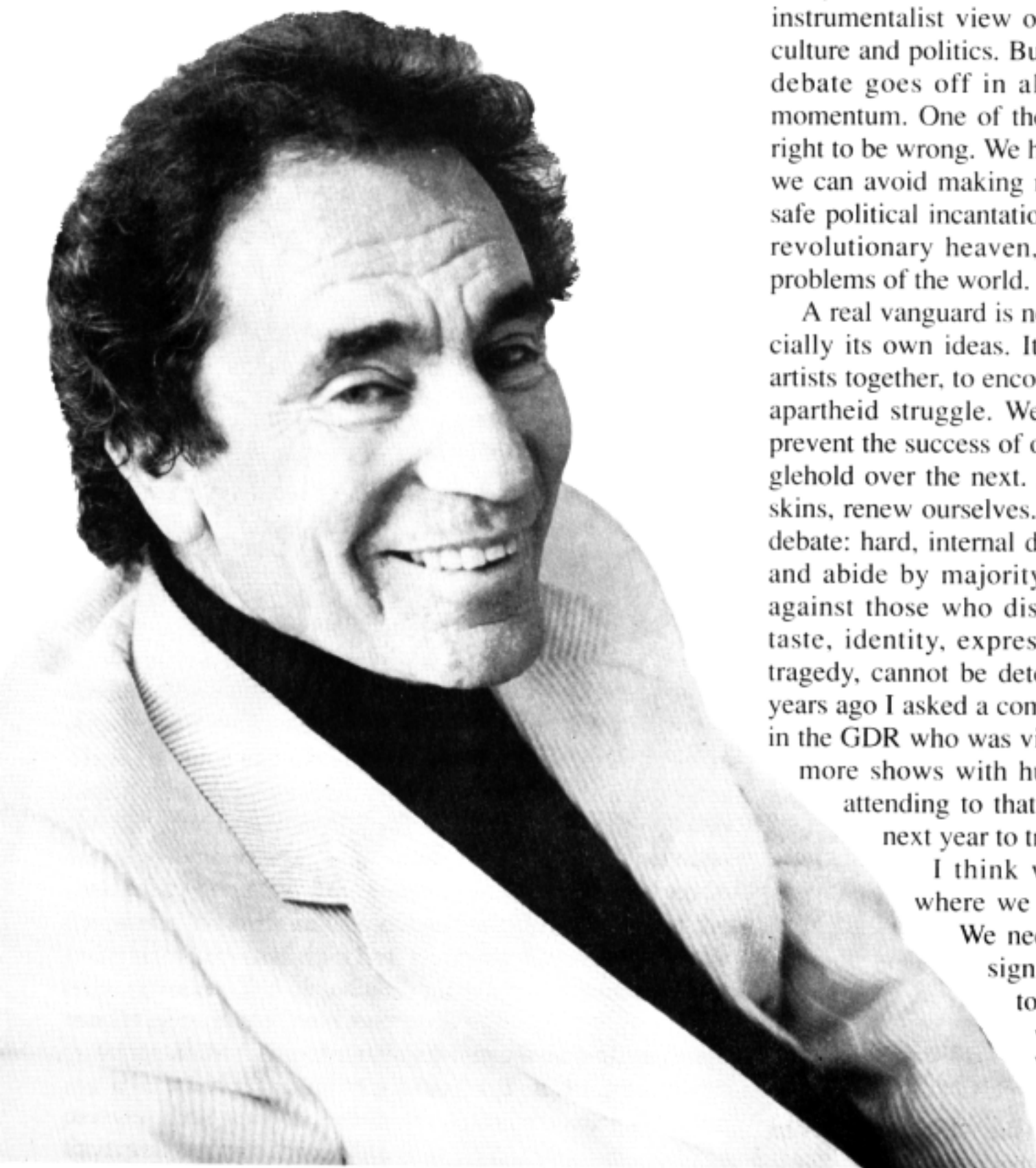


# Albie Sachs

A paper prepared by Albie Sachs for the in-house Seminar on Culture organised by the ANC in Lusaka last July provoked lively discussion. Called 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom', it has since been widely reproduced and hotly debated in South Africa. MANDLA LANGA asked Albie to comment on the comments.



**Rixaka:** You proposed that ANC members should be banned for five years from saying that art is an instrument of struggle. Do you stand by that?

**Albie:** The aim was to get away from slogans and open up real debate. It was Barbara Masekela of the Cultural Department who pushed me to write the paper. She wanted to open up the discussion. She's not responsible for what I wrote, but must get the credit or blame for the fact that I put my ideas down.

I think the debate has been wonderful. Sometimes I have been praised for things I didn't say. I certainly don't believe you can ever separate art and politics, most definitely not in South Africa. What worries me is a narrow, instrumentalist view of art, that ends up denuding both culture and politics. But that's what debate is for. A good debate goes off in all directions, generates its own momentum. One of the things we are fighting for is the right to be wrong. We have to take chances. The only way we can avoid making mistakes is by endlessly repeating safe political incantations. Maybe that's the way to go to revolutionary heaven, but it doesn't always solve the problems of the world.

A real vanguard is never afraid to examine ideas, especially its own ideas. It was right in the 1980's to bring artists together, to encourage them to take part in the anti-apartheid struggle. We achieved that. Now we have to prevent the success of one decade from becoming a stranglehold over the next. Like snakes, we have to shed our skins, renew ourselves. We are only used to two kinds of debate: hard, internal debate, where we thrash things out and abide by majority decisions, and tough polemics against those who disagree with us. But questions of taste, identity, expressiveness, issues of humour and tragedy, cannot be determined by majority vote. A few years ago I asked a comrade from the Ministry of Culture in the GDR who was visiting Maputo why there were not more shows with humourists in his country. We are attending to that, he told me, it is in our Plan for next year to train five humourists.

I think we need a new kind of debate, where we share our dilemmas with others.

We need a different tone. To me it is a sign of confidence, not of weakness, to be able to discuss our doubts and weaknesses in an open fashion. We don't have to hammer away at each other, just talk.

My worry is not about being dominated by the cultural desk,

which, after all, was set up to open the doors to cultural interchange as part of a move away from the total boycott; when we end apartheid, the boycott and sanctions will end quite naturally. My concern is for far deeper impediments to our creativity. We are dominated in our cultural imaginations by the image of the enemy. Apartheid camps in our heads, sets the battle-lines for our creative work. Then we are dominated by fear about what our comrades will say. No one knows better than I what a wonderful thing it is to be loved and urged to live by one's comrades. Yet comradeship and affection should not lead to timidity and fear of being criticised. We are freedom-fighters – we must feel free inside ourselves. Finally, there is a complicated form of domination which I would call the officialisation of our dreams. We take our goals and our hopes, our anger and our longings, and somehow convert them into formulae which are supposed to inspire, but which in reality hold us back, because everything has already been said in the formula, and the only purpose of artistic work is to prove the formula correct.

**Rixaka:** Excuse the interruption, but you haven't answered the question put to you.

**Albie:** Correct. The fact is that a lot has happened since I wrote those provocative words about banning us from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle. If de Klerk can announce that he has lifted banning orders, so can I. I hereby declare that my proposed banning order is invalid, and that; the only ban we should have in the ANC is a ban on banning orders.

**Rixaka:** Your query as to whether ANC members discussed the role of the white working class when they went to bed, caused much amusement, but was it fair?

**Albie:** I'm informed by a source I fully trust, that it is grossly unfair. When the male comrades are making love, she told me, they don't discuss the role of the white working class, they discuss the role of the black working class.

**Rixaka:** More seriously, some people see your remarks as part of a wider series of compromises by our leaders. Aren't we compromising too much?

**Albie:** I'm not sure that the word 'compromise' is the most appropriate. It's not just a question of how strong the two sides are, though clearly that's a major factor. Our objective is to serve the interests of the people. It might not be in the interest of the people to struggle on for

another two decades, win a total victory, and inherit ruins. In addition, a whole new series of problems would begin. Samora used to say: where there's revolution, there's counter-revolution - the defeated enemy engages in civil war, internationalises the struggle, imposes boycotts and isolation on your country. The Mozambican people had fifteen years of war after achieving Independence. Hundreds of thousands died, the whole rural economy was destroyed, schools and hospitals were burnt down. Some reactionaries would like to manoeuvre us into a similar position, so that having lost the political battle, they can become the contras, the Renamos of the future. We have to avoid that.

This has implications for culture, for freedom of speech and the free circulation of ideas. I think it is far better to have the opposition in Parliament than driven Underground. Mao once said: let a hundred flowers blossom, different schools of thought contend. Yet he couldn't follow through. It was impossible to have free cultural development outside of a democratic political culture, and he ended up by warning about the necessity to cut off the heads of the weeds. China is still struggling to achieve a clear political identity. I think sometimes we worry too much about the weeds and not enough about our own blossoms.

**Rixaka:** I thought you were against solemnity; now you're getting a bit heavy. Don't you have a new provocation for our readers?

**Albie:** Yes, I've got a good one, just for Rixaka. "I'm tired of being nonracial."

**Rixaka:** You can't be serious.

**Albie:** I'm just as serious as ever I was. You remember how fed up we used to get with the terms non-European, non-white. Sylvester Stein even wrote a book about a chauffeur who claimed he came from non-Europe. Now I'm supposed to be a non-racial. Our policies, our thinking is non-racial, that's correct. The society we want will be a non-racial one, in the sense that people will be judged for who they are and not according to race. But this is only the negative aspect, the absence of racism. It doesn't tell us who we are, how we express our personality. Non-racism is just the beginning. We have to get beyond it, explore the affirmative side of our nature, and work out in positive terms what it means to be a new South African. But that can wait for another debate.

*Photo by Sandra Cumming*