

# M&G Friday

May 30 to June 5 2008



## Affairs of the heart

**Mark Gevisser**, creative force behind two current exhibitions about gay life, writes about the dynamics of putting love on show today

**A**fter I gave a public lecture on my Mbeki biography in Cape Town a few weeks ago, an old comrade came up to me and embraced me. An older woman, she had played a key role in the fight for gay equality and had been one of my icons and so I was somewhat taken aback when she told me how "surprised" she had been ("pleasantly", she added) that I had acknowledged my life partner by name in my book.

In that moment I realised how far I

— and this country — have travelled in the two decades since I met her. The thought wouldn't have occurred to me not to name my partner and disclose my sexual orientation. But for my older comrade, who had fought battles that I had not, my acknowledgement was a profoundly political act, a blow against homophobia, rather than just a thank you to the man who shares my life.

I have been thinking about this encounter, for the past few months, as I have been working on two exhibitions which open this week at the Apartheid Museum and Constitution Hill as part of the Gala (Gay and Lesbian Legacy in

Action) Heritage Project.

The first, curated by Sharon Cort and designed by Clive van den Berg, is called *Home Affairs: About Love, Marriage, Families and Human Rights*. With personal narratives and intimate wedding memorabilia, the exhibition explores gay marriage within the context of what we mean today by the word "family". The Civil Union Act is the product not just of the battle for constitutional equality, but of an increasing acceptance that there is no such thing as a normative mom-dad-and-two-kids family in South Africa: gay families live alongside matriar-

chal ones, polygamous ones, cross-racial ones and adoptive ones.

The second exhibition is called *Joburg Tracks: Sexuality in the City*. I curated it with Wits University's Zethu Matebeni and it was designed by Van den Berg with graphics by The Library. The exhibition is, literally, a map of Johannesburg as experienced by eight of its gay residents, ranging from a closeted married gay man in his 70s from Soweto to a 24-year-old Y-generation transsexual. Our idea is to give visitors the opportunity of following the routes of these eight people through the city and to examine their

different experiences of it and reflect how constitutional equality has (or has not) made a difference in their lives.

One of the points on the journey of the exhibition is the suburb of Forest Town, where our subject Michele Bruno was arrested in 1967 when a gay party was raided. Wearing a fabulous ostrich-feather coat, he was held for "masquerading as a woman", then a crime. The raid precipitated a moral panic against homosexuality and the battle to counter this was the beginning of the gay movement in the country.

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# Affairs of the heart



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Ten years later Bruno found himself detained in the Old Fort for five days for no apparent reason. His words today, which form part of the exhibition, are poignant: "When I lived in Cavellgold, just on the other side of these walls, I would look at the Fort and think, 'the worst thing ever would be to be taken in there'. It was my biggest fear. And then here I was. How wonderful to think that it's now the place that guarantees our freedom."

More poignant are the words of "Edgar Dlamini", the closeted Sowetan in his 70s who has participated in the exhibition, but cannot use his real name. Each participant was asked to loan an object to the exhibition and Edgar chose to display a tie: "This tie is just like the one my lover gave me," he says.

"We were together for five blissful years before he died. And just like I wear my ring to remind me of my marriage to my wife, I wear this tie to remind me of my lover. The difference with the tie is that no one knows why I am wearing it, but that's how it has to be for me."

The two Gala exhibitions open this week in a country where gay people can marry and where I don't even have to think about the fact that I am a public figure who is also openly gay. But there are still stories like those of Edgar, or worse, Eudy Simelane – the openly lesbian Banyana Banyana player who was murdered in KwaThema, apparently in a hate-motivated attack. She is not one of our exhibition subjects, but another, Mary Louw, describes graphically the hate-motivated sexual assault she and her girlfriend experienced a

few years ago after a Pride march.

At his launch of the Gala Heritage Project last weekend, Chief Justice Pius Langa said attacks on "vulnerable group[s]", whether "xenophobic or homophobic, threaten to negate the gains we have made in defeating apartheid" and spoke of how the Constitution impelled us to develop a culture in which nobody must be made to feel insecure, worthless and endangered for being different.

Sitting in the audience was Emile, a gay Burundian man who is part of the *Jo'burg Tracks* exhibition. Emile was forced to flee to South Africa from Burundi two years ago after he was sentenced to death when found with another man. He hoped that South Africa would provide sanctuary, but he reflects in the exhibition, on the xenophobia he has encountered here: "It's



**Jo'burg Tracks traces the lives of gay individuals in the city (top left and right). Home Affairs (above) includes personal narratives and wedding memorabilia**



true that gay people are free here, but I do not experience it personally. I have no money and, before I had papers, I was scared to go out. I miss my family terribly, but it's too dangerous for me to go back. I want to work hard and I want to succeed. But I am vulnerable ..."

*Home Affairs: About Love, Marriage, Families and Human Rights is on at the Apartheid Museum until September. Jo'burg Tracks: Sexuality in the City is at the Old Fort, Constitution Hill, and runs until November. Call Gala 011 7174239 for more information*