

## The Rainbow Nation – January 2016

Ever heard of “jobbing backwards”? A term once current on the London Stock Exchange, it refers to a retrospective review of a given transaction process, typically tinged with mixed feelings regarding the chosen modus operandi. Benefit of hindsight and all that.

My tutor at Oxford occasionally accused me of jobbing backwards in the context of the weekly essay, which was tough – considering I was merely following his injunction never to quote an authority except to prove him/her wrong. (Ignorance may well be bliss, but doesn't hold a candle to Oxford arrogance....)

Anyway, Susie and I, having recently returned from a month in South Africa, know about jobbing backwards: Indeed, the description might extend to this blog, the first I have ever attempted. Suffice to say the time machine has somehow kicked off in reverse, and I am revisiting events and friends by instalment – inasmuch as they relate vaguely to music - starting with quite recent events.

So, May/June 2015. South Africa, *Sithe Efrica*, *Sarth Ifrika*, *Sauwooooooth Aaaahfreeka* - the Rainbow Nation. It HAS to be the most naturally beautiful country in the world. And I'm not saying that to be on the safe side just because my wife, Susie, is South African. Indeed I spent some of the happiest years of my life working there between 1978 and 1985, and of course met Susie who was dancing in the Cape Town Ballet, a world-beating company in its day.

Being in Cape Town is not unlike living here on the Côte d'Azur – a little part of you feels permanently on holiday. I'm not too strong on longitudes and latitudes, but Nice and Cape Town are pretty much vertically aligned (as is Oslo, by the way – coincidentally our home for a couple of years, in the late 80's). And all three share magnificent natural settings : Coincidence, did I say?



*False Bay – not a pretty name, but one to distinguish it from the better-known Table Bay, on the opposite northern side of the Cape Peninsular.*

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Apparently, 300 years ago, sailors from the Dutch East India Company were bamboozled by the resemblance between the two bays, and frequently attempted landings in the wrong one, hence the epithet *False*. Left wondering no doubt where the famed fish restaurants were, not to mention those pretty girls in the ballet company. Well, some of them did eventually find their way round the other side of the Peninsular - both girls *and* sailors, as you can see (that's Sue's friend Wendy, by the way).



*Ex-Ballet chums - the beach huts are rather pretty too, don't you think?*

Now, here's something interesting for UK residents: the height of Mount Snowdon - irrelevant as this may seem to you in the context. As you possibly know, Snowdon stands at a measured 1085 metres, and yet (wait for it) Cape Town's Table Mountain weighs in at (yes I know - mixed metaphors) exactly the same : *1085 metres*..... Considering Snowdon rises impressively in the middle of nowhere (*pace* Snowdonia), whereas Table Mountain sits plopped literally in the middle of town, that's no mean feat. Actually, authorities may differ over the latter, but as an Oxford graduate I'd happily stuff the authorities and go with received local opinion, that Table Mountain actually stands at 1086 metres (even if it *is* on tippy-toes), which makes it *a full metre higher* than Mount Snowdon. Coming from a half-Welshman that's a generous concession, look you.

You have no idea the effect a whopping mountain has in the middle of town. Cape Town stretches at least as far behind the mountain as in front of it. Suffice to say the climate can differ radically on either side, likewise the hour of sundown (at least 60 min. earlier in Newlands than in Sea Point). Very often the summit (meaning of course the entire plateau) is draped with the "Tablecloth" - a layer of cloud which cascades dramatically down the abyss, disappearing as it meets warm air from below. Considerable differences in temperature and consequent humidity between the two oceans flanking the peninsular – the Atlantic and Indian respectively – weave and lay the tablecloth.

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More importantly, one's entire life is dominated by this magnificent, looming presence, temperamental, moody - in summertime benign, reassuring and impressive, sleepy rock surfaces festooned with gorgeous protea flowers basking in the brilliant, clear light. Then in the winter threatening and lowering dramatically, shrouded in dense cloud, with drizzling, sometimes pouring rain. I have seen large trucks upended by the Cape "South-Easter" which blasts away for days at a time, unleashing gale-force winds, tearing the place apart. Despite (or perhaps because of) all this, one falls madly, hopelessly in love with Table Mountain – it is the heart and soul not only of the City, but of each inhabitant, black, white, and coloured.

I say that, but there is sadness creeping across its face, as Cape Town yields up its centuries-old identity to political and economic events. Traditionally the home of cultured, liberal thinking in South Africa, Cape Town, with its unique "indigenous" population of Cape Coloureds – inhabitants of mixed European, African, Asian and Khoisan descent (Archbishop Desmond Tutu for example) – has polarised into a standard black African/white European community that it never was. At the same time the ugly face of capitalism, with its concomitant divide between the "haves" and the dispossessed, leers disagreeably, rampant commercialism thriving in this once equable city, where somehow having (or not having) money never really mattered that much. Shopping malls now proliferate, groaning with ludicrously sophisticated goods, insultingly cheek by jowl with squatter camps and lamentable housing conditions - *arrivistes* ignoring, or worse, sneering at those who starve. And don't think I'm talking about the black/white divide.....(is *this* jobbing backwards?)

A solitary stroll through the leafy glades of Newlands forest, savouring the delicious coolth, watching trout lurking and sporadically rising in the bubbling streams is these days tempting providence. You're as likely as not to end up with a knife in your throat/back/belly (delete where inapplicable) and relieved of your mobile telephone (and, should you resist, possibly your life). Newlands Forest is at the back of the mountain - a very different façade from the better known, impressive, yet arid front face – and Newlands is where we lived in a dear little cottage during the early 80's. You could quite safely walk to the foot of the mountain in ten minutes (and then up), just as easily as you could drive around to its front and arrive at the opera house for work within the same time-frame, traffic permitting. Alas, neither is any longer possible – the traffic congestion these days is horrendous.

It was an idyllic existence.....and indeed many good things remain. High on the list, my old friend Deon Irish, these days an immensely successful advocate (Senior Counsel at the Cape Bar). Versatile, erudite, and a good musician to boot, he's music critic of the Cape Times and Titular Organist&Choirmaster of St. Michael's Observatory, Cape Town's very own smells-and-bells Anglican church, where regular Haydn, Mozart, and Schubert masses with orchestra and soloists are conducted with considerable flair by Maestro Deon himself.

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*The Cape Bar? No, actually the elegantly-named Savoy Cabbage, an excellent Cape Town restaurant. We are just finishing dinner to which we were invited by Deon, and during the course of which we imbibed quantities of the very best that the Cape vineyards have to offer. The evidence cunningly removed from the table for the photo nevertheless lingers accusingly - plainly discernible in the guilty faces m'lud.....*

As I say, my years in Cape Town were among the happiest of my life. I conducted my very first operas there – *Traviata*, *Barbiere*, *Lustigen Weiber*, *Don Pasquale* – as well as symphony concerts with the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra (eliciting the odd trenchant review from Deon in the Cape Times). A thriving Italian community in Cape Town ensured the livelihood of the Opera and contributed artistically : directors Angelo Gobbato, Gregorio Fiasconaro, soprano Marisa Marchio, conductor Franco Ferraris, who made some lovely recordings with Franco Corelli and Mirella Freni. From Ferraris I learned everything that I know about the music of Italian Opera, Verdi in particular, and even picked up a useful knowledge of spoken Italian during rehearsals, the theatre's *lingua franca* into which they all lapsed as soon as voices were raised and tempers became frayed – a frequent and sometimes highly enjoyable occurrence. I used to wonder upon which side of the footlights the drama was *really* being played out.....