

From Bothacracy to democracy, long live satire!

SOMEONE clever once said satire was tragedy plus time. That was possible when one had the time to allow tragedy to mellow into legend. One could make a satire about the tragedy of the Vietnam War after 20 years had lapsed. We had no time in South Africa. What happened today had to become the target for tonight.

Apartheid's culture of death didn't allow us the luxury of satire. We just had to show it as it was, the blood still fresh and slippery on our hands.

It was easy in those old days of Bothacracy. Then the good guys were in jail and the bad guys in Parliament. The issue was black and white. Most voices were stilled by laws and imprisonment and so the relative freedom of speech still allowed in the confines of satire had to be rationed. The voiceless ones needed to be given a whisper. Bad laws were there to be broken. Quote the banned leaders, wave the forbidden flags, sing the unmentionable anthem.

Satire was then more closely related to shock tactics than to social comment. For so many years I was blessed with a government that had absolutely no sense of humour. It became my ambition to make them all so the *moer* in that they would have strokes and retire to the Wilderness. I have had some success.

It also didn't take much to make them madder; all one had to do was repeat what they said. The South African government wrote my scripts and that is why I have never resented paying taxes; I call it royalties.

Then suddenly I lost my bread and Botha when the old regime hiccuped and fell into the toilet of bad politics. The new era of Pretoriastroika turned chalk to cheese and suddenly prison doors opened and restrictions were shredded. Freedom of speech became the habit of the day with maybe too much freedom and too little speech.

The wild excitement of the honeymoon after the shotgun marriage of left and right nearly overshadowed the fine writing on the wall: what after democracy? In the past, satire was based on the terrible facts of a white Christian society killing children and destroying a gagged majority with cruelty and greed; an alphabet of humour always anchored in the negative. It was what was wrong with us that mattered. It was important to be anti-apartheid.

It is now vital to be pro-South African. When Nelson Mandela walked to freedom I was prepared to hang up my high heels and my poison pen and find new employ. Surely that noble battle was over, I thought. The dinosaur of apartheid was banished to the Boerassic Park of AWB-land and there would be no need in the future to hold up the cracked mirror of satire to a cracked society.

How wrong could one have been! There is now a full

alphabet to work with. In the past it was the restriction of protest politics that kept one concentrated on the obvious: Free Mandela! Down with apartheid! Because there were no instant solutions, one had to shout out the answers. We knew the answers. We'd forgotten the question. Like: what do we do with this new toy called democracy?

We must rediscover questions and find answers from our experiences. Now is the time to move away from the negative and reflect positive hopes for a desperate future.

A sense of humour is the last truly democratic weapon in the hands of each person. No one's sense of humour is the same. Like fingerprints, a laugh is as individual as its enjoyer. The weapon of humour is as mighty as the gun. The violence of humour is as shocking as the grenade, but no one has ever died laughing.

To laugh at one's fear makes that fear less fearful. In the past people found themselves confronted with familiar prejudice in a comic situation and laughed. Hopefully that same prejudice was weakened by that laughter, so that a future confrontation on racist lines would be undermined by memories of mirth. How can you take seriously a person who won't sit next to another person because of their race, creed or colour. Racism is absurd. Absurdity can kill when it loses its label and becomes a way of life. Laughter controls the madness of humans and makes them human again.

The future of satire is always a past, meaning that what worked today cannot work tomorrow. It is a reflection of the happenings around one. Satire has to adapt or else it will die. There is nothing more deadly in satire than old news.

And now there are so many people who for the first time have been allowed their right to choose, and given back their right to be proud of their roots. The terrible wounds of the past can so easily be reopened by careless jokes and vicious laughter. There is a very thin line between what is satirical and what is racist. Political correct-ness could become the concrete condom on the weapon of satire.

Nothing is beyond satire, because everything created by people to control other people is deserving of a strong comment. But there are clever ways to do it. Don't stick your finger in my eye if all you need do is tickle me in my neck so that when I turn round my eye finds your finger.

In this transitional period, we stand with one foot on the bank of the future and one heel on the shore of the past. You can take it all very seriously, until you look down and see where your middleparts are dangling. And this River Rubicon is still full of crocodiles whose teeth could do a job Mrs Bobbett would envy.

Pieter-Dirk Uys is a South African playwright, director, actor and satirist.



By PIETER-DIRK UYS