum for writers in groups rather than writers as individuals and, perhaps because the political momentum of 1976 is dying away a little, a number of the groups are going. We seem to be coming to the end of a phase. This certainly hasn't meant that the writing coming in to the magazine has slackened in momentum: many of the people who were originally part of a writers' group are carrying forward the momentum into individual acts of writing. They are having to decide, in other words, "Am I a writer only because I am in touch with a group of people who see writing as an important aspect of the cultural struggle, or am I a writer because I'm a writer, because I continue to have things to say, a craft to develop?" Of course, there were writers right from the beginning who, while they were sympathetic to the community-based, group-oriented school of writing that was developing, nevertheless found themselves working alone as individual writers. People like Miriam Tlali and Mtutuzeli Matshoba would be examples of these; they are usually part of a slightly older generation.

Another thing to remember is that these writers' groups have certainly come in for a considerable amount of harassment from the Security Police. The most recent example of this is David Mphuso, Chairman of Gartasso, the Ga-Rankuwa Writers' and Artists' Association, who was held in prison and then released on bail on a charge of possession of banned literature. One of these books was, in fact, a Ravan Press publication which is not banned for possession, but he has nevertheless been charged with possessing it. And he's not by any means the first of the *Staffrider* distributors and contributors to be harassed in this way. I would say that we've had up to twenty reports made to us of harassment of one kind or another.

*You don't use commercial distributors. How do you recruit distributors?*

The whole black readership in this country operates largely outside the normal

channels of bookshops. And, from the beginning, *Staffrider* has been trying to express the cultural force that rests outside the institutional framework. So we use non-commercial outlets, outlets that derive from the writers' groups that we publish. Before the first issue of the magazine was published, we had lined up a whole army of distributors who knew what the magazine was doing and that their particular communities would be interested in reading the magazine. We tend to see a natural affinity between contributing to a magazine and distributing it. This is part of an attitude to writing. Mthobi Mutloatse says in his introduction to *Forced Landing* that the writer's job isn't done when he's written his piece; he has to be part of getting that piece to the people and part, even, of the people's response to the piece that he's written. In other words, we see the connection between the writer and his audience not as an abstract thing, certainly not as something that operates through a mechanism as abstract as the market, but as a matter of concrete connections. The writers that we're in touch with certainly don't find it demeaning or embarrassing to distribute the magazine that they publish in.

*Does Staffrider go overseas at all? Have you had individuals, or university libraries, or African Studies Centres subscribing?*

We have, in the usual way, a lot of library interest, which we're grateful for and which we would like to expand, but we're much more interested in developing an overseas distribution in the *Staffrider* idiom. We have distributors in places like England, Australia, Canada, Germany, Holland, for instance. This is obviously not a very high distribution; I wouldn't think it's more than 500 copies, but it does exist and we'd like to see it increasing. We're keen to develop a Third World nexus of this kind, one that doesn't confine itself to bookshop distribution but rests on writers and other interested individuals finding *Staffrider* interesting enough to distribute to a group of friends. We'd particularly like to see the magazine getting into Africa; that's one of the things that we're working on at the moment.

*Is the interest in Staffrider nationwide, or is it confined to the Johannesburg area?*

Well, interest is certainly centred on the Reef—Johannesburg and Pretoria. I don't know whether we should be worried by that or not; we *are* conscious of the problem of regions in this country. Probably over half of the copies of *Staffrider* go to this area: there's a terrific population density of literate people here. But we do, as much as possible, go for a countrywide distribution. We have distributors in places like Cape Town and Durban, but also in places like Bloemfontein and Kroonstad, where one might not expect there to be much interest. We also have distributors in Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.

*What, roughly, is your circulation?*

The print run is 7,000, and it's been there for the last two issues. We printed round about 1,000 copies of the first issue, and pretty quickly did a reprint of 1,500. And then the magazine got banned, so we couldn't really explore just how many copies would be needed. With the second issue we went into 3,000 copies, and then the magazine sort of

jacked itself up from there.

*I think it was Anthony Sampson who suggested that for every one subscriber or buyer of Drum magazine there were probably another half-dozen people who had access to it, or had bits of it read to them if they were not themselves literate. Do you know anything about the style of audience reception for Staffrider?*

Yes, all the indications that we have suggest that one copy of the magazine gets a pretty fair circulation, maybe up to six people reading one copy. And of course the magazine doesn't die: copies are not thrown away but travel from hand to hand. There are a hell of a lot of people in South Africa who are still reading early issues; as soon as somebody realises that a magazine like this is around they tend to get hold of back copies. We see each issue of the magazine as an instalment in a literary programme, and we try to make the magazine, in physical terms, sufficiently durable to stand up to that kind of reading over a long period.

*I know that the magazine is distributed at the white, or predominantly white, universities. Do you have any idea what part of the print run is accounted for by white readers?*

I'm often asked that question . . .

. . . *and couldn't care less?*

[Laughs] I would say that about ninety percent of the readership is black. We can only go by who takes the copies: if it's a black distributor then we'll tend to assume that the readers are going to be black. There would be exceptions, but that's the rule; that's the way this society works.

*Are you aware of what seems, at least, to be a fairly enthusiastic white student response to Staffrider?*

Oh, certainly. From the earliest days the campus distribution has been important to us. It's not just a question of distributing the magazine on campus, and having it read; we've always welcomed work from white students. I think for these students *Staffrider* is one of the publications in this country that represent some kind of alternative viewpoint on South Africa. Most of the other alternative publications are, of course, student publications, and we try to reciprocate by putting them on what you might call the *Staffrider* circuit.

*What has the reaction been from, say, the literary establishment to a magazine that makes as clear as Staffrider does what its literary function is?*

Well, the feedback has been pretty varied. First of all, I think that everybody has been very supportive. There's no doubt that the established writers in this country, mostly white, had themselves become embarrassed by a situation in which they only got

to read a black writer on a kind of token basis. They knew that something was happening out there, and they wanted to see it happen. The best of the writers, at least, became aware that they were living at the end of a cultural dispensation; like all good writers, they wanted to see the new dispensation come in. I don't mean that they would welcome it, necessarily. But, you know, "All things fall and are built again / And those that build them are gay." In that sense they were very supportive. But when it came to putting their work into the magazine they were a little more hesitant. Some writers did come forward to submit work but they complained afterwards that they felt that their work was getting "lost" in the magazine. I guess they said that because they felt that the work around it was of uneven quality; nor were they used to a magazine which presented all kinds of experience at different levels of expression and asked each contributor to defend his or her own twelve by five inches, or whatever was allotted.

*Was Staffrider reviewed anywhere in its early days?*

Because of the kind of public profile we were interested in—because black readership here operates outside the context of book reviews—we were not certain right at the beginning whether we wanted to seek reviews. And we preferred to get a magazine out that would move very quickly without drawing too much attention to itself. That, of course, is a contradiction in normal publishing terms, but because of our method of distribution it was feasible.

Later on, reviews did come. Everybody said what a good thing it was to have *Staffrider* around, how much they were finding out from the magazine, how vital it was for their grasp of what was happening in South Africa. Amidst the very favourable, very generous reviews would come the reservations which were mainly, I think, on the grounds of unevenness of quality. There was concern that the magazine didn't seem to go for "standards". Judging not from reviews but from other responses, there were even some black readers who felt that the magazine wasn't helping black writing in South Africa put its best foot forward, so to speak. And then there's the regional issue: some writers *still* feel much as those writers at the Mpumalanga Arts Group felt. Mafika Gwala still writes letters to me wondering whether *Staffrider* isn't too Soweto-centred.

*Could you say a little about the relationship between Staffrider, the Staffrider Series, and the other publications of Ravan Press?*

The *Staffrider* Series is seen, first of all, as coming out of the *Staffrider* momentum. Writers published in this series will tend to be writers who have contributed to *Staffrider*, and the series is aimed at a readership which has already been established by the magazine. Because this is a grass-roots readership, we assume that it can't easily afford more than about R3,50 for a book, but would gladly pay that amount as long as the book spoke to its own experience.

*Are you purposefully using other publications to subsidise this series, in fact?*

Well, Ravan has got an across-the-board commitment to publishing at prices which people can afford. It's not only black readers in Soweto who have problems with the

prices of books: students, for instance, sometimes find that a book they need costs between R30 and R40. The affected subjects are history, politics, sociology; our concern here is to bring the book within the range of the average reader. This means publishing in paperback. We do try on occasion to subsidise prices by publishing a limited number of hardbacks at a fancy price and simultaneously publishing in paperback at a much lower price. The aim is to extract a subsidy from libraries and those readers who value books partly by their appearance—because they look good and feel good—as opposed to those readers who are concerned purely and simply with what’s inside the book.

*Would you say that there are a number of writers which Staffrider has encouraged or nurtured to such an extent that one can think of them as created by Staffrider?*

Perhaps one can distinguish between three kinds of writers that *Staffrider* has had to do with. First, let’s take the case of the writer who is in the first place an oral poet, someone like Ingoapele Madingoane. He was very well-known before *Staffrider* came on the scene, and has become even better known since, not through *Staffrider*’s efforts but through his oral performances. Though both *Staffrider* and the Staffrider Series have introduced him to a lot of people who do not have the opportunity to hear him read, one wouldn’t describe him as a writer who was established or “brought through” by the magazine. Then there’s somebody like Miriam Tlali, whose career was already established before the *Staffrider* period by her novel *Muriel at Metropolitan*. During the *Staffrider* period her range of writing has expanded; the magazine has also brought her to more readers, has perhaps resuscitated interest in *Muriel at Metropolitan* and might have created an even bigger readership for her new novel, . . . *Awethu!* Of the writers who’ve become known mainly through publication in *Staffrider*, the best example is probably Mtutuzeli Matshoba, who published in the magazine before going on to do his first book. Yet even he first published in *The Voice* newspaper, like so many other *Staffrider* writers. The close co-operation between the two publications is explained by the fact that Mthobi Mutloate, co-director at Ravan, is very active as a journalist and feature writer on *The Voice*. Anyway, as we started to publish Matshoba in *Staffrider* we quickly became aware that there might be the prospect of a book at the end of the line, and we were able, in fact, to cut costs by using the original typesetting, playing it out in book format. This is something that we try to do: see writers who appear in the magazine as people who may well be producing books in the near future. I’m sure that there are a lot of books in genesis in the magazine at present.

*What position does Ravan Press and Staffrider hold regarding the censorship apparatus in this country? And what effect does censorship have on the selection process and the editorial policy in general?*

Strange as it may seem, I can’t think of one instance in which we have turned down a piece of writing that we really wanted to use simply because it would get the magazine banned. We have perhaps elided a word here or there in case it would alert the censors, as long as the absence of the word wouldn’t actually weaken the force of the story. For example, one of the stories that appeared in *Staffrider*, “A Glimpse of Slavery”, which deals with parole labour on the farms, got us into trouble, not with the censorship people



—that issue of the magazine wasn't banned, in fact—but with the prison authorities who made a complaint in terms of the Prisons Act. We were visited by the police and told that a prosecution was pending, though in fact it never came through. When it came to publishing the book, we changed the title: instead of calling the book *A Glimpse of Slavery* as we first intended, we ended up with *Call Me Not A Man*. On the other hand, we did include, quite unchanged, the story "A Glimpse of Slavery" as it had originally appeared in *Staffrider*. The title change didn't help: the book was still banned, and "A Glimpse of Slavery" was the story mentioned in the reasons given by the Publications Board for the banning. They said, among other things, that the events depicted in the story were improbable: they constituted a misrepresentation of what typically happens on farms using parole labour. It's interesting, incidentally, that the recently concluded Becker case involving parole labour on the farms, a case in which much of the evidence led is reminiscent of "A Glimpse of Slavery", was settled out of court. The coming issue of *Staffrider* carries a piece by a lawyer on the relation between the Becker case and Matshoba's story.

Censorship, as far as we are concerned, is one of the many institutional weapons that an oppressive state has at its disposal. Its utilization, whether through the Prisons Act or any other mechanism, is a political act, an act of violence against the culture of resistance in South Africa. By and large, we have sought to challenge that system by trying to push out the frontiers of censorship. The banning of *Staffrider* Vol. 2 No. 1 was primarily a consequence of our giving space to "hostile writers living abroad", according to the letter from the Publications Board, which we published in the next issue of the magazine. The distinction made by the censorship apparatus between committed writing from inside South Africa and its counterpart from outside suggests that writers in exile are seen as outside the game which the State is prepared to play with writers here. We responded to that challenge by making it quite clear in our reply that we don't accept that distinction. In fact, one of the aims of *Staffrider* is to try and end this cleavage that exists between exiled writers and writers who remain here; we'd like to see more and more exile material appearing in the magazine.

I don't say, obviously, that we disregard the censorship system. There are clearly certain constraints of law that we simply cannot get around. We would not, for instance, publish a banned person since we would then be open to prosecution. Nor would we publish a contribution which directly advocated violent overthrow—a poem about how to make a Molotov Cocktail, for instance. Perhaps we've not had to reject such a contribution because writers themselves exercise some constraint in what they submit to the magazine.

*You say that you do all you can to protest the censorship system, but you don't appeal. Why is that?*

Yes. That is a majority decision, taken by the *Staffrider* writers, not to go to the Publications Appeal Board, which is as much an institutional arm of the state as the Publications Control Board. *Staffrider* writers demand the dismantling of such institutions. To try and operate inside the censorship system is not an option for them.

*Could we look towards the future of Staffrider? Do you see changes coming in the*

*magazine? What sort of role do you think Staffrider has to play in the future of the country? Do you feel that you have almost played yourselves out, or is there still a long way to go?*

We feel that there's a long way to go. We see *Staffrider* as now established in its role of providing writers all around the country with a vehicle for their work. The success of the magazine is, in a way, the main problem now. We are getting so much work—but we are also getting more work from established writers. This concerns us because we feel that the magazine must maintain its commitment to publishing new writing; not only does the influx of material mean that we cannot do justice to it all, but the quality of that material means that new writing which isn't quite as immediately impressive may get short shrift. I'm not confessing here that Ravan Press and the editorial collective of *Staffrider* are applying specific literary standards: the point is that the more pieces there are which are so good that the editorial collective must unanimously agree on their inclusion in the magazine, the less space remains for writers who are just beginning. This is a problem which any magazine has as it grows: how to keep the magazine as open as possible, so that the best work doesn't squeeze out some of the very interesting but perhaps less skilled work of new writers. In other words, a magazine should avoid becoming the vehicle of a particular clique of writers. It's a question of balance. One way around the problem is to increase the frequency of the magazine. We have several times thought that we would go monthly, or even keep our promise of being bi-monthly. One of the many logistic difficulties here is that if you are circulating a fairly big print run without using established institutional networks, it takes quite a while to distribute one issue.

How long can *Staffrider* continue to play this role? I certainly see the magazine as operating within a particular transitional culture. When the transition is accomplished I would think that *Staffrider*, like all magazines sooner or later, will have to learn how to fade away as gracefully as possible from the scene. I think that prospect is some years away, and the intervening years are important. I'd like to think that we could get through the transition period alive and in good shape and continuing to do what we set out to do.