

MIRRORING NATURE



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Reflections on reflections on
human existence.

Muthal Naidoo
Celebrating 80 years of life.

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ISBN: 978-0-9921816-5-9

Layout and Cover Design:
Max Hartzenberg

Printed and bound by Minuteman Press

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THEATRE

Creativity=Life

Life is the striving for perfection in creativity – a pursuit that turns all activities, from the simplest to the most complex, into art. Everything humans create, all human fabrication, all that is not natural i.e. not found in nature but is the product of human hands and minds, constitutes art. And we take artistic pride in the creation of even the most practical objects that serve our daily needs – in baking the perfect loaf of bread, for example. But creative acts that contribute to the requirements of daily living, being practical, are differentiated from creative acts that cater to mental and spiritual needs. Everyday creativity is art; specialized creativity that is inspirational, is Art.

And Art – Music, Dance, Painting, Sculpture, Poetry, Novels, Playwriting, Acting, etc. – is not simply intuitive creation of beautiful things; it also represents conscious reflection on life. Though the Arts are not seen as essential services (especially by governments), they are, nevertheless, essential to the maintenance and the progress of a community. Abstracted from everyday living, the Arts are symbolic activities that examine our belief systems. They keep us striving for perfection in presenting the best and worst in human nature through the benign vehicle of entertainment (or, as in the visual arts, appreciation). The Arts offer a safe domain in which to examine the volatility of human nature.

Creativity=Freedom

Artistic creativity, in common with all forms of creativity, requires freedom from convention – the only freedom possible in society. And in a no-man's land in which dichotomies of right and wrong, good and evil do not apply, that is where creativity burgeons. The

only real freedom is in the creative act and it is euphoric; it leads to innovation which in turn leads to change. Though change is feared as it requires breaking out of habitual ways of thinking and believing – and embracing the unconventional, once accepted, however, it becomes the new convention. As conventions are forms of restraint, they invite restructuring. Thus the human search for freedom that underpins creativity, that makes possible continuous expansion of human understanding is, in Alvin Toffler's terms, a wave-like progression.

The Mirror to Nature

Theatre, which brings all Art forms together in its storytelling, holds the mirror up to human nature and allows us to examine the human condition from an objective point of view. As a metaphorical representation of our striving for perfection, theatre shows good overcoming evil, humans overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles, people confronting complex moral choices. It often shows us the achievement of perfection in the happy ending. In W.S. Gilbert's words, "I'm really very sorry for you all, but it's an unjust world, and virtue is triumphant only in theatrical performances." (*The Mikado*) But seeing this triumph portrayed, stimulates us to reach for it in real life. Theatre, therefore, though an imitation of life, in presenting heroic achievements, encourages life to imitate art. And the distinction between Art and life is blurred as life and Art become mirror images, in a hall of mirrors.

In everyday life, 'if' is a fiction; in the theatre 'if' is an experiment. In everyday life, 'if' is an evasion; in the theatre 'if' is the truth. When we are persuaded to believe in this truth, then the theatre and life are one.

(Peter Brook,
The Empty Space, 175)

In its many forms – stage performances, radio, film, television, DVD – theatre has become an essential part of our lives and impacts powerfully on our ability to make sense of human existence.

Shakespeare

Supreme man of the theatre, Shakespeare, working with the facts of the stories on which his plays are based and embellishing fact with the inventions of his mind, repeatedly confronts us with the factitious nature of both human existence and theatre. The creation of life on stage imitates the human creation of civilization and its exploration of the nature of being.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare presents his general view of theatre. Hamlet, as playwright, warns actors against overacting; they have to perform with energy but without exaggerated gestures, facial and vocal expressions. Overacting makes performance insincere, unbelievable, points to its fictitious nature and detracts from the play's purpose of revealing to people the truths of their actions and their influence on the times in which they live.

... let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance; that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (*Hamlet*, III, ii, 16-24)

This is Hamlet, the director, creating a believable performance that will not detract from the message he is sending to the audience, in particular to Claudius. This intention is wrapped up in the notion of theatre as the mirror to human nature and its function to enlighten us about human existence.

But Shakespeare goes beyond the understanding of theatre as a means of providing insight into the meaning of community. We may infer from his many metaphors of life as theatre, that the act of creating life on the stage led him to contemplation of its similarities to the act of creation of life in the world.

In *As You Like It*: the character, Jaques, describes the stages of a human life as roles played by an actor.

All the world's a stage, And all the men and
women merely players They have their exits and their
entrances And one man in his time plays many parts
(*Act 2, scene 7, 139–143*)

Is this a metaphor of the world as a stage or is it a declaration of the metaphoric nature of human existence in the world?

In, *The Tempest*, Prospero, having presented a theatrical vision, a magic show (*the baseless fabric, this insubstantial pageant*) which has vanished into thin air, declares that the world (*the great globe*) is also ephemeral.

And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (*Tempest, IV, i, 151-8*)

“We are such stuff as dreams are made on” i.e. we ourselves are insubstantial so what we take as real is not; it is also a dream. Life, therefore, is as much a performance as a stage play. Life and theatre are almost interchangeable. Life is a play and theatre – a play within a play.

“ ... Out, out, brief candle.
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.” (*Macbeth V, iv, 22-7*)

This is Macbeth's despair at the ruin he has made of his life. He now sees life as artificial (a human creation). In his references to life as a 'shadow' and a 'tale,' the world as a 'stage,' he presents the reality of life as a performance and sees it as meaningless – 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury.' He is blind to the fact that it is a tale that he has made of his life. He has been under the illusion that supernatural powers (the witches) were structuring his life. His blindness forces us to see that we each shape our own destiny so we must take responsibility for what we make of our lives. Just as an actor shapes his role, so we shape our lives. The idiot who tells the tale of one's life, is oneself.

Humans had built a world inside the world, which reflected it in pretty much the same way as a drop of water reflected the landscape. And yet... and yet... Inside this little world they had taken pains to put all the things you might think they would want to escape from — hatred, fear, tyranny, and so forth. Death was intrigued. They thought they wanted to be taken out of themselves, and every art humans dreamt up took them further *in*.”
(Terry Pratchett, *Wyrd Sisters*)

The freedom to create, the essence of being human, is taken a step further in the following quote:

“The stage is a magic circle where only the most real things happen, a neutral territory outside the jurisdiction of Fate where stars may be crossed with impunity. A truer and more real place does not exist in all the universe.” (P.S. Baber, *Cassie Draws the Universe*)

And here we have a reversal of the notion of art imitating life. In being able to act 'outside the jurisdiction of Fate' makes it possible for theatre to investigate new ways of thinking, doing and being. As in Science Fiction.

Being simultaneously conscious reflection on, as well as an expression of human creativity, Art has a dual nature and this duality is made most obvious in theatre. Being the re-creation of life with real people in roles, a theatrical performance is the word made flesh.

And this brings us to Antonin Artaud and his understanding of theatre as reality not imitation.

Antonin Artaud

In his book, *The Theatre and its Double*, Antonin Artaud rejects the idea of Theatre as a mirror to nature – its reduction of theatre from Art to a form of therapy.

Its object is not to resolve social or psychological conflicts, to serve as battlefield for moral passions, but to express objectively certain secret truths, to bring into the light of day by means of active gestures certain aspects of truth that have been buried under forms in their encounters with Becoming. (Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, 69)

And for Artaud, the expression of truth is not primarily through the word. Artaud advocates the reduction of the use of spoken language in theatre in order to give access to vital, instinctual understanding. For him, language, the carrier of conventional meaning, is a mask, the mask of civilization, with which we cover over the reality of existence. And language in plays, is that mask; it hides from us the reality of the human condition.

...the public is no longer shown anything
but the mirror of itself.

Shakespeare himself is responsible for this aberration and decline, this disinterested idea of the theater which wishes a theatrical performance to leave the public intact, without setting off one image that will shake the organism to its foundations and leave an ineffaceable scar. (Ibid. 76-7)

For Artaud, the performance is not complete unless it awakens in the audience the awareness of the truth that is hidden under language and social convention. So the audience cannot be a passive, separate entity — merely observers. The audience must be made part of the performance; it has to be placed in the midst of the performance, it has to be surrounded by the actors who do not act *before* it but *upon* it.

Theatre then becomes true theatre, the Theatre of Cruelty; “cruelty” means setting off images “that shake the organism to its foundations and leave an ineffaceable scar.”

Cruelty was not tacked onto my thinking; it has always been at home there: but I had to become conscious of it. I employ the word ‘cruelty’ in the sense of an appetite for life, a cosmic rigor and implacable necessity, in the gnostic sense of a living whirlwind that devours the darkness, in the sense of that pain apart from whose ineluctable necessity life could not continue; good is desired, it is the consequence of an act; evil is permanent. (Ibid. 102)

So for Artaud, theatre becomes a kind of religious ritual in which good is abstracted from entrapment in prevailing evil. This seems to be acceptance of finite, though mystical, meaning in existence. It is different from Shakespeare’s view of theatre which reflects the human search for finiteness in the meaning of existence.

In the Theatre of Cruelty, audience involvement has to be not only with the actors but with all elements of the performance and in particular with the *mise en scene*. For Artaud the *mise en scene* – sets, lighting, movement of actors, costumes, i.e. the physical presentation of the performance – is more effective in shaking the audience out of an artificial and perfunctory existence than the spoken word. Artaud deplores the fact that the *mise en scene* is seen only as context for the spoken word when it is more than mere accompaniment; when

it is the purveyor of an intuitive understanding of reality that words cannot express.

... it is not a question of whether the physical language of theater is capable of achieving the same psychological resolutions as the language of words, whether it is able to express feelings and passions as well as words, but whether there are not attitudes in the realm of thought and intelligence that words are incapable of grasping and that gestures and everything partaking of a spatial language attain with more precision than they. (Ibid. 70)

To do that, to link the theater to the expressive possibilities of forms, to everything in the domain of gestures, noises, colors, movements, etc., is to restore it to its original direction, to reinstate it in its religious and metaphysical aspect, is to reconcile it with the universe. (Ibid. 69)

For Artaud, the suppression of words, allows the theatre experience to become an epiphany; makes possible intuitive understanding of the reality of existence. Without excessive dependence on words, theatre becomes a mystical experience and is returned to the realm of the religious.

In his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal takes the idea of bringing the audience into the performance further than Artaud. But he brings the audience in as conscious not intuitive beings as in the *Theatre of Cruelty*. The audience at a Boal-type theatre event is encouraged to make suggestions that change the course of events and to enter the performances to act out their understandings of and solutions to problems. Audiences are not allowed to be passive observers of performance; they have to become active creators of performance – i.e. playwrights and actors – working alongside the professional troupe to objectify the reality of their existence. In the

Theatre of the Oppressed entertainment gives way to examination of real conditions; to exploration of ways to challenge existing states of affairs and bring about change. In the Theatre of the Oppressed life and Art are one.

In Berthold Brecht's Theatre of Alienation (Epic Theatre), life and art are deliberately kept separate. So the stage has to be seen as a stage with lighting instruments and props, not a natural environment. This is to prevent the audience from empathising with performers and performance. Keeping the audience conscious of being separate, allows it to remain critically aware. In the presentation of theatrical images that disturb and outrage, audiences must see and acknowledge the horror and cruelty of oppression – the reality that is hidden under facades. The audience must be shocked into awareness of the necessity for change.

In Brecht's Epic Theatre, alienation is the mirror in which the distorted images that we have made of life are reflected. It presents the necessity for change and depends on the objectivity of the audience to see that. In the Theatre of Cruelty, the performance has to evoke intuitive (mystical) understanding and it can only happen in the theatre; for Brecht and for Boal (the Theatre of the Oppressed), the performance has to raise consciousness in order to effect change outside the theatre – in the community.

Entertainment

Though Artaud gave theatre a real boost, especially in terms of its presentation – as was demonstrated in Peter Brook's circus theatre production of *A Midsummer Nights' Dream* – theatre maintains the division between performance and audience and continues to hold the mirror up to nature through its ability to entertain. But why is entertainment necessary? It is the means by which the meanings of the Arts are given objectivity. Entertainment or delight allows us to experience Art as outside of ourselves and in enjoying them, we are not coerced by the understandings of reality that they present; we are free to use our own judgment.

In Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty (aptly named, I think), the audience would not have that freedom of choice because Artaud wishes it to be subjectively involved in the performance – in a ritual that eliminates entertainment.

But having evolved from religious ritual, theatre is no longer confined by it. Its ability to entertain is what freed it from ritual, freed it from conformity, freed it to explore the human condition. Having a narcissistic interest in ourselves, it is the reflection of ourselves that we find most interesting and entertaining; that draws us to the theatre and to movies.

... theatre is ... a public event, a spectacle or a show, attempting to please or amaze the audience by a display of exceptional stage achievements, ... In that sense, like sporting events or the circus, theatre serves what I shall call the performance function: it satisfies our natural desire to achieve or witness something extraordinary.
(Jean Alter, *A Socio-semiotic Theory of Theatre*)

Theatre entertainment takes many forms — from the highly spiritual and intellectual to the most nonsensical and ridiculous. All cater to the diversity of human experience. But for some, excessive dependence on the entertainment aspect of theatre diminishes it as Art.

When you come into the theater, you have to be willing to say, "We're all here to undergo a communion, to find out what the hell is going on in this world." If you're not willing to say that, what you get is entertainment instead of art, and poor entertainment at that.
(DAVID MAMET, *Three Uses of the Knife*)

There is a suggestion here that entertainment is separate from Art. But the entertainment aspect of Art is essential not only to our enjoyment but also to our appreciation and understanding. What we experience in the theatre is not simply the performance, it is also the

medium itself in all its aspects – the script, the direction, the acting, music, dance, and the mise en scene. The medium is an expression of the essence of being human; it is the presentation, for all to see, hear and appreciate, of human creativity and endeavour. And our delight is as much in the creativity of the presentation as in the performance. The Art of the theatre, as all Art, is the affirmation of being human.

“I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms,
the most immediate way in which a human being can
share with another the sense
of what it is to be a human being.” —
(Oscar Wilde)

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JANE AUSTEN: NORTHANGER ABBAY – IRONY

Artists and the Arts mirror life and provide us with the means to observe ourselves, gain objectivity and influence the way we shape our lives. In reflecting our strengths and weaknesses, they allow us to examine the meanings we make of existence and find new and better ways of being. Artists, builders of mirrors, invent and use techniques that awaken consciousness and turn us into participant-observers of the human condition.

The technique that Jane Austen uses in her novels is irony – a figure of speech which infers the opposite of what is perceived, thus giving us a double view of situations in the contradiction between words and circumstances, between appearance and reality. Double meanings create uncertainty and lead to questioning. Irony, therefore, is a declaration that we are not to take things at face value. And cloaking character and situation in irony, Austen exposes hypocrisy or eccentricity and invites us to laugh with her at human frailty and to question social conventions and beliefs.

Irony, the means she uses to entertain as she questions taken for granted attitudes, emanates from the mind of an observer and we are made aware of the author as observer from the very first sentence in *Northanger Abbey*. She tells us right at the start, with an amused twinkle in her eye, that she is going to turn someone, with little potential to be so, into her heroine “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be an heroine.” (p.1) Though this opening remark casts doubt on Catherine, the word “heroine” automatically raises expectations of exceptional qualities. But the opening sentence is followed by a catalogue of Catherine’s shortcomings. She is not ravishingly beautiful, does not like to study, hates playing the piano, cannot

draw, is not industrious, is quite naive, and being highly impressionable, takes things at face value. And she enjoys reading sensational literature – Gothic novels.

Gothic fiction (sometimes referred to as **Gothic horror**) is a genre of literature that combines elements of both horror and romance ... Prominent features of Gothic fiction include terror (both psychological and physical), mystery, the supernatural, ghosts, haunted houses and Gothic architecture, castles, darkness, death, decay, doubles, madness, secrets, and hereditary curses. The stock characters of Gothic fiction include tyrants, villains, bandits, maniacs, Byronic heroes, persecuted maidens, femmes fatales, monks, nuns, madwomen, magicians, vampires, werewolves, monsters, demons, dragons, angels, fallen angels, revenants, ghosts, perambulating skeletons, the Wandering Jew and the Devil himself. (Wikipedia)

Gothic novels appeal to the instinct and enthrall thrill-seekers like Catherine. They do not require objective evaluation, only total unquestioning involvement in events. Austen, however, being an intellectual, wishes to engage our intellect more than our emotions. So she speaks directly to us and as her ironic view distances us from events and characters, we do not become embroiled in intrigues and machinations. It is her purpose to show us the effects of sensational literature on impressionable, unquestioning minds. She brings her readers to stand next to her to observe as Catherine attempts to turn reality into mindless horror.

And we are required to see that Catherine has to be quite ordinary and naive as she is the mirror through which the excesses of the Gothic novel, as well as the hypocrisy of her society, are reflected. *Northanger Abbey* thus becomes a critique of the Gothic romance genre. But it is more – it is a critique within a critique. Austen places her parody of the Gothic novel, within her ironic view of a crassly

materialistic society and playfully suggests that the imagined horror of the one is the underlying reality of the other. This is vividly demonstrated in Catherine's visit to Northanger Abbey.

Her head filled with images from Gothic horror romances, and Northanger being an Abbey, reminiscent of a castle from a Gothic novel, Catherine sees it only in terms of fiction rather than the reality it presents. Though part of the Abbey, where the Tilneys live, has been renovated and the Tilneys live in modern comfort, Catherine is determined to turn Northanger into an environment of secret horrors. In addition, General Tilney's unpleasant character gives rise to her view of him as some kind of villain. So when she hears of the death of the General's wife, she translates it immediately into murder and starts searching for evidence of the crime. As she views everything through the Gothic mirror, she finds in ordinary human weaknesses the exaggerated horror of sensational fiction.

Blinded by her romantic fantasies, she is unaware that the General is excessively attentive to her as he believes she is an heiress and is eager to ensure that she marries Henry and brings an inheritance that will help with the upkeep of the Abbey. Catherine has no idea of his motives: one, her head is filled with romantic nonsense, and two, she is not an heiress and has no idea that this is how the General sees her. She sees him as a villain and he sees her as an heiress and both want to preserve the Abbey; he in fact, she in fiction.

In the 1990 BBC film version of *Northanger Abbey*, starring Peter Firth as Henry Tilney, the focus is on Catherine's wild imaginings and the General comes across as more sinister than mercenary. Film being a visual medium, the screenwriter has had to find visual means to convey the rich irony and humour of the author's verbal expression. To make the parody of Gothic horror clear, the screenwriter has embellished Austen's novel with a ghoulish marchioness, intimate friend of the General, a black page boy in a kind of dream sequence, and dreams of the General dipping his hands in blood, and carrying Catherine's inert body. As the visual is not as subtle

as the verbal, the General's crassly mercenary motives are made to seem much more sinister and even suggestive. This is reinforced in the scene in which Catherine is made to don the riding habit that belonged to the General's late wife. None of this is in the novel. It is the film's attempt to make obvious Catherine's filtering of reality through the Gothic mirror. When Catherine asks Eleanor about her mother's "corpse", however, it becomes inappropriate; Austen would not allow her to be so crude.

Being a very young, naive, ingenuous, impressionable girl without great beauty, accomplishments, sparkling wit and intelligence, what is it that makes her attractive to Henry Tilney? Henry is accomplished, intelligent, sophisticated, and can see beneath the surface unlike Catherine who takes words at face value. He is quite the opposite of Catherine. The cliché – opposites attract – comes to mind, but that would be an oversimplification; it would mean that Henry wants her simply as a foil to his excellence. That would result in an unequal relationship similar to the Allens, (or the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice*) where the husband has to endure the silliness of a simple wife and takes refuge away from her in card games or in his library.

But Austen doesn't leave us with what we may perceive as inconsistent. She explains Henry's interest in Catherine as another of her strategies to ground her novel in everyday reality and remove it completely from Gothic or fairy tale romance.

"I must confess that his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude; or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought. It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of an heroine's dignity; but if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own." (206)

In other words, Henry's love is based on gratitude – he responds to the fact that Catherine is attracted to him – he likes her because she likes him; and that is seen as the normal way in which attachments happen. This is the finishing irony in a novel that intends to disabuse us of romantic nonsense.

But Henry, unlike most of the other characters in the novel, stands outside situations and is able to evaluate them. He is introduced to the reader as “a teasing young man” and his teasing takes the form of ironic commentaries. His use of irony makes him akin to Austen herself; like her, he sees the truth beneath dissembling and effusive behaviour. In the Gothic novel, evil is exaggerated and made obvious through violence; in Austen's novel, evil is of an everyday variety, and Henry, like Austen, is aware of its demure residence under social convention – in Isabella's effusive expressions of affection, John Thorpe's pretended interest in Catherine and General Tilney's excessive politeness to her.

In Catherine, Henry sees someone in sharp contrast to the hypocrisy around her. She is frank, has the courage of her convictions and most of all is instinctively honest. She does not dissemble and is a breath of fresh air in an environment of affectation and insincerity. And, of course, she openly likes him, genuinely likes him for himself and has no ulterior motive.

What makes Jane Austen's novel enjoyable is her obvious enjoyment in delineating her world and its people. And her ironic view exposes the foibles of people chiefly for amusement and entertainment.

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THE JOKER

Watching the Joker in the film, *The Dark Knight*, and seeing him eliminating the criminals who assist him, seeing him burn a mountain of money, seeing his pursuit of the district attorney not as a vendetta but as a means of demonstrating his understanding of existence, seeing him force people to confront their fear and surrender their humanity, sent me on a search in which I found nihilism, anarchy, and most importantly *Batman: The Killing Joke* and Alan Moore.

A major inspiration for the film, Alan Moore's graphic novel (comic book) *Batman: The Killing Joke*, tells the story of the man who became the Joker. Moore's graphic novel literally ends with a joke about killing that leaves Batman and the Joker laughing hilariously together – both seeing the reality we make of existence as a joke.

And what we find in *Batman and the Joker* is Alan Moore's exploration of the meaning of existence. In San Francisco's *Believer Magazine* (June 2013), Moore, in an interview, says:

Yeah, our view of reality, the one we conventionally take, is one among many. It's pretty much a fact that our entire universe is a mental construct. We don't actually deal with reality directly. We simply compose a picture of reality from what's going on in our retinas, in the timpani of our ears, and in our nerve endings. We perceive our own perception, and that perception is to us the entirety of the universe.

Moore, gives an indication of how he awoke to his understanding of reality.

"LSD was an incredible experience. Not that I'm recommending it for anybody else; but for me it kind of – it

hammered home to me that reality was not a fixed thing. That the reality that we saw about us every day was one reality, and a valid one – but that there were others, different perspectives where different things have meaning that were just as valid. That had a profound effect on me.”
(Alan Moore: *Believer* Interview, Sept 2014)

Christopher Nolan’s film, *The Dark Knight*, does not bring Batman and the Joker together in the way that *The Killing Joke* does. In the comic book, the ending suggests that the characters are two sides of the same coin; both see absurdity in human constructs of reality. But in the film, they are in total opposition and don’t share the joke. Batman, beginning to question his function as a saviour, is at the beginning of disillusionment and his doubts weaken him. While the Joker, the embodiment of chaos, complete in himself, can act with absolute certainty and is powerful, more powerful than Batman.

For the Joker, the reality that we profess is a fabrication, a fairy tale, “a mental construct;” it is not authentic. And the definitions that we give to existence, conceal the reality of its meaninglessness. The controls that we place upon ourselves, having no external reference, simply become the means to uphold an illusion. All the knowledge that we have accumulated and the progress we have made, merely feed the illusion that life has objective reality. But they are a form of psychotherapy and we are really locked inside reflexivity – as participant–observers in a reality of our own making.

If there is no objective reality, we are dealing only with “perception of perceptions.” And that for the Joker makes existence meaningless and the world an asylum. Existence being meaningless, authenticity of being human consists in being meaningless. As we refuse to acknowledge that, he is compelled to demonstrate it. So embracing insanity, the Joker frees himself of human conventions and sees his mission as the destruction of the veneer, the facade of sanity, under which we hide the reality of chaos. Determined to force acceptance of insanity as the true meaning of reality, he pursues Harvey Dent,

the best of the best, whom he drives insane. Dent becomes Two-Face; with a face one half of which is orderly and the other chaotic; he becomes the Joker in the Batman.

Next, the Joker places people in a situation in which they have to choose between killing or being killed. He is certain that fear will overcome reason, drive them to kill and they will all be destroyed. He does not win this challenge; the people on the ships choose not to kill so they do not die. They affirm the value of life that underpins civilization and human belief in objective reality. This affirmation gives back to Batman his strength as it validates his being.

Does this test prove objective reality or does it affirm human existence as a “mental construct”? Science fiction presents human existence as objective reality i.e. we are not the only occupants of the universe. But is Science Fiction not simply a projection of human life into outer space? Is it not simply a “mental construct”? – more reflexivity?

In *The Dark Knight*, anarchy and chaos are regarded as synonymous, but for Moore they are not. This is how Moore defines anarchy in his graphic novel, *V for Vendetta*. V says:

“Anarchy means “without leaders”, not “without order”. With anarchy comes an age of ordnung, of true order, which is to say voluntary order ... this age of ordnung will begin when the mad and incoherent cycle of verwirrung [chaos, confusion] that these bulletins reveal has run its course ... This is not anarchy, ... This is chaos.”
(Alan Moore: *V for Vendetta*)

George Woodcock editor of *The Anarchist Reader* writes in his introduction:

... the word archon (means) a ruler, and the prefix an, (indicates) ‘without’; hence anarchy means a state of being without a ruler. By derivation, *anarchism* is the doctrine which contends that government is the source

of most of our social troubles and that there are viable alternative forms of voluntary organization. And by further definition the *anarchist* is the man who sets out to create a society without government. (p.11)

And Moore takes this further:

“I believe that all other political states are in fact variations or outgrowths of a basic state of anarchy; after all, when you mention the idea of anarchy to most people they will tell you what a bad idea it is because the biggest gang would just take over. Which is pretty much how I see contemporary society. We live in a badly developed anarchist situation in which the biggest gang has taken over and have declared that it is not an anarchist situation – that it is a capitalist or a communist situation. But I tend to think that anarchy is the most natural form of politics for a human being to actually practice.” (*Believer* Interview)

What anarchist theory posits is informal organization not the governments that we have today that rule by fear, coercion and exploitation. [After twenty years of living under a “democratic” government, I now see governments as the Jokers of the world but without the Joker’s intelligence or honesty.]

The Joker is not an anarchist; he is a nihilist [*nihil* = nothing] i.e. he sees existence as having no intrinsic meaning and finds human attempts to create meaning, a sick joke. That would include the anarchist attempt to create society without formal government. The anarchist idea of informally organised communities is to me as idealistic as democracy. It takes human goodwill for granted in the same way that democracy does. But human beings are not altruistic; our first concern is the self and we are supremely opportunistic. Government administration acknowledges only the volatility of human nature. Laws and regulations are forms of control; as are all societal institutions, social, religious, economic, etc. And the Joker sets out to show that the reality human beings create in building

society, is a fantasy, a pretence of orderly existence; that there is no consistency or commitment in declarations of liberty, fraternity and equality. Everyone knows – rules are made to be broken. So why pretend that what we have created is real; that our regulations ensure a haven for human existence?

His view is involuntarily supported by Batman, whose efforts to end crime in Gotham City lead to new more creative forms – criminals impersonating Batman and committing crimes under his guise. In *The Dark Knight*, Batman is beginning to see his role as one who simply puts out fires without being able to stop the conflagration. He is beginning to see that human propensity to take opportunistic advantage of all situations is ingrained; that society's conventions invite subversion by all, though most obviously by the criminally inclined and the disadvantaged. The criminally-minded (and that includes corrupt politicians) batten on the majority's compliance with rules and regulations – the moral cages in which they are confined that make possible their abuse. Bound by convention, people are sitting ducks for the Jokers of the world.

Being out of the moral cage gives the Joker his power. He is able to destroy at will because he does not subscribe to concepts of good and evil. And because he repudiates all conventions, he is totally unpredictable. No one knows what to expect from him. That is his power. Batman, Gordon, Dent follow rules so their actions are fairly predictable. In a conventional world, power is gained from being unconventional; it is what makes all criminals powerful. It is also a trait of most heroes in novels and films, heroes like Batman. We call them mavericks and admire them for their ability to ignore societal restrictions and act on their own authority in times of crisis. Their individualism, independence, freedom from constraint gives them power and makes them very attractive; they appeal to the subconscious longing in all of us to be free of rules and regulations. We identify vicariously with their defiance of imposed authority – of controls that become hindrances in a crisis. What makes them exceptional is their ability to look beyond controls placed on

behaviour by society and find imaginative solutions to problems. Like artists, they demonstrate that creativity consists in being able to break out of conventions. Hero and villain, Batman and Joker, have much in common.

It is the anarchic desire for freedom in all of us that is symbolised in the Joker and the Hero. But the Joker's unconventionality and unpredictability are not just the titillating abandonment of rules; for him regulatory rules, laws, are lies to protect the superstructure of fantasy that hides the truth. Rules deceive us into believing that our actions have meaning when they are there only to ensure that we preserve the systems that bind us together and delude us into believing that we have a purpose in the universe. The Joker, the only true maverick, repudiates all attempts to make him conform to the fabrications of human logic.

As there is truth in what the Joker believes, he forces us to examine our understanding of existence. But his view is one-sided. True – existence is a mystery, human beings are instinctual and cannot be relied on absolutely, and they have fabricated an existence on earth. But does that mean that the human creation of existence is meaningless because it is a mental construct, a perception of perception? For the Joker this is so. As we cannot place our existence in a clearly definable context that is outside ourselves, our existence is reduced to a kind of psychotic dream.

But the one undeniable fact is that we do exist. For the majority of human beings who value the life they have, it is an opportunity. And they have created civilizations, flawed as they are, and given human meaning to existence. That meaning is the expression of instinctive reverence for life. Even the Joker values his life. His despair at the meaninglessness of existence does not lead him to take his own life, and, like the majority, he gives it meaning – he has a mission. His mission is to destroy our illusions. So despite his nihilism, he functions, albeit negatively, in the human context in a human way; he creates meaning.

He expresses his meaning through his actions. And that is what humans have done since the beginning of time, acted to make the world their home – taken control of the randomness of existence and created a human reality. The Joker is in despair because it is not objective reality; Batman is in agony because, being human, it can never be perfect.

For the Jokers of the world, who need an external agency to give reality to our existence, life is a meaningless joke and there is no point in giving it form. The majority of humans do not suffer the Joker's angst as they believe in an external agency – God. For the Joker this belief is part of the elaborate structure they have created to give credence to a false understanding of existence.

There are others, who may or may not be atheists, who, like the Joker, contemplate the mystery of existence, but unlike the Joker, do not despair at its incomprehensibility. For them it becomes an exciting adventure, a challenge to give meaning, to create reality – as all artists and scientists consciously do. Alan Moore calls it magical:

“I believe that magic is art, and that art, whether that be music, writing, sculpture, or any other form, is literally magic. Art is, like magic, the science of manipulating symbols, words or images, to achieve changes in consciousness ... Indeed to cast a spell is simply to spell, to manipulate words, to change people's consciousness, and this is why I believe that an artist or writer is the closest thing in the contemporary world to a shaman.” (*Alan Moore*)

In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker unwittingly makes magic; destructive magic, but magic nevertheless. As his negativity and pessimism can only be perceived in its opposition to human optimism and creativity, he too is caught in the logic of a “mental construct.”

In the end there is no escape from reflexivity. And the line between sanity and insanity disappears.

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HOLY MIRRORS

Faith

Though real experience of faith is at the human level, in daily commerce, in the trust that is required of us to maintain the integrity of community – as we see in something as mundane as obeying traffic signs – we generally associate the word faith with religion, belief in the metaphysical, God, angels, demons, spirits.

Belief in the supernatural reinforces the maintenance of trust in daily life. And religious rituals, like social traditions, requiring strict conformity, are a means of consolidating community. Those who understand, have no need of metaphoric re-enforcement of trust through ritual and tradition. They understand trust in real terms; they know it is essential that human beings keep faith with one another in order to be human and humane; in order to survive with dignity. Ubuntu: “a person is a person through other persons” which fosters mutual respect – is what they posit as the basis of community.

Ironically, religious faith, reflecting human limitation, repudiates mutual respect except within its own cultural confines. Its insistence on conformity to a partisan set of religious norms and values that arise from a particular culture, confines faith within cultural ghettos and gives prominence to difference rather than the commonality of being human. Each religious enclave avoids engagement with the beliefs and practices of every other – there is such fear of contamination. Such paranoia casts doubt on professions of religious faith. If one's faith is firm why fear contamination? Fierce repudiation of other configurations of faith, points to the subconscious uncertainty of professions of one's own faith. And the so-called faithful, being at the root uncertain, are really faithless. Their God simply becomes an icon of their culture; not the creator of all humanity. And religion,

instead of reinforcing the trust necessary for human existence, often vitiates it and threatens human survival in the world.

Atheism

After someone sent me dates of religious rituals, I informed her that I was an atheist, have been all my life. She wrote back, “I am surprised, but I respect your choice.” When someone says they respect your choice, it generally means a repudiation of that ‘choice’, end of discussion; we cannot enter into any kind of consideration of the ‘choice’ – pointing again to the fear of contamination that emanates from subconscious doubt. So I was unable to explain that atheism is not a choice; it is my understanding of existence. To think of atheism in terms of choice is to relegate it to a kind of religion.

The expression of respect for my so-called ‘choice’ is not genuine respect. Real respect would mean a willingness to discuss, explore how our views differ and why they differ. But for believers in general, faith has to be absolute – there can be no questioning – questioning indicates doubt, an abdication of faith. Believers live in fear of uncovering doubt beneath their ‘faith.’ As my faith is in the human condition, it is not a reflection of hope and fear, it is based in reality. As I am ever ready to subject my understanding to questioning, in the hope of gaining greater insight into the human condition, I make an attempt to open discussion. I inform her that atheists are people who have examined religious beliefs, understand people’s need for them, but accept the scientific view that existence is a mystery. Pursuing a closed subject, however, I am being insensitive. So there is no response and I proceed alone to clarify my thinking.

The mystery of our existence in an expanding universe is disturbing to humans because we are finite in infinity; we have beginnings and ends; the universe, apparently not. Being finite, we make sense of life through the finite, through definition, and definition is a declaration of mortality. But we long to be one with the universe – we long for ever lasting life. Limited, however, by an understanding

that is dependent on the finite, what we long for is not really to be infinite but to be infinitely finite, to perpetuate human life forever. So we created the metaphor of the supernatural – heaven; defined it in anthropomorphic terms to contain it, give it stability, dispel uncertainty and ensure unchanging everlasting life. The metaphor works for the majority.

An atheist, however, does not accept the metaphor; she accepts the reality of arbitrary existence; she sees that it is human beings who create the order of their existence, who ordain their destiny through their creativity. The first major human innovation was the establishment of community. Humans began to live in community even before they became fully human. Like other animals, they lived in herds, troops, colonies, to protect themselves against predators. Once they felt fairly safe, they began to turn their troops into communities, into matrices for the creation of more complex existence on earth. And the growing complexity of human existence is the human response to the randomness of life in an expanding universe. The mystery of the appearance of life on earth poses a continuous challenge to define existence. Without the uncertainty, the mystery, there would be no incentive to explore, to define the unknown. The mystery turns human life into an eternal adventure and stimulates endless creativity. The arbitrariness of existence bequeaths on us total freedom to explore and create.

Mirror of Perfection

Exploring, defining and building became our *modus operandi*. Begun as a means to secure and stabilize existence on earth, it developed into the search for control of all the elements – air, earth, water – and in present times the exploration of space both in fact and fiction. As a result of the order we have imposed on our existence, we now live in communities in which we take security and stability for granted. But community remains volatile – because human beings are volatile, subject both to instinct and reason. Consequently, a more powerful means, more powerful than a human institution, had to be found to

protect us from predators within the community. So we devised an incorruptible system of justice in the abstract, outside the human sphere – a Platonic ideal – God. Mirror of Perfection.

Supernatural existence, being mystical, is a powerful inducement for maintaining stability, security and morality. We fear inordinately that which we cannot see and give it power over us. Hence in religion the creation of icons to give God a friendly presence and the Devil a recognisable one. M. Night Shyamalan's film, *The Village*, depicts the human propensity to create fictions based on superstitious fear to keep community intact.

We created the supernatural to protect ourselves from ourselves. Its power derives from its being external to the human condition and human weakness. We endowed upon this external power the ability to grant eternal life – heaven or hell in the hereafter – as reward or punishment for upholding or destroying the integrity of community. And the belief was inculcated that we are all inexorably forging our way to one of these destinations.

Faith, as defined by religion, is belief in the attainability of perfection and eternal life in the hereafter. It makes the search for the truth of existence redundant for the faithful who regard attempts to define existence through empirical means, such as Darwin's evidence of evolution, as irrelevant. For them, life fits into a preordained pattern and human existence has not evolved; it was divinely conceived. God is the Father. When we die, we become spirits and are united with God (or Satan) in metaphysical existence.

Heaven and hell based on human duality, led to the conception of dichotomized good and evil and the dichotomized human being – body and soul. Good was associated with soul; evil with body. In Heaven, the place of goodness, spiritual beings free of bodies, are not contaminated by carnal desires. [Our depictions of deities and angels in human form, however, contradict this – reflecting our inability to conceive of intelligent life except in anthropomorphic

terms.] Inhabitants of heaven, being pure spirit, represent perfection i.e. order, consistency, stability, certainty, singularity of purpose and goodwill. Hell is the opposite; it is the place for the wicked who remain victims of lust. [It is, however, difficult to understand how the wicked, who also lose their bodies in death, are able to feel the physical pain of the torture that they must undergo in hell.] The configurations of Heaven and Hell redirected the fear of death into the fear of committing crimes.

The Violence of Faith

Divine life is a metaphor, a poetic invention, a symbol, a mirror of human perfection; it is not empirical fact. As such it requires constant interpretation by saviours, prophets, popes, priests, sangomas, shamans, psychics, fortune-tellers. We devised the metaphor of the supernatural world with its promise of eternal life for a pragmatic purpose – to ensure survival on earth. But the metaphor has taken on a life of its own and every community has created its own gods or god.

A symbol, being an abstraction, cannot be proved or disproved. It requires blind faith; it cannot be questioned. Questioning, therefore, becomes sacrilege, a repudiation of faith. Any challenge, even the slightest, such as the challenge to symbolic items – bread and wine, icons, hijab – is construed as sacrilege and leads to violent reaction – ostracism, excommunication, division, fatwa, holy war. This bellicose disposition of the fanatical believer arises from his inability to give concrete evidence of the supernatural; so he has to knock you over the head to convince you or he has to annihilate you. The metaphor is thus turned into a fetish protected by superstitious fear.

For the believer, perfection as it is envisioned in Heaven, is a beacon for good behaviour. For the atheist, perfection, envisioned as an abstract ideal, is a beacon for continuous human exploration to advance life on earth. The atheist's faith is in reason and human endeavour; she, believes in the search for perfection in real circumstances, even though it is a never-ending search – perfection being

unattainable. But that is what makes progress possible. The search for perfection leads to continuous change and enhancement of life as we gain more knowledge, more understanding. Human beings, therefore, are on a perpetual voyage of discovery, a life-long adventure, in pursuit of the expanding meaning of existence in an expanding universe.

For each of us, the adventure lasts only as long as our individual lives. Death brings it to an end. There is nothing more. So atheists know that they must make the most of the time they have on earth. Life, being limited, is very precious; it makes sense not to waste it.

[In two Hollywood films, *The City of Angels* and *Meet Joe Black*, human aspiration is reversed from the traditional religious view; the films present angels who choose to return to physical life on earth and not remain in spiritual stultification. Being Hollywood films, of course, the adventure of life on earth means sex – but then sex does mean human creativity.]

Reality

Belief in the metaphor means viewing life through the metaphysical mirror and taking reflection for reality. The atheist abandons the reflection in favour of reality. She looks squarely at human existence and finds the meaning of life in human endeavour. To “love thy neighbour as thy self” read as a metaphor is to ensure life in the hereafter; but in reality it expresses a pragmatic need to work together to build community – the catalyst for the development and progress of the individuals who comprise it.

The metaphor and metaphysical sources of control, place ultimate accountability for human acts outside the human sphere. So instead of examining the nature of human actions in terms of their impact on human society, they are translated into metaphysical terms of good and evil and deflect understanding from the human condition. Acts of destruction and violation seen as acts against God are sacrilege. To place them in the human sphere as acts against human beings – diminishes the degree of the iniquity for the believer.

For the atheist, however, God is an abstraction for community, so all crimes are crimes against humanity and are “sacrilegious”. Community is the source of our being and identity; crime, therefore, is not simply an attack on another, it is an attack on the condition of being. As such, it is also self-destructive, parasuicidal. We created community for our survival and the responsibility of preserving community is ours; we are accountable to ourselves not to a metaphorical being.

The only reality in which we operate, is the world that we occupy. We have theories about how it came about but we have no absolute proof. Against this uncertainty, we have furnished our world with all kinds of institutions, religious, social, political, economic, scientific, artistic, to give us stability. Our establishment of stability, the very bricks and mortar of the home we have created, is based entirely on human endeavour.

But human nature being what it is, despite theism, despite atheism, we have given rise to societies in which the powerful prey upon the powerless. Neither the metaphor nor rational understanding has been able to eradicate harmful exploitation. Human beings are imperfect, so the striving for moral perfection, both theistic and atheistic, remains in the domain of the metaphor.

Faith in human endeavour

When John F Kennedy promised a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s, he was expressing his faith in human endeavour. All our understanding of existence in the universe has come about through human endeavour, through all philosophers, artists, scientists, technologists, who search for ways of overcoming ignorance, ways of extending the boundaries of human understanding and human functioning. They work within the human construction of systems searching, always searching, for new and better ways of understanding and organising our lives. They have superlative powers of observation that allow them to look at the obvious, restructure it and configure new meanings that lead us into more advanced understandings and ways of living. Because they are always

challenging accepted conventions and shaking us out of traditional understandings, they are often seen as upstarts until we eventually begin to understand what they offer us. The ability to break out of conventions, societal norms, rules and regulations, sets the imagination free and stimulates creativity. And humans who live in the paradoxical situation of being finite in infinity are caught in the paradox of having to break the bonds of civilized living in order to innovate and take civilization forward.

It is the ability to discover the shortcomings of the ways in which we organize our lives and find solutions that allows us to continue to advance.

LEAR AND PROSPERO

Last week I watched Shakespeare's *King Lear* and yesterday (23.04.2014) *The Tempest*, and I began to see Prospero in relation to Lear. Both are leaders: one gives away his political power to spend his life in retirement; the other, who secludes himself in study, is deposed. Both seek freedom from the responsibility of government but both wish to retain power. When they lose power, both are angry and resentful. Both are banished; one to barren wastes; the other to an island. Each has a daughter who embodies love – the essence of harmonious existence. Lear is too blind to see it.

Lear loses everything and dies, and it seemed to me as I watched *The Tempest*, is transported with Cordelia, to a magical island and is resurrected in Prospero, Cordelia in Miranda. Writers often become fascinated with themes and characters and try them out in different contexts. Take Jane Austen, for instance, you will find a Darcy-type, a Wickham-type, a Bingley-type, an Elizabeth-Jane (merged or separate), a Lydia-type in all her novels. She is trying to solve the problem of women's independence in a culture in which all they can aspire to is a secure marriage.

Shakespeare examines the problem of political power in many of his plays. In *The Tempest* and *King Lear*, he divests both Lear and Prospero of political power. Lear has to learn that love is not love when it is conflated with power. After he is reduced to “a poor forked animal” and goes mad, he learns to see. Unlike Lear, Prospero is given a second chance. In his banishment, through his study of magic, he attains god-like power – a reaction to his former apathy with regard to power – and takes total control of an island, the elements and people.

He colonizes and enslaves Caliban, son of Sycorax, the “witch” who formerly ruled the island. He also enslaves the elements in the form of Ariel, whom he releases from imprisonment in a tree and thus gains power over him. His rule is totally authoritarian. Throughout the play his slaves cry for freedom. One wonders then, if as Duke of Milan he had ruled instead of studying, what kind of ruler he would have been. Better than his brother? On the island he is a dictator.

With magic arts, learned from books, Prospero has gained the power to take revenge on his brother and the King of Naples who together conspired to depose him as Duke of Milan. He uses his magical powers to bring them to the island to punish them. But his sojourn on the island, has given him a different understanding of existence and he learns from his daughter, Miranda, and from Ariel, to be compassionate. Speaking of his treacherous brother who with the complicity of the King of Naples, robbed him of his Dukedom, he says:

Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th’ quick,
Yet with my nobler reason ‘gainst my fury
Do I take part. The rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance.
(*The Tempest*, 5.1, 25-28)

And he gives up his magic – his power to control:

... But this rough magic
I here abjure. And when I have required
Some heavenly music – which even now, I do
To work mine end upon their senses that
This airy charm is for, I’ll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I’ll drown my book.
(*The Tempest*, 5.1, 54-57)

Lear is severely punished for his blindness; Prospero is forgiven for his and we assume that he returns to Milan to rule with compassion. Being a wiser man, it is possible that his people will be justified in loving him on his return.

He is now a man who sees human existence as transient and the pursuit of power as meaningless illusion, like a stage performance, a reflection of reality, not reality itself.

The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve;
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.
(*The Tempest*, 4.1, 151-158)

The creation of life on-stage in a theatrical performance imitates the creation of life off-stage. All human systems and institutions are creations for stabilising life on earth. They give us the illusion of being fixed in time and space so we are not aware that the human pageant is “insubstantial” i.e. a process not a fixed form. What we take as reality seems fixed but is not; we have our being in a process of continuous change. Reality, therefore, is in continuous movement (in Alvin Toffler terms, rising and falling like waves) – flowing out of one set of circumstances into the next as we evolve; in computer terms – as we continuously update the way we live.

Ironically, the fictional life created in Shakespeare’s plays, in Jane Austen’s novels, being fixed in time and place, attain that quality of permanence that we so vainly wish to establish in reality. Plays like *King Lear* and *The Tempest* are fixed in Shakespeare’s words and present a reality frozen in time and place. Plays, novels and other art forms that reflect life are the closest we can get to stability in the human condition. Our rules, regulations, laws try to fix us in unchanging circumstances, but they give only an illusion of stability.

We live in an expanding universe, on a planet that rotates on an axis and revolves around the sun but in our daily interactions, we are completely unaware that the earth is a spinning spaceship. Being in an aircraft and moving with it, we are unaware of its movement.

In the search for fixity in the human condition, we build communities and set up power structures to exert control over human volatility. But power itself is subject to human volatility and readily gives rise to the lust and greed that lead to the unending struggle for dominance.

Power at all levels leads to corruption in every walk of life. And corruption is the symptom of malfunction in the systems we create. But we treat the symptom without seeking its cause because we accept administrative systems unconditionally. Human nature, however, ruled both by instinct and reason, is ambivalent and human beings are fallible. Placed in positions of power and authority, they fall prey to lust and greed, to corruption. We may, depending on our integrity, punish those who abuse power but it does not occur to us to examine the systems that facilitate corruption; we more readily arraign the individual.

Love, always presented as an alternative to corrupting power, is also a form of control but being based on affection, is benign and leads to voluntary conformity. As such, love cannot compete with the violence that accompanies corruption. [That possibly explains why love is generally personified as women in Art.] Cordelia and Miranda, embodiments of love in *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, have no power. Cordelia is murdered; Miranda marries into power. Within power structures, love is replaced by lust and rape. And in the bureaucracies that serve power, functionaries become automatons, cold and inhuman in their treatment of the powerless who must apply to them for all kinds of permits that control their lives – IDs, passports, licences etc. And in administering such permits, functionaries find ways to abuse their power and authority. Corruption, facilitated in bureaucratic structuring, makes it impossible to predetermine human destiny.

So Jokers, looking for clear-cut definitions of existence, feel betrayed, become disillusioned and succumb to despair. For the majority, who live in fearful compliance with the dictates of power, the solution is God who provides the only stability possible – in life after death. When we lived in our conception of a geocentric universe, the ruler–pharaoh, king – was seen as God on earth and the killing of a king, as in the play, *Macbeth*, was sacrilege. It led to chaos, disorder, loss of control. But pharaohs and kings lived in pomp and circumstance and the stability they created denied human dignity to the majority. In the modern world, rulers invested with power by the electorate, become demigods. They see themselves as entitled, become corrupt and self-serving. While legislating to curb human volatility in the electorate, they , in themselves, become embodiments of inconsistency as they turn their guardianship to exploitation and pillage. Their understanding of equality and fraternity is an election promise, as insubstantial as democracy.

We invented gods and governments as Guardians of stability, but our desire ‘to stop the world’ is a futile quest. We are like psychiatrists trying to impose ‘normality’ on ‘abnormality’. But what is normal? The elimination of the instinctual self? We are creatures of instinct as well as reason; as inclined to destroy as to create. Under the veneer of civilization, we are feral beings and the duality of our natures makes human existence paradoxical – the opposition in our natures gives rise to creativity as well as corruption.

When Adam and Eve decided to take control of their destinies, they lost their innocence. And what is innocence? Simply total conformity. So what they lost was a trivial life of complete stability. When they left the garden, they became creative beings. And creativity, like childbirth, combines pain with delivery.

After we watch plays like *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, we are left to evaluate the efficacy of the ways in which we try to bring together the contradictions in our natures; to wonder whether the striving for stability, which is a denial of human complexity, should form the basis of structured human existence.

UNTO DUST – IRONY

I write this for high school students studying Herman Charles Bosman's story – particularly for those whose mother tongue is not English.

In order really to appreciate Bosman's writings, one has to have a good understanding of irony.

So what is irony?

It is a figure of speech, a writing technique, in which underlying meanings are the opposite of surface meanings. The writer or speaker uses words that are the opposite of what is really meant. You get the real meaning by examining the context (situation, circumstances) in which the words are spoken or written. Through irony, a writer creates situations which make the reader see the difference between what is said and what they see. The word "ironic" is the adjective; it indicates that something is the reverse of what is stated.

For example if you see a very skinny person and you say: "I think it's time you went on a diet," you are being ironic. You are saying the opposite of what you mean. On the surface you are saying, "you must lose weight" but you really mean, "you need to put on weight."

Why does a writer use words that mean the opposite of what they express? Reversing the meanings of words and situations makes them humorous and makes you look for the truth. Bosman uses irony to point out in a humorous way the ridiculous contradictions in situations. If you don't see that he means the opposite of the words he is using, that he is pointing out the lack of logic in situations, you will not understand his intention and you will miss the meaning as well as the humour in his writing.

You have to look at whole situations to see how words express the opposite of what is happening or being said in order to see the humour.

In the first paragraph of *Unto Dust*, Bosman describes the death of a young girl as something “beautiful and touching ... sweet wistfulness.” Then he presents the reader with a contradictory version in the words “a couple of plain clothes men”, “crude questions” “cattle dip”. These indicate that the death was the opposite of sweet and beautiful. And the whole situation is ironic because the people at the funeral do not wish to face the reality of a horrible death, probably a gruesome suicide. Instead they wish to pretend that because she was young, she was innocent and her death, though unfortunate, was tender and sweet.

The pretence is ironic and amusing. We, the readers, feel superior because we can see the hypocrisy and we laugh.

Then Bosman moves on to describe how happy Andries Wessels is to die because he knows he is going to heaven as he is having visions of “heavenly hosts” and “choirs of angels.” When he describes the angels as having “cloven hoofs” and carrying “forks”, Bosman is showing us the opposite. It is the devil that has cloven hoofs and carries a fork. So Andries is not seeing angels; he is actually seeing devils. That means he is not going to heaven but to hell. His past life was the opposite of what he says it was; he was not a good man who had trodden “a blameless path.” His visions indicate the opposite of what he believes. The situation is ironic because he does not realise that he has confused devils with angels.

His confusion of angels with devils is funny; even funnier is his pretence that he was a good man; but most amusing of all is that he is unaware of how he has confused good with evil [“angels with cloven hoofs and carrying forks”] and his belief in himself as good when he is really sinful. The fact that he is unaware and we, the readers, are aware, makes this what is known as *dramatic irony*.

After this ironic introduction of attitudes to death, Bosman turns to the main incident in *Unto Dust* – the story of the deaths of two men, one white, one black. The title, *Unto Dust*, comes from the following quotation in the Bible, Genesis 3:19: “dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” When God made Adam and Eve he gave them everlasting life but when they disobeyed him, he cursed them with death – they would not live forever, they were subject to death. They were made of dust and would become dust again.

Bosman’s story is based on the idea that if we all return to dust then we are all equal in death. But Oom Stoffel Westhuizen, who tells the story of the deaths of the African, a black man, and the Afrikaner, a white man, believes that Afrikaners are superior to Africans so the dust of Afrikaners is superior to the dust of Africans. This belief is what Bosman is laughing at in this story. How does one tell the difference between one pile of dust and another? And that’s what the story boils down to; the ridiculous attempt to divide dust into one pile that is superior and another that is inferior.

The story has two narrators; Oom Schalk Lourens is the narrator of *Unto Dust*. He talks to the reader and tells us the whole story. The other narrator is Oom Stoffel Westhuizen who talks to Oom Schalk Lourens and tells him the story of Hans Welman and the African warrior who died in the war between Africans and Boers many years before.

Oom Stoffel tells Oom Schalk that he saw the African warrior kill Hans Welman, then strip the body and put on Welman’s clothing. When he saw the African putting on Hans Welman’s clothes, he shot him and the black man’s body fell next to the white man’s body. When the war was over, some six months later, Oom Stoffel with a party of Boers went out to retrieve Welman’s body. All they found was a heap of bones and couldn’t tell which bones belonged to the white man and which to the black man. They all looked the same. Stoffel says, “the little party of Boers spent almost a whole afternoon with the remains in order to try to get the white man sorted out

from the kafir.” Eventually they took home what they hoped were the white man’s bones and buried them in a special grave: “... we Boers had properly marked out places on our farms for white people to be laid to rest in, in a civilized Christian way, instead of being buried just anyhow, along with a dead wild cat, maybe, or a Bushman with a claypot, and things.” (*Bosman at his Best*, 134)

Oom Stoffel and the men “felt very bitter about this whole affair.” (136) And their bitterness is really a cover for the fact that they have no idea whose bones they have brought back to be buried and no one dares to challenge them. “They wanted somebody – just once – to make a remark such as ‘in death they were not divided’. Then you would have seen an outburst all right.” (136) [‘in death they were not divided’ is from the Bible and refers to the deaths of King Saul and his sons who died together.]

But one night, Oom Stoffel saw the African warrior’s dog on Welman’s grave. It really startled him; he draws no conclusion from this except to say it was strange. Bosman leaves it to us to draw the conclusion. Clearly the dog knows whose bones are in that grave. So the story ends in a superb irony. In the grave lie the bones of the African man buried in “a civilized Christian way.” And we must conclude that Helman’s bones are lying “just anyhow, along with a dead wild cat, maybe, or a Bushman with a claypot, and things.” Of course, Oom Stoffel and his friends will never admit to that.

Unto Dust clearly demonstrates what both Oom Lourens and Oom Stoffel deny – that all people are made equal in death. Both Oom Lourens and Oom Stoffel are people who believe in the superiority of white people and in this story their racist attitudes are shown to be ridiculous. You may be put off by their use of the word ‘kafir’, but you must remember that this is how racists express themselves. And in this story, Bosman is making fun of racists.

Reference

Herman Charles Bosman. "Unto Dust." Lionel Abrahams, ed. 1965. *Bosman at his Best*. Cape Town: Human and Rousseau. 133-7.

MRS DOUBTFIRE

On the day after Robin William's death, I watched the film *Mrs Doubtfire*. I could hear echoes in my head of *Pagliacci* and *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* – stories about men who cover up the anguish of betrayed love, while they play the parts of clowns. In the opera, *Pagliacci*, the clown expresses his anguish in the aria *Vesti la giubba* (*Put on the costume*) and putting on the costume becomes the motif of the film, *Mrs Doubtfire*.

A modern day version of the *Pagliacci* story, *Mrs Doubtfire* is not melodramatic and is more complex as it focuses on the clown-man in whom fantasy and reality are confused. The film presents the process of untangling the clown from the man, so that his life can become reality, not performance.

The confusion of life with art, make-believe with reality, tragedy with comedy, the concrete with the abstract is presented in an intriguing pattern of contrasts and reversals. *Mrs Doubtfire* is the story of Daniel Hillard, who cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality. As an actor, a voice-over artist ("I do voices"), he plays a variety of entertaining comic characters and comes to see himself as more loved and valued as a clown than as himself. So he adopts the persona of the clown in real life, and becomes a performer both off- and on-stage.

His fear that his real self is not as engaging as his fictional self, emanates from his success as an actor. Actors in themselves are fusions of art and life; they are real people who turn themselves into fictional characters. They are chosen for their resemblance to the roles they play, and they tend to play similar types of roles over and over. Clint Eastwood, for example, tends to cast himself as this macho maverick, unconventional hero with a cavalier attitude to women, but really a noble character deep down. Playing the same or

similar roles over and over, it is probably easy to lose track of reality; become the character and lose the real person – especially as it is not clear whether the popularity of actors emanates from who they are or whom they play.

The temptation must be strong to adopt the character in real life as it is the character in the actor, rather than the actor as himself, that fans know. Daniel Hillard, the clown in *Mrs Doubtfire*, always plays comic roles and makes people laugh. And since it is gratifying to be able to make people laugh, he becomes a clown in real life. Joking and outrageous behaviour become his way of interacting with people off-stage; his way of establishing relationships. He does not wear a clown suit that one can see; his disguise is his clowning. So “putting on the costume” in his case, means putting on the persona of the clown.

As a clown, Daniel is only a caricature; he is loved as entertainment but not for himself. And mistaking the applause for appreciation of the real person, he cannot stop performing. For him the show never ends. The audience, i.e. his friends and family, in particular, his wife, don't want or need an endless performance. They don't want endless suspension of disbelief; the show has to come to an end. As a clown, he is a show, a performance, unreal, but for him that is his reality. The applause makes it so. When he stops performing, there is no applause and he feels he is nothing. His clowning, therefore, is also a cover-up for feelings of inadequacy.

Paradoxically, when he does actually put on a clown suit, his clowning stops. Consciously playing a role in real life, brings about a complete reversal. As the fictitious *Mrs Doubtfire*, he is reduced to one voice and has to be a consistent human being who exists within social conventions. Though the voice is a false voice, it speaks what is conventionally true.

Playing *Mrs Doubtfire* in real life, not on stage, forces him to distinguish between fantasy and fiction. Having to put on the

mask – i.e. the body, face, hair and persona – a precarious disguise – having to don and doff it continually, brings home to him the artificiality of the role. Portraying a woman, and a much older woman, is a persona that he cannot adopt in real life. The bus driver's interest in him – reinforced by the songs, *Dude looks like a lady*, *Walk like a man* – makes that clear. So the role though it is fantasy, forces him to confront himself and what is real. And he discovers himself as a man and a father.

In learning to separate reality from fiction, he learns to function in the real world. He changes, is less self-absorbed and becomes a human being capable of establishing real relationships. Freed from the control of the fictional character of the clown, he becomes himself in real life and the clown is relegated to fantasy in the fiction of a TV series.

Seeing the film at the time of Robin Williams's suicide, however, gave it a further twist. It turned the more or less happy ending, the reversion to reality in the film, into a fiction within a fiction. I wonder what happened to Robin Williams, the man, who played Daniel Hillard, the character, also a comic actor, who learned to differentiate between fantasy and reality.

Hillard's life ends in normality not in death as in the opera, *Pagliacci*, or in the film *Laugh, Clown, Laugh*. But Robin Williams' death imitates those earlier fictions and becomes a mystery that returns us to the life-art confusion.

GURU PILLAY: IT'S A COLOURFUL WORLD

Adapted from a family biography, *The Keshwars from Dundee*, that I wrote towards the end of the first decade of the new millennium, this essay details the consequences of holding the mirror up to apartheid. *It's a Colourful World*, a comic revue, written by Guru Pillay in 1970, reflected the absurdities of apartheid. In the short period of its run, though audiences found it hilarious, the apartheid government was not amused. Black theatre, in general, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, despite stringent attempts to control it, continued relentlessly to reflect the injustices of systemic and individual racism. Though most black playwrights remain unknown, they were as relentless as guerrillas in attacking the system.

This is an account of one such theatre venture in Durban that crossed the colour line in its appeal and for that reason primarily was regarded as a serious threat by the government.

In the nineteen-sixties theatre, like everything else in South Africa, was segregated. Though black theatre groups had no proper theatre venues, facilities or funding, they were not deterred. African theatre groups were active in the townships and African, Indian and Coloured actors came into the Durban city centre to put on plays in all kinds of venues: hotel lounges, school and community halls and cinemas –in those days cinemas still had screens that hung over stages. One venue used regularly was the Bolton Hall at the corner of Albert and Queen Streets. The Bolton Hall, a Trade Union Hall, was a popular venue for meetings of organisations opposed to apartheid. It was here that the Brian Brooke Theatre Company, in defiance of racist laws and attitudes, performed to non-racial audiences in the 1950s. In 1954, their production of Cecil William's play, *The*

Kimberley Train, depicted the experiences of a play-white Coloured woman who is unmasked and humiliated.

Despite segregation laws, there was a tradition of non-racialism among fringe theatre groups in the 1960s and that invited the attention of the Special Branch; rehearsals and productions were kept under surveillance. And there was continuous harassment of Black and mixed theatre groups. The banning of the revue *It's a Colourful World* was typical. But the attempt to reverse the banning order in a court battle, was unusual.

Guru Pillay, very active in theatre at the time and involved with the theatre group MAD (Music And Drama), devised and wrote *It's a Colourful World*. He explains how he came up with the concept:

We met at our workshop in Prince Edward Street and began to toss around a few ideas for a show. It was at this workshop in 1970 that I suggested that we write a revue on the whole concept of colour. I knew that people were interested in any issue dealing with colour.

I then wrote *It's a Colourful World* in a matter of three weeks. I found it very easy to write. The revue dealt with colour in all its aspects, social, political, sexual, love across the colour line, sport, race, marriage, colour consciousness among Indians, even took the colour issue to a philosophical plane!

It was very funny and at the same time poetic and philosophical. I stuck strictly to the subject of colour, and never deviated from that theme. As one newspaper critic put it: "The entire revue deals with colour and yet one never gets tired of it."

Herby Govind/en and his team of musicians set the lyrics to music.

The revue became the talk of the town, and for the first time I saw queues forming outside Bolton Hall in

the way people queue to enter a cinema.
(Guru Pillay, August 2010)

This is what Professor Herby Govinden, composer of the score and musical director, remembers about *It's a Colourful World*.

Benjy Francis discussed the script with me, asking me to consider writing the musical score. I hadn't been involved in such a venture before. I had composed music for schools (anthems), and had written liturgical church music. The script of *It's a Colourful World* was unique and challenging and I did request Guru's permission to adapt/amend the lyrics while I was 'experimenting with my musical ideas. I had a fairly good grounding in western classical and popular music as well as in church music – performance (piano and organ) and theory – light classical (shades of operas by Gilbert & Sullivan), jazz and rock.

Maynard Peters who was one of the directors kept track of the musical score while it was being written and 'tried out' during rehearsals. Peter Somasundram and Andy Joseph also contributed ideas – and even wrote some of the songs which I incorporated into the score. A group of musicians performing on piano, keyboard, guitars and percussion provided background music and accompaniment during the show. The audiences responded enthusiastically and there were some very encouraging newspaper reviews. (Herby Govinden, September 2010)

It's a Colourful World took Durban by storm. It was a smash hit: unique, original and very entertaining; it presented the absurdities of living with racial and colour discrimination. The show opened on Friday, 22 January 1971, played to full houses, had to be extended and seemed on a limitless run. The main actors, Maynard Peters, Barrie Shah and Benjy Francis received great acclaim for their performances.

The following newspaper reviews, (transcribed from Andy Joseph's scrapbook) tell, with the freshness of the times, the impact of the musical on Durban audiences.

The show, originally planned for a run of one week, received such tremendous support that it was indeed extended. It played to packed houses for three weeks. Ironically, its great success spelled its doom. As a "non-White" show playing to multi-racial audiences and lampooning colour prejudice, it could not survive in a racist environment.

**22 January 1971 (Leader/Graphic?)
'WORLD' at the Bolton**

The controversial "*It's a Colourful World*" comes on at the Bolton Hall today (Friday).

Based on everyday South African situations, the musical revue says all colour is beautiful. An interesting aspect of the show is the music which is all original and significant. Durban-born Andy Joseph, brother of South Africa's well-known pianist, Chris Joseph, is on the piano. Andy has been responsible for composing some of the music. On organ is Peter Somasundram who has also composed music for the show. Both Andy and Peter have a distinct taste for jazz.

**Sunday Tribune: 24 January 1971
Review by I. G.**

SWINGING SATIRE

**REVUE: *The Mad show - It's a Colourful World*
(Bolton Hall, Durban)**

The Music and Drama (MAD) group has produced a completely original satirical revue that really swings. The music is tuneful and the dancing, if a trifle undisciplined, is lively and attractively presented.

The theme is Colour with a capital "C". Sketches, for instance, include "The Black and White Song", "Colour! Colour!", "Why Can't The Blacks Be Like the Whites?",

“All Holds Colour-barred” and “It’s a Colourful World”, which gives the show a swinging finale.

Most of the sketches could stand considerable pruning – they are far too wordy. But it is original and clever and in parts very funny – like the no-contact boxing match between Black and White. It also carries a let’s-get-together message.

Several artists showed exceptional talent and of the individual acts I thought Barrie Shah’s “My Little White Friend” was beautifully sung.

Rating: Swingingly different.

Daily News, Monday, 25 January 1971
Review by Roy Christie
REVUE MERITS NATIONAL ACCLAIM

An extraordinary event is occurring this week at the Bolton Hall in Durban, and by rights it should be packed every night by White South Africans. After all, it’s not often that Whites have a chance to see the mickey taken – with surgical accuracy – out of the colour bar by the people who are on the wrong side of it.

I refer to *It’s a Colourful World*, an original South African revue, presented by the Music and Drama group, a gathering of non-White Durban talent.

On the basis of what I have seen, however, I believe that *It’s a Colourful World* should be presented in Johannesburg and Cape Town – that it should receive national attention, in fact.

It is a strange experience, as a White man, to sit in the audience and have to identify with the target of the caste’s (sic) satirical barbs. There’s a peculiar poignancy involved, particularly when the sometimes savage shafts are softened by a patent spirit of goodwill.

If you do not have a white skin in South Africa, there is nothing abstract about the Department of

Community Development, or the Group Areas Act, or the law which forbids you to co-habit with your wife or girl-friend while she's staying on her White employer's property.

There is one shockingly hilarious routine in which French bedroom farce blends with the permutations of the Immorality Act. And the melodic lament, *A Pair of White Legs*, has the bitter-sweet whiff of reality.

A sketch which is superbly successful satire features Maynard Peters as a nutty surgeon, Barrie Shah as his female assistant and Benjy Francis as a White man they have decided to dissect to see what makes him tick. Just as the mad doctor is about to take the man apart, Barrie warns him: "He probably hasn't got a heart..."

The revue is a completely original offering, largely from the pen of Guru Pillay.

Natal Mercury, Friday, 29 January 1971

CRITICS' CORNER -

Revue - It's a Colourful World

"*It's a Colourful World*" or "How to write a satirical, musical revue dealing with South Africa's prime obsession without really offending anyone, and still get the digs in." That is how this might be seen, and the strange thing is, it really works.

As a revue on colour by a Coloured group, MAD – Music and Drama – this little musical jollification has points that are highly entertaining and educative for any whites who have the good sense to go and see it.

It comments on Whites, apartheid, Western culture and what apartheid does to people who are not White. But the tone is such that the qualities that might be expected, bitterness and malice, are not even suggested. It is also very entertaining and, in places, very funny.

...The inevitable Blaar is dealt with thus – “Blaar, Blaar, Black Sheep, have you had your fill? No, sir, no, sir, there are houses still.’

And there is a hilarious revelation of Indian colour consciousness in the skit where the dark Baba refuses to marry a nice Indian girl because she’s black.

The music is effective enough and in two numbers, “A Pair of White Legs” and “My Little White Friend,” it is outstanding.

In the long run, the final measure of its success as an entertainment, and not a polemic, is that as a two-hour revue, the sole emphasis of which is on one subject, colour, one is never weary of that subject. The show has its last performance tonight. D.C.M.

Natal Mercury, January 1971,

“Mercury” Reporter

Revue may extend its run

The original revue “*It’s a Colourful World*” presented by the Music and Drama group at the Bolton Hall in Durban has extended its run until Saturday, and “might continue for longer if the present good attendances are maintained.”

There is a possibility that the revue will be seen in Pietermaritzburg after its Durban run.

The above article appears next to a photograph of a scene from the show. The caption reads:

THE SONG “Western Culture” ends a satirical sketch which analyses the White man and discovers that “he is just a human man.” It is one of the items in “*It’s a Colourful World*”, whose run has been extended in Durban. (From top) Maynard Peters, Benjay (sic) Francis and Barrie Shah.

Just as the show entered its fourth week, it received a sledgehammer blow that brought it to a sudden halt. On Wednesday, 17 February 1971, the Publications Control Board banned the script of *It's a Colourful World* on the grounds that it undermined morality and was offensive to White people. Since White reviewers had declared the show innocuous, the banning came as a great shock.

A pall settled over the group. The euphoria of a runaway success gave way to anxiety and fear. MAD was suddenly forced to confront the brutal reality of living under racist rule. The show, an entertaining send-up of colour prejudice, was a show, a simulation, not real, and very funny. The banning was a slap in the face that forced the group to acknowledge real prejudice. People like Guru, a teacher in the employ of the government, silently contemplated the possibility of reprisals. Surveillance, detention and interrogation loomed large in the minds of all. They had assumed the freedom of expression of artists. Now they were awakened to the stark realisation that it was not theirs. They had stepped out of line and their criticism of racism, however innocuous, had been met with the might of the State. Freedom of expression was a privilege that did not extend to “non-Whites.” South Africa was indeed a colourful world and offstage colour was not entertaining or innocuous.

At first members met at their workshop in Prince Edward Street and at Good Hope Centre in a spirit of mourning, but anger overtook self-pity and activated them. True they were “Coloured”^{*} but they were not ciphers; they would fight back. They had recourse to the law. But it was apartheid law, and that meant taking their challenge to racism from the stage and into the courts.

^{*} The terms ‘non-White’ and ‘Coloured’ appear in newspaper reports of the show. The cast consisted of South Africans of Indian descent.

The following newspaper accounts, transcribed from Andy Joseph's scrapbook, outline MAD's struggle to reinstate *It's a Colourful World*.

Natal Mercury, Thursday, 18 February 1971
BUT REVUE CAN GO ON!
Political Reporter

The Publications Control Board has banned the script of the satirical revue "*It's a Colourful World*" – but not the show itself! The board's chairman, Mr J. Kruger, was not very sure yesterday whether the show had been banned or not. At first he said it was "not true."

Then he checked and confirmed that the script of the entire revue had been banned. The producers of the show are to appeal against the decision which only comes into operation when it has been published in a Government Gazette. They have been told that all the scripts have to be sent to the Group Areas Board offices in Durban by Monday.

...They (the producers) were told of the banning by officials of the Group Areas Board in Durban, after receiving a letter which read: "Kindly call at the Group Areas Branch Office, Masonic Grove, Durban, on 17/2/71 at 9 a.m. sharp re show 'Colorful (sic) World', and see Detective Warrant Officer van der Walt". The letter was written on a page from an exercise book.

Fifteen minutes before the show was due to start last night, the doors of the Bolton Hall were closed and there was no sign of activity inside. There was no queue to see the show.

Meanwhile, critics in the show world have labelled the banning as a blow for South African theatre, and have pointed out that a gloomy future probably lies ahead for theatre in the country.

The vice-chairman of the Young Progressives, Mr Trevor Moodie, said last night that the only motive for the banning he could think of was political. "There is nothing immoral, disgusting or perverted about it."

Natal Mercury, 18 February 1971
Show had laughs but no hatred
By Doug Morrison

When I reviewed the show, on January 25, what struck me most about it was its lack of anything that could be construed as offensive except to someone who found it offensive to point out the flaws in a White-imposed system.

Although its subject matter would appear to be perfect for expressing hatred, particularly for apartheid and whites, what was expressed was compassion and understanding.

It was also very funny and the audience that night appreciated it for that at least.

Daily News, Wednesday, 24 February 1971
FUGARD ATTACKS SCRIPT BANNING
By Roy Christie

ATHOL FUGARD, the distinguished South African playwright today pledged R50 toward the costs of the appeal against the banning of the script of "*It's a Colourful World*" the Durban non-White musical revue.

Speaking to me by telephone from Cape Town, Mr. Fugard said he regarded the banning of the script as "absolutely outrageous."

In his view the musical was quite inoffensive and, in fact, was characterised by "the qualities of understanding and compassion by these people, who after all are at the receiving end of colour prejudice".

M.A.D.

Mr. Fugard is closely associated with “*It’s a Colourful World*”, for it was his personal dynamism which inspired members of M.A.D. – the Music and Drama group – to set about the creation of an original revue. While in Durban last July he exhorted the group to establish their own theatrical identity. “*It’s a Colourful World*” is the direct result of that appeal.

Daily News, Thursday, 25 February 1971.

Shows without words: A new art?

Political Correspondent

CAPE TOWN, Thursday. AN OPPOSITION MP predicted today that stage shows in South Africa might be reduced to silent mime if the Publications Board continues to ban scripts of productions but not the shows themselves.

Mr. L. G. Murray, M.P. for Green Point and chairman of the United Party’s interior group in the Assembly, was referring to one of the board’s latest decisions – the banning of the script of a satirical revue in Durban.

Mr Kruger said today that only the text of the show’s script had been submitted to the board – and that the board had only considered this script as a publication.

He said that the board did not give reasons for a banning and no details were given of passages it objected to. When asked how a show could proceed without a script, Mr. Kruger said that was for the producers to decide.

Mr. Murray said today that the board’s decision raised the interesting possibility for the theatre that shows might now be reduced to silent mime because of the banning of the script.

Then MAD decided to put on two performances of the show. The matter was still before the Courts and the banning had not yet been gazetted so performances were still legal. Nevertheless, re-opening the show was regarded as an act of defiance.

**Daily News (26) February 1971
REVUE ON AGAIN FROM FRIDAY**

By Roy Christie

THE HIT non-White musical, "*It's a Colourful World*," is to be presented to the public once again from Friday night onward while the script dispute with the censors goes on appeal.

The revue was staged on Friday, 26 February and Saturday, 27 February.

**The Natal Mercury – 3 March 1971
BOARD TO SEE SHOW?**

Political Reporter

THE Publications Control Board will investigate any further performances of the satirical revue, "*It's a Colourful World*." They banned the script a fortnight ago. ...

Chairman of the Board Mr. Jannie Kruger told me from Cape Town yesterday that if the show was being performed, and the cast was still using the banned script, even if only from memory, "then we will have to have a look at this."

...it seems likely that members of the Publications Control Board will be making a trip to Durban to see the show for themselves. If they felt that it was necessary they could then ban the revue as a stage show.

...Mr. Francis told me that the decision to stage the

show, which played to multi-racial houses, had been taken only after legal advice had been sought.

...Referring to the fact that there had been no attempt on Friday or Saturday to stop the show, in spite of wide publicity, he said: "Mr. Kruger's original comment that the script was banned but the show could go on, seems to have been correct."

...The producers of the show hope to take it on tour in Natal, and if possible, throughout the country.

Though MAD had taken the decision to proceed with the show, the banning had undermined the cast. Members felt intimidated and the show did not continue after the two performances on 26 and 27 February.

Daily News, 8 March 1971.

BANNED REVUE CLOSES

Daily News Reporter

THE non-White revue, "*It's a Colourful World*", whose Producers defied the censors by playing in Durban after the script was banned, will not be seen again.

The parents of some of the cast fear Government reprisals should the show go on, it was said today. ... A few of the cast, who had previous commitments, had to leave the show anyway. One of those was the pianist whom the producers have found impossible to replace.

In July, Guru Pillay, the playwright, brought an appeal against the Publications Control Board in the Supreme Court. Mr. D. J. Shaw, QC, with Mr H. E. Mall (instructed by R.S. Pather and Mehta) appeared for Mr Pillay. Mr W. H. Booysen (instructed by the Deputy State Attorney) appeared for the board.

Natal Mercury, 27 July 1971
COURT ASKED TO CLEAR SHOW SCRIPT
Court Reporter

AN APPEAL against the Publication Control Board's banning of the Script of the satirical revue "*It's a Colourful World*," which played to multi-racial audiences in Durban in January, was heard by Mr. Justice Muller in the Supreme Court, Durban, yesterday.

...The revue was written by Mr. Ayya Gurusami Pillay, a teacher, and was staged by the amateur theatrical group Music and Drama in Durban from January 22 to February 13 this year... The revue satirises the Immorality Act, separate sport and job reservation, as well as snobbery among Indians.

Mr. Pillay, in his affidavit, said he was a member of the Music and Drama group and at its request wrote "*It's a Colourful World*."...He asked the Court to find that the script was not a publication or object in terms of the Publication and Entertainment Act and that its banning was ultra vires and invalid.

The unfailing reference to Guru Pillay as a teacher, i.e. a government employee, was a subtle form of intimidation. His appearance in the Supreme Court would have demanded fortitude and courage.

Natal Mercury, 30 July 1971.
REVUE APPEAL DISMISSED
Court Reporter

THE satirical musical revue "*It's a Colourful World*" undermined respect for the Immorality Act by holding it up to ridicule and was likely to induce some members of the audience not to obey the Act, a Durban Judge decided yesterday.

Mr. Justice Muller dismissed an appeal by the author of the revue, Mr. Ayya Gurusami Pillay, a schoolteacher, against a ruling of the Publications Control Board

declaring the script of the play to be undesirable.

The Judge also found that the revue was “offensive and harmful to public morals” and was harmful to race relations and prejudicial to the general welfare.

...“A large section of our population (White and Coloured) hold the view that it is perfectly proper to segregate the various races. On the other hand, a large section of our population (White and Coloured) hold the view that the Immorality Act is inhuman.”

The Judge said that in terms of the Act all behaviour of a sexual nature between white and Coloured persons was regarded as immoral and was prohibited. It was the policy of the State, expressed in the Act, to maintain the races distinct.

The matter was taken on appeal to the Supreme Court.

Daily News, 30 July 1971 (Stop Press)
BOARD’S FINDING UPHELD

Mr Justice Muller today upheld findings of Publications Control Board that satirical musical revue “It’s a Colourful World” was undesirable in terms of Publications and Entertainments Act.

Judge said in Supreme Court, Durban, play brought White section of South Africa into ridicule or contempt and was harmful to race relations. He dismissed with costs appeal by author of script, Durban Indian teacher, Mr. Ayya Gurusamy Pillay.

The Judge of the Supreme Court, bound by apartheid law, dispensed the only form of justice possible to a “non-White” group that dared to lampoon racism in the South Africa of the time. Had *It’s a Colourful World* been an inferior show and not so popular, it probably would not have attracted any attention. But being an outstanding piece of work, it was doomed.

With the banning of *It's a Colourful World*, members of the group lost the confidence and high spirits with which they had set about establishing non-racial theatre.

We enjoyed a remarkably long season – indicating that our experience was worthwhile. Who knows what more we could have done were it not for the banning orders due, no doubt, to the presence of the Special Branch whose presence was conspicuous among the audience! (Herby Govinden, September 2010)

MAD is part of Durban's hidden theatre history, the history of the many groups that operated without the support of the State, the Universities and other institutions. They survived on the energy and exuberance of their members. MAD was one among many transient groups of players that continuously popped up and disappeared after a few years in an on-going theatre movement that persisted under the mainstream. Though the creative drive with its impetus towards the establishment of indigenous theatre could not be extinguished, much of the work of these revolutionary artists did not survive. What a pity to have lost *It's a Colourful World*.

HELEN MARTINS: OUTSIDER-ARTIST

After reading Athol Fugard's play, *The Road to Mecca*, I wanted to know more about Helen Martins. The portrayal of her in the play presents her as a conventional little old woman. I became curious as I believe artists to be unconventional human beings and Helen Martins was unconventional even as an artist. She is called an Outsider Artist.

The term outsider art was coined by art critic Roger Cardinal in 1972 as an English synonym for **art brut** ... ("raw art" or "rough art"), a label created by French artist Jean Dubuffet to describe art created outside the boundaries of official culture; Dubuffet focused particularly on art by those on the outside of the established art scene, such as psychiatric hospital patients and children.

While Dubuffet's term is quite specific, the English term "outsider art" is often applied more broadly, to include certain self-taught or naïve art makers who were never institutionalized. Typically, those labelled as outsider artists have little or no contact with the mainstream art world or art institutions. In many cases, their work is discovered only after their deaths. Often, outsider art illustrates extreme mental states, unconventional ideas, or elaborate fantasy worlds. (Wikipedia)

As Helen Martin created art without reference to established art norms, was she unconventional only as artist not as human being? Fugard portrays her as a confident artist at the end of the play; but at the beginning shows her as a typical old woman, allowing herself to be bullied. The bullying is gentle, in the form of an offer of a conventional solution to the problems of growing old; it ignores the reality

of her existence as an artist. She is being subjected to societal norms that regard the old as having no purpose in life, being helpless, child-like and needing to be baby-sat while they wait for death.

And it is a dominee, curator of convention, Marius Byleveld, doing the bullying, while she sits tongue-tied, a weak woman who cannot confront a strong man. Ironically, his strength comes from his compassion; he genuinely wants to protect her but he looks with ordinary eyes at an extraordinary human being who is beyond his understanding; he is trying to drag her into a normality that she has long rejected. How can he understand anyone who is a challenge to fixed understandings of existence? She sees the words, “God”, “Heaven”, “Hell” as “stones”. For a man of the church this is blasphemy. Elsa, her friend, says that Marius loves Helen as a man loves a woman. That sums him up as a man whose instincts are divorced from reason. He could never understand a woman like Helen. His love for her is an instinctive response to the freedom that emanates from her being, from the enlightenment that comes with creativity. But as a conventional man, he does not understand it and cannot not give himself that kind of freedom. He translates it into conventional terms of sexual attraction. He unwittingly loves her for her unconventionality even though he is trying to extinguish it. “I am trying to go. It’s not easy ... trying to find the first moment of a life that must be lived out in the shadow of something that is terribly wrong.” (74) He cannot see that they are totally incompatible; that what he is offering “is terribly wrong” for her.

According to all accounts of her life, Helen Martins was an artist driven to create, and she fulfilled this need without reference to outside acknowledgment, recognition, encouragement – in fact she created in the midst of suspicion, derision and hostility. In the play, Helen’s creativity is presented as a mystical compulsion, divorced from conscious effort. She waits for a complete vision of that to which she must give form and must capture it immediately before it fades from her mind. This view of her creativity turns her into a

kind of Virgin Mary, into a vehicle for her creations rather than the author of them.

In reality, Helen Martins was inspired by writings in the Bible, the poetry of Omar Khayyam and William Blake – indicating that her creativity, which expressed her passion, was distilled through the processing of thoughts and ideas. As her artistic vision was given form by others, Johannes Pienaar, Koos Malgas, it had to be consciously formulated in order to be transmitted.

Fugard's play is itself based on thinking processes; external stimuli were consciously merged into form. In "A Note on Miss Helen," the foreword to the play, he admits to knowing her story; was stimulated to explore it on receiving a request from an actress for a play about two women, and on seeing a photograph of Helen and her friend (Elsa in the play) who struck him as:

"a very strong, a very remarkable person, with a strong social conscience, a strong sense of what South Africa was about, a strong sense of outrage at what was wrong with it. **I couldn't help thinking** (my emphasis) of the anomaly of this sort of stern decency in encountering the almost feudal world of new Bethesda. (*The Road to Mecca*)

Art is informed by passion and thought. Perhaps Fugard regards Outsider Art as mystical because it does not reflect the logic of Art as developed in its institutionalisation. The Owl House reflects Helen Martins' logic to which we do not have the usual institutionalised access but that does not mean it is not the product of thought processes.

Fugard's play is set in the years when Helen Martins was going blind and finding it difficult to continue her artistic work. She accepts that she is coming to the end of her creativity but she will not end her life waiting to die.

In real life she did not.

While Jill and Miss Helen wrote her will together Jill asked Miss Helen if she was afraid of dying, to which she replied that "...when you get older, you realise that dying isn't the problem. Living is the problem... My agony would be to 'live dying' without being able to work" (Mitchell,33)

And she did not wait for death; she embraced it. Helen Martins drank a mixture of caustic soda and crushed glass and suffered for three days before she died. Caustic soda by itself is lethal; it was a fairly well-known way to commit suicide in those days. Why did she add crushed glass? Crushed glass was a substance she used in her art. The walls and windows of her home were transformed by a mixture of paint and crushed glass into reflections of colour and light. Did she add crushed glass to the caustic soda to turn herself into an art work in death? To overcome the "darkness" that would end her creativity? To turn death into a reflection of light?

Whatever one may think of her suicide, it was a conscious act to bring her life to a meaningful end. I find in the suicide an act of creation. What I have read about Helen Martins, forces me to reject the view of her death as a moment of despair. She was a woman who had turned her existence into a work of art in the face of rigid conservatism. And she was inspired by her own understanding of the Bible, by what she had learned from Omar Khayyam and William Blake. She was the personification of the unconventional. She was not in need of women's liberation; she experienced freedom at the highest level. Her unconventional life expressed this freedom.

Consequently, I cannot see her suicide simply as a form of surrender to the inevitable – the blindness that would end her creativity. Her suicide may have been weakness in one sense but, in another, it was strength – the strength of a human being giving her own unique definition to her life – the final touch that turns death into the completion of artistic endeavour.

In the play, Helen's freedom stems from her creativity. To me it seems to be the other way around. Helen's nonconformity was her freedom; it stimulated her desire to create both her way of life as well as her art work.

“... Miss Helen demonstrated a disregard for the social conventions of her context. Even though her father was opposed to the marriage, she proceeded to get married, and she did so in a private dwelling instead of in a church. This was an action which would have been highly frowned upon by her church-orientated community. She befriended and visited coloured people. As this occurred during the time of apartheid, her involvement with coloured people violated the social code. In addition, she illegally made and sold liquor to coloured individuals. Also, after the death of her mother she refused to take any responsibility with regard to the care for her decrepit father. ... Miss Helen also (had a) quarrelsome friendship with Miss Frances. (Elsa in the play)” (Mitchell, 48)

Helen in the play is not that unconventional. In the play, Helen's husband is Stephanus and she stays with him till he dies.

The real Helen married Johannes Pienaar and with him went on tour in theatrical performances. They divorced after six incompatible years. Then she went home to look after her ailing parents and stayed with them until they died. Finally freed of that responsibility, she turned her attention to art and began converting her home into an art work. She apparently became involved with Johannes Hattingh, who was helping her transform her home and building the statues she dreamed up. He was a married man. Their affair seemingly continued for twenty years and Helen may have had an abortion or two. It is believed that her marriage to Johannes Jacobus Niemand was her attempt to force Hattingh to leave his wife and children. The marriage to Niemand lasted a few months. When Koos

Malgas came to work with her, she was suspected of being intimately involved with him.

That her existence gave rise to much speculation, attests to her independence; she could not be put into a box. Society resents those who do not bow to its conventions; those who, like Helen, live life according to their own beliefs and requirements. She was clearly a nonconformist – both as artist and human being.

In the play, she is turned into a somewhat stereotypical old person. All the characters appearing or mentioned in the play are made to conform to stereotypical notions. Koos Malgas, the Coloured man who helped her build her statues, is turned into a drunken, abusive husband, and is not acknowledged for his contribution to Helen's Mecca. In the play, he is not Helen's friend; he has a wife, Katrina, who is Helen's friend. Katrina also conforms to the conventional; she is childish, young, trapped in marriage to an abusive husband, has a child and is a servant. Elsa represents the women's lib type, strong-minded, rebellious, defying patriarchal authority. Being somewhat stereotypical black and white women, their depiction carries subconscious racial attitudes.

Helen in the play, exhibiting traits of a weak, old woman, depends on Elsa's strength to help her resist the attempt to draw her into conventional society and a living death. Perhaps it was a need to embrace the cause of liberation for women that determined the invention of Elsa and Katrina. Tying the story to social causes, reduces Helen from a passionate, intrepid artist and formidable human being into a somewhat weak old woman vacillating about the need for life-support.

Helen Martins as a vehicle for women's liberation is a poor substitute for Helen Martins, the Creator.

References

1. Athol Fugard. *The Road to Mecca*. 1985. London: Faber and Faber Limited.
2. Donna Mitchell. *A Psychobiography of Helen Martin*: MA Thesis

I know
no beginning
no ending
not knowing
is not negative
it is the fire
of imagination
of creation
not knowing
is power