



# LIVES: SOUTH AFRICAN RITES

In a former office of apartheid, a very civil union.

BY MARK GEVISSER

**Earlier this year**, I went to the Edenvale Home Affairs office, on a strip of auto-repair shops and scrap yards northeast of Johannesburg, to book my marriage. “Same sex or opposite sex?” barked the young black woman, gold hoops in her ears to match her attitude.

It took me a moment to respond. “Same sex,” I said, a little too loudly, looking around to see if any of the other clerks would look up in shock, or perhaps just interest. They did not.

“The marriage officer likes to do the same-sexes early in the morning,” the woman said briskly, consulting her book. “Too much paperwork, you people. You’ve made our lives much more difficult.”

Three years previously, the South African Parliament passed a law permitting gay marriage, upon injunction from the highest court in the land. My partner and I had been together for nearly two decades. We decided to get married now because it would facilitate our move to France, where he had been offered a job. It was, we told each other, just an administrative matter.

We could have done it more easily — through a gay judge I know, for example — but I wanted to see the system work for us. And so far I was not encouraged. Like all Home Affairs offices, Edenvale was grimy and arcane, contemptuous and chaotic — the last place on earth you would want to get married. In the old days, Home Affairs was the processing room of apartheid: it told you whom you were and where you could be. It was still a place of a million frustrations and rages a day. And I was about to have one of them.

But the woman pre-empted my lecture on public service by shoving a form across to me, noting the time and date of our appointment. With a green highlighter she underlined a reminder that at least two witnesses were required. “We have room for 20,” she said, “so bring all your friends and family.” “No, no,” I protested. “It’ll be just two. We don’t want to make a fuss.”

She arched her eyebrows disapprovingly and pulled out a pink highlighter to underline another injunction: “If you have rings, please bring them with you.”

We were not planning on rings, I said.

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“Why not?” She answered her own question: “Ah, you don’t want to make a fuss!” And then, in counseling mode: “Do you think you are a second-class citizen because you are gay? You have full rights in this new South Africa. You have the right to make a fuss.”

Here I was, an entirely empowered middle-class white man being lectured to by a young woman from the townships about my rights. And here we were, three weeks later, with rings but alas only two witnesses, being ushered up the stairs and into Room 8: Marriages.

We entered a parallel universe. Porcelain swans swam between arrangements of orange and brown dried flowers, and on every available surface, there were cascades of what turned out on closer inspection to be empty ring boxes. It was inexplicable at first, then comical, then unexpectedly moving.

“You like it?” trilled a voice behind us. An Afrikaans woman, probably in her early 60s, had entered. She introduced herself as Mrs. Austin: she was actually in finance, but she loved marrying people so much that she had applied for a license and now did it two mornings a week. She explained that each, couple was invited to leave its ring boxes to contribute to her installation.

Our actual marriage was a sideshow. The main event was Mrs. Austin herself, who regaled us with stories of the marriages she had performed. She had to “go on a training” to learn how to marry gay people, she told us, but it had been worth it. She was proud to have done almost 200 already, more than anyone else in the region. But she made no secret of her disappointment at our lack of campery. Where were the feathers, the champagne? After presiding over the swapping of rings, she extracted a red heart-shaped ring box from her installation and balanced it between our two hands for a photograph.

Even though Mrs. Austin kept on referring to us as “same-sex” and heterosexuals as “normal,” we were swept out of Room 8 on a tide of hilarity. Even the fact that she could not furnish us with a marriage certificate — the computers had been down for six weeks because someone had stolen the cables — did not tamp down the good feelings. We were a white man and a black man, free to be together in the country of our birth, treated with dignity and humanity by a system that had denied both for so long. Well worth the fuss. ♦

ILLUSTRATION BY HOLLY WALES

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