

RIDING STAFF

TEN YEARS OF STAFFRIDER

1978-1988 edited by Andries Walter Oliphant and Ivan Vladislavic (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1988), 448 pp, R24,95 + R3,24 GST. Available from Ravan Press, P O Box 31134, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, 2017. Telephone: (011) 4033925-9

STAFFRIDER Volume 7 Number 1 – current: A quarterly magazine edited by Andries Walter Oliphant and published by Ravan Press at R3,95 + R0,26 GST.

A collection of the covers of the very first volumes of *Staffrider* appears on page 11 of this commemorative anthology. These covers visually capture the leitmotif of the *Staffrider* which so readily nestled in and gave vibrancy to Azanian culture.

Leitmotif

The cover of the first issue captures "a youth in black silhouette shown in the process of clearing – arms stretched out to balance, legs bent for landing – a formidable, high, wire-netted barricade topped by thorn-like projections and by strands of barbed wire. Behind the barricade is a still, black mass of figures, where the individual shapes of people are blurred into the dark, continuous entity, although a strong sunlight streaming across from the right highlights the contours of some heads, shoulders and sides." (Michael Vaughan "Literature and Populism in South Africa: Reflections on the Ideology of *Staffrider*" in Georg M. Gugelberger (ed) *Marxism and African Literature* James Currey Ltd 1985 at 209) The back cover of Volume 1 Number 1 shows the youth jumping clear.

These photographs are from a collection by the late Ralph Ndawo. The fact that the crowd and the barrier depicted are at an NPSL soccer match in the ghetto underlines the universality of oppression and exploitation and the youth's clearing of the



barricade underlines the struggle for liberation.

The image on the cover of Volume 1 Number 3 depicts a crowd at a railway station. The image of the inveterate traveller and the corollary that the Black people are a *travelling* population is a recurrent image in the early *Staffrider*. The very title of the magazine derives from this image – it is a reference to Magawulana riding trains "without a ticket" and living dangerously. *Magawulana* by K.F.S. Ntuli appears as a "novel in progress" in the first issue:

"The boy had instinctively warmed to this character of the back-streets. Liso felt instinctively that only good could come from this man. He of the checked woollen cap, the faded denim trousers, the canvas shoes which showed the toes and the shirt the original colour of which was now impossible to tell, due to long use and its state of cleanliness. He of the red, fearful, jumping eyes. The one who knew how to get onto trains without a ticket; he who could discourse for hours upon the virtues of keeping your eyes open. The one who would give you the best advice on how to avoid trouble. He introduced himself as Magawulana. Whether it was the first name or the surname you did not know, and you instinctively knew you were not supposed to ask. This one knew how to bruise the law and how to avoid its consequential retaliation.

He was the maestro; Machiavelli re-born. He was truly master of any situation. You knew he would champion the ship; you knew where your place was with him. In any situation you had to take the back seat and he would drive, for, you see, difficult situations were his speciality. Only practical experience can give these qualities to any man, and experience was what Magawulana certainly had."

The leitmotif of *Staffrider* established in these early editions was to locate itself in the concrete experience of the Black people with all its grind and grime and to emerge victorious. Both the youth clearing the barricade and Magawulana are characters "of the people", both of them are absolutely unencumbered by any sort of wealth or possessions. And both the youth and Magawulana represent a conscious, creative energy at one with the masses. As Mthobeni Mutloatse puts it in "*Ngwana wa Azania: A Film Concept*":

"This child of bastardised society and bastard people-in-high-office and colour-obsession and paranoid of communism and humanism, shall break through and snap the chain of repression with its bare hands, and this child, with its rotten background and slightly bleak future shall however liberate this nuclear crazy world with Nkulunkulu's greatest gift to man: *ubuntu*." (pg. 61)

It may be added that Vaughan's ob-

jection that the *Staffrider* figure is "found in juxtaposition to images of the people, the masses, the suffering and oppressed multitudes, the community – rather than in juxtaposition to images of class-defined collectivities" (Vaughan *op cit* 209) and that the figure deifies "individual agency in the 'imaginative' genres of *Staffrider* literature" (Vaughan *op cit* 211) is difficult to take seriously. The Black proletarian nature of the original *Staffrider* cannot simply be determined by the objective class membership (*viz* lumpen proletariat) of the *Staffrider* figure – even Vaughan has to admit that the class partisanship of the *Staffrider* figure was decidedly Black proletarian, even that the same persons may at different times be "workers" and "staffriders" (Vaughan *op cit* 210f). To argue that the *Staffrider* figure had to don a hard hat and overalls and carry a spanner in order for *Staffrider* to be kosher is ludicrous in the extreme.

BC

Staffrider emerged in the aftermath of the Soweto Rebellion when the Black Consciousness Movement was severely proscribed. It was immediately adopted by people precisely because it grounded itself in the BC ideology. The BCM has always attributed a central place to the development of Azanian culture and *Staffrider* represented the Movement defying the 19 October 1977 bannings: it represented the BCM's resilience and its *locus* in the consciousness of oppressed people. It also represented the simplicity and the complexity of BC's ethos. Ideologically, *Staffrider* shows a profound appreciation of the dialectic between the struggle for national liberation and that for socialism.

Staffrider succeeded in getting various township cultural groups to make contributions and it did not reject these contributions on the basis of Eurocentric "literary standards". The result was a magnificent pot-pourri of stories, novellae, documentary photography, poetry, essays, art, reviews and interviews.

No wonder, then, that each issue of

Staffrider was eagerly awaited and snatched up by a voracious reading public. *Staffrider* had a knack of defying preconceived notions about our "illiteracy", "laziness" and "backwardness". We were proud of *Staffrider* – it was *ons eie skelmpie!* (See "About *Staffrider*": "A staffrider is, let's face it, a *skelm* of sorts. Like Hermes or Mercury – the messenger of the gods in classical mythology – he is almost certainly as light-fingered as he is fleet-footed. A skilful entertainer, a bringer of messages, a useful person but . . . slightly disreputable . . .").

Non-Racialism

Predictably, liberalism – hugely inspired by the state's massive crackdown on the BCM – launched a concerted campaign to deflect the direction of *Staffrider* and Ravan Press which published it. Christopher van Wyk and Fhazel Johennesse found themselves unhappy with *Staffrider's* "relatively uncritical" and "loose" editorial policy (See Christopher van Wyk "Staffrider and the Politics of Culture" pg 165 ff). They launched *Wietie* in 1980, a magazine whose life-span proved ephemeral. By 1983 as a result of sharp struggle within *Staffrider's* informal "editorial collective" and within Ravan Press itself, *Staffrider* got its first editor in Christopher van Wyk. Van Wyk, while insisting that he subscribed to BC in the early days, betrays his real motives:

"A non-racial attitude was beginning to take shape in the country. At that stage the magazine published an overwhelming number of black contributors and I felt that the non-racial perspective required a greater openness to all South African writers."

It is obvious that van Wyk never understood the ABC of BC. In a land where the overwhelming majority happen to be Black, it can only be the crudest racism which dictates that a magazine's content is "unbalanced" if it reflects this demographic reality. White racism is at one level a matter of choice, at another a matter of privilege, but at *all* levels an exercise in oppression.

Ravan Press also lost Mthobeni Mutloatse, "the one person without whom there would have been no *Staffrider*." (Mike Kirkwood "Remembering *Staffrider*" at page 5). Mutloatse and others channeled their not inconsiderable energies into Skotaville Publishers, an independent publishing house under firm Black control. Skotaville derives its name from T D Mveli Skota, who made the call in his report as Secretary General of the ANC for "a monster Conclave" to be summonsed for Black people "from Cape to Cairo . . . to take immediate action" to "avoid perpetual slavery of the very worst type." (Circa January 1930, Document 48h in Volume 4 of *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882-1964* edited by Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M Carter and published by the Hoover Institution)

Given the change in the direction of both the magazine and Ravan Press which Ravan's catalogue for 1985 described as reflecting "contemporary developments, such as the rise of the trade union movement and the establishment of broad, non-racial political organisations", *Staffrider* lost its soul-force and broad appeal. That is why Andries Walter Oliphant, yet another "former" BC activist, was called in to become editor in 1987. As Kaizer Nyatumba reports in "A 'skelm' of Sorts' *Tribute* September 1989 page 111: "Oliphant said there was a feeling at Ravan Press in 1987 that the direction of the magazine had changed and its quality had deteriorated. He said attempts to improve the quality of the magazine did not succeed because there was 'not sufficient critical writing being made available to both writers and the readers to make critical criteria visible.'"

Whitewash

Oliphant, too, is a born-again non-racialist. But he goes further than van Wyk – who is candidly worried about "how the current movement with its non-racial perspective will crystallize in imaginative writing" (pg. 170). Oliphant attempts to re-write history by saying that *Staffrider* never reflected a BC perspective! The only evidence

he brings for this proposition is that the magazine was "at no stage exclusively black in either its contributions or its readership." (pg. 167) Once again, a grasp of the ABC of BC will reveal its strong anti-racist thrust which simply refuses to pigeon-hole people into ethnic or racial categories. **"Black" and "white" are political definitions, they bear no relation to race in any ethnographic sense or even colour in any literal sense.** That the editors of the "new-look" *Staffrider* have a crude tribalistic approach becomes obvious when one realizes that an attempt is made to include as many white (defined in terms of South Africa's Population Registration Act) writers as possible in this anthology.

Liberalism manifests itself in a profoundly a-historical approach and in a blatant attempt to re-write contemporary history. Hence in the first issue edited by Oliphant (who has also given *Staffrider* a new book-sized format, just to "register clearly in the readers' minds that there was a change" Nyatumba *op cit* 111) he editorializes: "(W)hat immediately strikes one, even at a cursory overview, is the responsiveness of the magazine to the populist movement

which began to reassert itself in the political and cultural domains, after the period of dormancy and reorganization that followed the large-scale repression of the sixties." (Volume 7 Number 1 1988 at pg. 3) The result is that the new-look *Staffrider* appeals only to the trendy literati – it is "the refrigerated food of bourgeois culture", to borrow from Mafika Pascal Gwala in an interview with *Staffrider* (Volume 8 Number 1 1989).

Struggle in the ideological realm, especially in literature and art, is crucial. Revolutionary literature and art must create a variety of characters out of real life and help the masses to propel history forward.

It is time for real Black artists to stand up and be counted. In Desiree Barnwell's inimitable words:

"Will the real black people please stand:
Those fearless of the unconventional,
Moved towards their own blackness,
Prone to influence and set trends,
Schooled in *their* times and folkways,
Dedicated to worthwhile endeavours,
Attentive to meaningful expression."

What about a regular forum for Black artists, Skotaville Publishers?

What about reclaiming *Staffrider* and writing its true history?

Recommendation

This anthology is useful in bringing together some of *Staffrider's* best published works (although it must be stressed that many mediocre works have been included in this anthology and many great works have been excluded – banned for BLACKNESS!) and in providing a cumulative index for Volumes 1-6. It is also challenging in that it brings acute focus to bear on the whitewashing of our cultural heritage. As a Black writer wrote to his nephew:

"I said that it was intended that you should perish in the ghetto, perish by never being allowed to go behind the white man's definitions, by never to recognize that we are Black in senses we give to Blackness, instead of senses they give to Blackness. And so, since we are upsetting the applecart of cosy white thought about Blackness, these people who believed that your imprisonment made them safe are losing their grasp of reality."

– Vanesco Mafora

