

Bloke Modisane

Come Back Africa is the first authentic cinematic record of the system of apartheid in South Africa. It was shot on location ... in the Sophiatown that was destroyed because they said it was a slum, in the shebeens, reeking with sweat and the stench of stale beer, down in the mines in the bowels of the earth.

Only the reckless daring of a man who had the conviction to film *On the Bowery* could have risked so much to make *Come Back, Africa*. Lionel Rogosin dug deep to find his story, penetrated the squalor of the locations to feel the heart-beat of the Africans. He went into the shebeens, the illicit drinking dens and listened as his subjects spoke, sometimes with bitterness and at times with humour, about the injustice, the misery, the poverty that marked their lives. He got drunk with them, and I remember that one evening we dragged him through a ceremony and made him an honorary Zulu, and taught him to do the Zulu war dance.

By the time he was ready to shoot his film we had conditioned him to see black, to feel black and to react black.

But for Lionel Rogosin to be black meant he had to adopt all the problems that attend that colour, and it never occurred to me that morning when he showed up at the office where I worked that I was ^{be} ~~to~~ ^{be} ~~en~~meshed in a gigantic fraud, in a colossal challenge that was to lose me my job and earn me a friend for life.

I was a working journalist on *DRUM Magazine* when I met Lionel Rogosin. He walked up to my desk and said, "My name is Rogosin, a mutual friend ^{asked} ~~as~~ me to look you up." He told me about his project, and I listened courteously. I had met too many people who wanted to make films, dishonest people who had taken African artist for a joy ride at very little cost. Exploitation of black talent by white opportunists is an old story. So I listened to his story and did not believe a word he said. /

The Merry-go-Round

He was having trouble with the Government over visas for his crew, two cameramen and a sound engineer, and for some reason, that was all I needed to believe him ... anybody in trouble with the South African Government was my friend. Lionel Rogosin had to submit to the authorities details of the kind of film he was doing. After Ed G. Murrow's film, *African Conflict*, American film makers were suspect. /

Thus began the great merry-go-round. At one time he was making a travelogue, but the Government wanted to see his commission – the actual contract. Lionel had to live that lie through and produce a contract, a vague, noncommittal commission from an airline company that did not want to be involved. That was thrown out. Then he decided to film an African musical. He took this story to Pretoria, South Africa's executive capital, and weaved a near-plausible tale of presenting the music of Africa to the world, to show that Africans were basically a happy people.

To support his story he went round the locations shooting scenes of penny-whistle troupes, gum-boot dancers, singing troupes, mine dancers, and shot hundreds of feet of film which he was preparing to screen for the department of the interior if ever challenged to do so. The police followed him through the townships, playing it cloak-and-dagger, and reporting all his moves. It came to be quite a game playing up to them.

Three months of this fooling and travelling the 72 miles to Pretoria every other day, the visas were finally granted. But by this time Lionel Rogosin had fed the white papers with a story that he was impressed with Deneys Reitz's book, *The Commando*, and that he wanted to make a film of it. *The Commando* is a loaded account of the Afrikaner war against the English ... the Boer War. The newspapers were enthusiastic over the project, and the government's attitude began to change.

From Zurich came Walter Wettler, sound, and Ernst Artaria, camera man, and from Israel came Emil Knebel, camera man.

For a while the police seemed to be off our backs, and Lionel Rogosin and I set up casting for the film. He did not want professional actors, but he wanted faces, and for two months we looked at faces in the bus queues, in the streets, at the cinemas. We went everywhere looking for a face in the crowd. I began to develop a feel for faces, to set them apart, but compared to Lionel Rogosin, I was in the kindergarten league.

I could not keep up with Lionel Rogosin, being up in the morning and looking at every face that came out the "Native's Entrance" of Johannesburg's Park Station. He brought space in a newspaper and we spent a whole afternoon looking at faces and interviewing probables, but Lionel was not satisfied. He went back to the bus queues and the ironic part of it all was that as Lionel picked a face the African would be terrified and just run – always a man who did not have a Pass, that document of oppression which puts 1 250 000 African males in jail every year. Others suspected he was a Bethal farmer, those notorious traffickers in human lives who lure Africans to jobs with fantastic salaries, the trick labour contracts which are concluded in a rush, then the horror of being shanghaied to a farm and working under slave conditions for anything up to one-and-sixpence a day. As a rule Africans don't talk to strange white men, especially those who are seemingly polite. Being in his company marked me as a traitor.

Then, one morning he rushed up to me with the exciting news that he had found the face he was looking for, but in actual fact he had found more than a face or an actor. He had found Zacharia himself, a country man who had been forced to come to Johannesburg because the land couldn't support his needs. It was a miracle find. Zacharia didn't have to act the part – he just had to be himself, the simple rural African: inarticulate, halting in speech, coarse, very little education, but a tremendous man with a quiet dignity and integrity. And since no dialogue was written into the script he had to improvise all his lines. The words were his own, and so was the grammar and the usage.

The terrifying scene at the end when he finds his screen wife, Vinah, murdered by the villain Marumo, was even more agonising to watch. The script called for him to break down mentally, and in a rage of hysteria to smash up the crockery. The crack-up of the character and the man were so closely linked that we were all terrified at being present at the destruction of a man. It was a nightmare that we could not stop or turn our faces from, and by the time Lionel shouted, "Cut!" we were sick. The scene had come too close to the real thing and it was printed after only two takes.

The tension and the strain began to show on Lionel's face. He was behind schedule, his own visa was about to expire and he feared that the government would kick him out of the country. So he prepared for this eventuality. We held a script conference: Lionel, a young journalist friend of mine called Lewis Nkosi and I, sweated over the script. Discussed, argued and battled at it for hours until we were all satisfied. After this Lionel shot all his exterior shots, the documentary bits that couldn't be done anywhere else.

The cameras were loaded on to cars. The cameras were covered with blankets with the photographers couching behind them, and all the time there was a look-out. The look-out would give the signal and the blankets would go over the cameras and the cars would drive away with Lionel and his white crew looking like tourists out to see how the other half, or rather, how the other three-quarters lived. Soon as the police were gone off would come the blankets and shooting resumed, and when he was doing the safe scenes, like the itinerant musicians or a wedding, the cameras would be mounted on an open van, and sometimes we had the police come round to watch. And always at this point Lionel couldn't resist the temptation of getting the police to help.

Tongue in cheek, he would walk up to them and ask if it was safe for him to shoot in the locations ... was his equipment safe? Was there any danger of being knifed or robbed? At which point the police would advise him to be careful, and in the end he would have the police controlling the crowds that are always drawn by the making of a film. With the police keeping the crowd away from the camera, Lionel would have a whole day of uninterrupted work. And just before sundown he would be advised to stop working because the "Natives" would be drunk and troublesome.

It never failed, and Lewis Nkosi and I would die laughing.

I suppose I should not admit to such a thing in print ... question of honour and all that, but it hadn't occurred to me that I was capable of many unsophisticated lies. A quality of sorts that Lionel and I shared with such generous helpings. People were always asking about the film; they wanted to know what it was all about, and we told them. It was a different story every time, until I couldn't remember which friend I had told which lie. It was stimulating to find a co-conspirator in Lionel Rogosin.

The story of the film was top secret – not even the actors were told: this more as a protection to them rather than a case of trust. If the actors didn't know, then perhaps it would be easier for them in the event of reprisal tactics by the police. Zacharia was blissfully ignorant and religiously dogmatic; he never asked question, just did what was asked of him. The others were sophisticated enough to know and realise the time for ignorance.

After all the tensions and the back-breaking speed of shooting as much as could be done, Lionel and his wife, Eli, got extensions on the visas. And with this endorsement of goodwill in his favour, Lionel became daring. He wanted to shoot the mine sequences, to go down a real mine and shoot the sequences of the training of new recruits, of the men going down the mines, in another world of tunnels and men with flashlights on their foreheads, the actual drilling for gold. And that, for me at any rate, was a high point in the film.

The black of the skin of the miners seemed to flow into the black of the tunnels, and the flashlights on the helmets seemed to move without bodies. Moving one behind the other, and photographed in long shots, gave the impression of a long snake winding in the dark.

The Africans scratched at the bowels of the earth for the gold that is the symbol of South Africa's white prosperity and the fundamental of the greed that oppressed them.

Lionel Rogosin wormed his way into the confidence of a minor official with a glowing account of making a film of South African gold mining, of showing the high technological standard of mining, its efficiency in transforming, by training, rural savages into proficient miners. And so the mine sequences were photographed – a rare privilege to be awarded to a foreign film maker.

The big interior scene, the one featuring Johannesburg's black intellectuals in a shebeen, was tricky and in a way the most dangerous. Lionel wanted it to be authentic: the atmosphere of a shebeen, real liquor, real-life intellectual drunks, a real-life shebeen queen, and a genuine look-out for the police. Liquor laws in South Africa are emphatic: Africans are forbidden to drink by law. This does not, of course, mean the Africans don't drink – in fact, eighty per cent of all liquors distilled in South Africa find their way into the townships. The Africans drink undercover.

Lionel supplied the liquor – illegally, of course, and where and whenever there are free drinks going you'll find Can Themba, Morris Hugh, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane and other brethren of the Bacchus community, that a mutual friend, Nimrod Mkele describes as: displaced intellectuals in search of morality. With all immodesty I wish to add that that scene was the most authentic, for at the end when the shebeen queen throws us out, the wobbling and the leaning on each other was the real thing. And the reason, at all, that the scene came to an end was due to the under-sight of Lionel Rogosin who had undercatered.

If the police had surprised that sequence there would have been no Come Back, Africa; Lionel would have been jailed for supplying liquor to Natives, and the Natives would have been convicted of being in possession of liquor. But we were lucky: we had a good look-out and the scene was shot in the most improbable place ever – in the class-room of a mission school on mission grounds.

We couldn't find a Sophiatown room, preferable a shebeen, big enough for two cameras to truck back and forward, and after days of sweating out the problem I suggested the mission school.

Lionel Rogosin's final problem was to find processing laboratories that would develop his films without a special copy being rushed to the security police. The only one technically equipped to do the job was at Irene, a suburb of Pretoria, and the studio was known to have a big contract with the state information department. So only the safe reels were sent there for development and then rushed to New York for processing, but the dynamite was sent straight to New York.

When it was all over and the rushes sent to New York we had a big illegal party, where white and black drank together, danced together and got drunk together, and I think I saw Lionel Rogosin smile genuinely: not just with the mouth, but with the eyes, the face, and his whole body. He had survived it all, and the hoax, the lies, the deceptions were all justified in his bold stating of the African's case.