by M J Daymond

THE LOST COMMUNITY

Richard Rive
'Buckingham Palace' District Six
David Philip: Cape Town, 1986
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Since its demolition in the 1970s, Cape Town's District Six has come to symbolise all that is evil about Apartheid. The site of what was once a busy community has remained, for the last ten years, a rubble-littered wasteland with only its churches and mosque standing as lonely reminders of what was destroyed. It would be some compensation to think that since the area was proclaimed white, its occupants evicted and its buildings demolished, it is shame which has been holding back the property developers from their work. However unlikely that may be, the present emptiness is a constant reminder that the "greed and arrogance" which decreed the resettlement of a once thriving community are purely destructive humours.

Poets and song-writers, short story writers, novelists, journalists and sociologists have all recorded their anger at what has been done. In decrying the wickedness of appropriation and resettlement, they have created the verbal equivalent of what is symbolised by that empty space at the foot of Table Mountain.

Richard Rive's latest work, **'Buckingham Palace' District Six** joins this growing body of written protest although its tone is not that of protest writing. What he undertakes is to celebrate and so give mythical status to what has been lost; in doing so he demonstrates the evil of destruction. To call this process a mythologising one is to point to the selection and simplification necessary when a writer wants to make accessible to everyone a truthful and rapidly assimilated view of a complex issue. Of course there is nothing complex about the way a decision to destroy a living community is to be seen. It is quite simply wrong. (The claim that District Six was a slum, as parts of it seem to have been, might properly lead to a decision to improve the existing housing and amenities; it has no real bearing on the decision to scatter a community in enforced resettlement.) Where the simplification of mythologising does occur is in the selective focus Rive has used in order to establish exactly what was lost and how it should be remembered.

Richard Rive has decided that the picture he wants to preserve is of a collection of loveable rogues living cheek by jowl with sober, respectable families in the row of cottages called 'Buckingham Palace'. This companionable little community is a microcosm of the whole District. In the first cottage is Mary, the madame of an establishment painted bright blue and called The Casbah; her handyman-bouncer, Zoot, and his assistants, Pretty Boy, Surprise and others, live next door in a pink splendour called Winsor Park (the painter, Oubaas, cannot spell); a family known as The Jungles because of the three sons' ferocity comes next; at the end is the barber, Last-Knight, with his wife and three daughters, Faith, Hope and Charity. Between, and acutely observant of this mixture, lives the young Richard and his family. What emerges is the tolerance that each household learns for the other and their capacity to rally round in times of need. Rive wants the District to enter our national mythology as a community of heterogeneous people who have learnt, without too much difficulty, to live together and who thereby give the lie to the central text of Apartheid's dogma.

The embattled part of Rive's purpose is never explicitly stated. He is a genial, anecdotal writer, especially skilled at the understatement of the short story, and he has marshalled his abilities and his chosen memories into an amusing and powerful tribute to the spirit of what was destroyed in the 1970s.

The book opens with the author's own memories of his childhood and then, in a series of anecdotes, places each group of characters in their respective cottages. The most colourful of these is Mary's bouncer. Baptised Milton September (his brothers are Byron and Keats), he has versifying abilities which he turns to the cause of freedom in ways reminiscent of his great namesake, but he is known to the District as Zoot in honour of his tap-dancing. Zoot has a wise and useful guardian angel who guides him in making it clear to his landlord that although the rent will be a monthly charade, his tenancy of what becomes Winsor Park is preferable to publicity about the conditions in which the previous tenants had lived. Zoot is the homespun philosopher of the streets: it is he who is entrusted with the work's final word on the evils of "greed and arrogance" and it is he who indicates where Rive would have us place our trust - in the sometimes unconventional wisdom of the social misfit. This involves the claim that the seemingly makeshift morality of the people of the District is actually more honest and more generous than that of the larger world. As Zoot says, after a New Year's Day picnic at Kalk Bay is spoilt when Pretty Boy and Moena Lelik are prevented from walking on the adjacent white beach of St James, "it's only in the District I feel safe. District Six is like an island."

The antithesis that Rive uses between the outside world of regulated immorality that is Apartheid, and the island of unregulated morality that is District Six involves him in overt nostalgia - the days are all golden in their glow: ripe, warm and "apricot" - and is potentially sentimental. Prostitutes with hearts of gold are usually an invitation to stop thinking. But, as with all our cliches and our slogans, there is a partial or a potential truth in such figures and his achievement has been to make his figures contain, for the purposes of his book, a satisfyingly whole truth. Part of this persuasion is managed when he builds into his stories signals which clarify what is entailed in accepting them. His opening memoir indicates that he is bringing to his pages figures

who were legends in the District in their own day, and it is in their larger-than-life glamour that their particular validity can be understood. Then he shows that his characters themselves had to practise a tolerance based on the recognition of individual worth and so ensure the community's survival. For instance, remembering his childhood friend, Armien, he tells us that

> "On our way to morning service (on Christmas Day) we stopped at Moodley's shop, which was open since he was not a Christian. Neither for that matter was Armien but he was our friend and went wherever we went even though he was a Muslim."

Just as friendship guides the children past potential causes of division, so good sense allows the community to ignore what it cannot alter for the better. When Mary's aged father, Pastor Adam Bruinties, comes from the Boland to spend his birthday with his daughter in her "boarding house", she decides to make the best of it. He is welcomed with a huge party which soon turns riotous, but instead of retreating in horror, her father places himself firmly at the centre of the uproar. The old man is not blind, nor is he a hypocrite; he practices a greater humanity in accepting the version of her world which Mary chooses to give him. Thus when leaving in his "old Dodge with a country registration", "he winked an eye conspiratorially at his daughter while chuckling happily to himself." In another context this might all seem rather a doubtful gloss, but in the context of meaning which Rive creates, it carries a powerful significance which overrides such everyday doubts. This is demonstrated when Mary's world is destroyed around her and she is able to turn to caring for her father as a replacement function in life.

The line Rive is treading demands considerable poise, especially as he cannot afford to have his microcosm lapse wholly into the glow of idyllic memory. The largely nostalgic first and second sections have to prepare for the subject matter of the last - the defeat of a community - and the affectionate, nostalgic note has also to include the uncertainty and pain of the days when the community is "falling apart".

He begins the last section by striking a note of heroism when he shows the determination that can be engendered in little people who suddenly find themselves up against a facelss "them". Then Rive returns to his comic mode as he shows Inspector Engelbrecht trying in vain to get the information about race that the Group Areas Board requires. At The Casbah, the Butterfly thinks he is an impatient customer: "A bit early aren't you? You must be desperate," she said looking him up and down. Next door, Oubaas's innocence offers him another kind of defeat as he cannot fit the man into any of the pigeon-holes recognised by bureaucracy. It is not until he finds the anxiously respectable Mrs Knight that he gets the responses he needs for his forms. Rive is fair-minded about the fears which lead her to comply with the order to move, but the fact remains that it is the wish to be respectable (as against respected) which proves to be her undoing.

In the little community's white landlord, Katzen, Rive strikes another, more rare note. In a moving episode, the old man attends a meeting in the church vestry and tells his tenants that as a Jew who was made a **"staatsangehörige"** in Hitler's Germany and who knows what is is to be treated as sub-human, he will protect his tenants as far as he can: he will never "while this evil law remains . . . sell (his) houses."

Comparisons between the legalised oppression and discrimination in this country and Hitler's policy of genocide are often heard in the heated rhetoric of political platforms, but the partial truths of such sloganeering do not stand up well to cool consideration. Rive, however, has found, as he did with other matters which are cliched or sentimental in a daily context, ways of giving a memorable, truthful quality to such comparisons without asking us to forgo better judgement. Katzen's son sells the cottages to the Dept of Community Development as soon as his father dies, saying that the old man's promise was made when he was sick and therefore not responsible for his words. The son, an affluent lawyer from Johannesburg who has been content to let his father exist in one room at the top of Long Street, clearly knows nothing about responsibility. When Oubaas is able to place the son's actions by comparing him to Pontius Pilate, his recognition, however well-worn, is an achievement for Oubaas which revitalises the cliche for us. It is in these ways that Rive's mythologising is doing his country a real service.

What makes such judgements most memorable is that Rive gives his characters a concern not to become like their oppressors. Mary, Pretty Boy, the Butterfly, Oubaas and even Zoot endeavour to retain a dignity amidst their despair and anger. This strength and their rough kindness to each other is a quality which David Muller used in his novel set in District Six, **Whitey** (1977), in which he shows that the humanity of the District, amidst its squalour, is such that it can remind even a confirmed alcoholic, unable to free himself from self-destruction, what he is losing. Such faith is also what distinguishes Rive's work from the other recent novel to have come from the destruction of District Six. Achmat Dangor's **Waiting for Leila** is a considerable, overtly angry first novel which won the Mofolo-Plomer Prize in 1980. It takes as its starting point the defeat of its protagonist, Samad, amidst the laws which are destroying his community. As the deserted buildings slowly collapse, so Samad's soul sinks, howling all the way, into torment. Dangor's axiom, the inevitable defeat of the individual, is as valid a judgement of the consequences of Apartheid as is Rive's greater faith in humanity's power to rise above the effects of "greed and arrogance". One need not choose between them as beliefs. But in responding to the power of each work to persuade and to move, I would choose Rive's writing, although I too think that more people are likely to be defeated by the destruction of their world than will find decency and heroism from within themselves. This means that the selective, mythologising focus which has created Mary and her team has value at the moment as a note of hope rather than as a simple reminder of reality, but it seems to me that it is a considerable writer who can successfully pit his little people and the value of their communal sense against the might of Apartheid's bulldozers. Rive does so quietly confident of his power to make his characters and their determination never to forget what they once had, something which may be a source of strength to all his readers.□

Just after **'Buckingham Palace'** was published last year, BP Southern Africa announced its "R100-million plan" to speed Apartheid on its way; it includes the proposal that the District should be "rebuilt as the first open residential area" (Sunday Tribune, 16 November, 1986) with R50-million earmarked for the developmental costs. It is a nice gesture which presupposes the end of the Group Areas Act. Those who hope such an aboutface will indeed follow the coming white elections may be proved right. And if such a desperately needed, sane step is taken, then many people should turn to Rive's work to understand for themselves what might hold a disparate society together again.