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'You ANC nothing yet!' *Gender roles in the new South Africa* *according to Pieter-Dirk Uys*

Introduction

Who is Pieter-Dirk Uys? A comedian and satirist of Jewish and Afrikaner background, whose one-man shows made a point of lampooning the National Party government of South Africa during the Apartheid era. He toured America, Britain and Australia extensively in the 1980's, and was one of the few artists, along with Athol Fugard, to be able to attack the apartheid regime from inside South Africa with apparent impunity. His shows featured impersonations of John Vorster, P. W. Botha and other well-known figures of the National Party establishment, and their content made no secret of his hostility to the apartheid regime and all it stood for. Since the arrival of the ANC-dominated Government of National Unity, he has needed to find a new role for himself, and encouraged by an invitation to provide a cabaret entertainment for the 1995 ANC congress in Bloemfontein, he has re-launched himself as a satirical commentator on the new regime. He observes during his performance that he had never hitherto dared to imitate black South Africans until encouraged to do so by the reproaches of no less a figure than Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

The Venue and the Audience

The performance I wish to discuss was recorded on video in March 1996 in a church hall in Manenberg, a suburb formerly labelled "coloured" in the Cape Flats area in the southern suburbs of Cape Town. As Pieter-Dirk Uys observes, under the apartheid regime it was

separated from the "white" suburb of Pinelands, where Uys himself was born, by a railway line and a fence. The video shows some remaining barbed wire surrounding a busy, heavily populated but not impoverished suburban environment of small villas, and well-stocked washing lines which he alludes to in the décor of his show. It is an area which has consistently supported the National Party in elections since the arrival of democracy in 1994.

The video provides us with many cut-away shots to the audience, which is shown to be exclusively coloured, and including a high proportion of women wearing head-scarves which identify them as Muslims. They appear to be laughing uninhibitedly at even the most risqué jokes and swearing of a performer whose values ought in theory to be quite different from their own. Pieter-Dirk Uys explicitly identifies himself as a gay comedian with ANC sympathies and a *penchant* for transvestism and bad language in the opening lines of his show, and it is the dynamics of this unlikely confrontation which I wish to discuss in my paper. It seems to me to be symptomatic of the shift in attitudes to gender and sexuality in the new South Africa since the installation of the new regime, in a way which one might compare with the *movida* of the new Spanish liberalism after the death of Franco in 1975.

A privileged standpoint?

It seems to me that several features of Pieter-Dirk Uys' personality and his stage performance suggest a unique standpoint from which to comment on issues of gender politics in the new South Africa. The first is his background in the formerly dominant Afrikaner society, with its puritanical morality and emphasis on traditional family values; because of both his familiarity and his distance from these, it makes him a well-informed but detached observer of that milieu. The second is his Jewish extraction, which would no doubt give him an extreme sensitivity to the dynamics of racial discrimination. The third is his gayness, which gives him a particular awareness of the arbitrariness and artificiality of traditional gender roles. Finally the fourth aspect is his role as an impersonator, in that this is based on playing with the visual

and auditory markers of social identity, such as accent, intonation, gesture, dress codes, etc.

It is interesting to speculate as to whether Pieter-Dirk Uys would have been allowed to perform such an obviously transvestite show under the old regime of apartheid. I have little information about the extent of tolerance or otherwise of gay culture under the rule of the National Party and its promotion of conformity to the puritanical values of the Dutch Reform Church. I suspect however he would not have been allowed to get away with something quite as blatant, and certainly not in a coloured community area. His shows were previously restricted in South Africa to an audience of sophisticated white city intellectuals, likely to attend a cabaret performance in Johannesburg or Cape Town. Certainly his shows in London in the 80's did not make anything like as much a feature of transvestism, being principally political in their targets, and this may suggest that it would not have been entirely acceptable at home in South Africa at that time. Nonetheless the characters of Evita Bezeidenhout and the *kugel*, or Jewish princess, were characters he had developed in previous shows, and are already familiar at least to a cult audience in South Africa.¹

The mise en scène

Several aspects of the staging of his show are interesting in relation to the question of gender identity. The first is the backdrop of a long washing-line right across the stage, on which are suspended all the costumes he is to use during his performance. It picks up a feature of the suburban environment of Manenberg mentioned earlier, which the audience must surely recognise. Quite apart from the symbolism of "dirty linen" to be washed in public, the washing-line displays all the main elements of the "kit," the clothing by which one's gender is most often publicly identified. The second feature of the *mise en scène* is the use on stage of wardrobe boxes normally kept in the wings or the

¹ I should like gratefully to acknowledge my debt to South African conference delegates who helped me clarify some of these points: in particular, Cecil Abrahams, David Johnson, Mike Nicol and Sinclair Wynchank.

dressing room, a kind of library or warehouse in which all the accessories, the trappings of gender-role are stored: wigs, moustaches, spectacles, jewellery, handbags, etc. Finally, in the second part of his show, he makes great play on stage with the make-up table, again normally confined to the wings or the dressing-room, and which constitutes a kind of workstation for the reinforcement of gender identity for women, as he underlines in the monologue of his imaginary white liberal housewife. All these features serve to foreground the artificiality of gender-role. It might be objected that he only applies this to the wealthy white middle classes, but it is interesting to notice that his impersonation of Winnie Mandela follows much the same lines, with an emphasis on the process of building a public image. It is also worth mentioning that the male figures — most strikingly Archbishop Tutu — are given a similar treatment.

Analysis of the performance

The three women figures he presents to his audience are, in descending order of the importance attributed to them: a white, liberal, Jewish housewife; an Afrikaner society hostess and media personality called Evita Bezeidenhout (not far removed from Barry Humphries' creation, the Australian Dame Edna Everage); and lastly Winnie Mandela. Two are fictional characters based on certain white South African stereotypes; Winnie Mandela is the only woman public figure to be impersonated. It should be noted that the first half of the show presents a range of male authority figures ranging from P. W. Botha and Pik Botha to Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. The "drag acts," because of their outrageousness, are nonetheless the climax of the show, despite their less exalted political roles.

The *kugel*, or white liberal "Jewish princess," seen consoling herself at her make-up table is presented as having severe problems adjusting to the new South Africa, despite her best intentions. Her maid Dora has gone on strike and retired to bed with a box of chocolates; squatters have set up camp on her front lawn; and her husband's construction company has been excluded from contracts under the Reconstruction and Development Programme because it doesn't

conform to the specifications of "affirmative action" as it has no black directors. She has tried to learn Xhosa, only to discover that her maid speaks Zulu, and only communicates with her by cell-phone.

This caricature presents us with all the traits of the ambivalent position of dependent white middle class women trying to come to terms with a radical shift in the pattern of power-relations in South African society. They are shown trying desperately to hold on to the privileges they enjoyed under the old regime, which are all under threat: servants, spacious and comfortable accommodation, material luxuries, a guaranteed income from investment opportunities and even a clear liberal conscience. None of these can be guaranteed any longer, and the humour arises from the disparity between these aspirations and those of the new South Africa: adequate housing, egalitarian treatment for all racial groups, investment opportunities for those previously excluded from the economic mainstream of the country, and the enforcement of a certain political correctness. In many ways the picture echoes that given in the well-known cartoon strip *Madam and Eve* featured in the *Weekly Mail and Guardian*, which also features a white middle-class mistress and her maid.

By contrast, the earlier portrait of Winnie Mandela provides in many respects the black counterpart to the 'Jewish princess'. Quite apart from the predictable political jibes — the allusions to her support for "necklacing," the Stompie affair, her double dismissal from her ministerial post, etc. the portrait emphasises her desire to imitate the extravagant lifestyle of her former white opponents: a new wig every day, regular changes of wardrobe, expensive foreign trips, etc. She is also presented as ruthlessly self-seeking in a material as well as a political sense, and is obviously not Pieter-Dirk Uys' favourite ANC politician. One wonders if there is not an element of misogyny in his particularly venomous caricature.

The final character presented by Pieter-Dirk Uys is the supposed Afrikaner society hostess and media personality "Evita Bezeidenhout": the latest incarnation of one of his recurrent satirical characters. In this guise she embodies the prodigious ability of the

National-Party-supporting Afrikaner establishment to present themselves as innocent, well-intentioned political power-brokers in the new South Africa, miraculously washed clean of any association with the abuses of the apartheid regime. She is no dependent housewife but rather a shrewd political operator, whose aim, nevertheless, is also that of clinging onto the privileges afforded her by her membership of the ruling elite. She makes sure we know she is on first-name terms with the de Klerks and even President Mandela. Like the former police torturer turned security guard for Nelson Mandela, featured earlier in the show, she too has draped herself in the colours of the new South Africa, in the form of a glittering cocktail dress made in the design of the new flag. She illustrates the growing importance of women in the young, liberal wing of the born-again National Party, perhaps based on figures such as Rina Venter, Health Minister in the De Klerk government of 1989-94.

The great absentee in Pieter-Dirk Uys' portrayals of women's roles in the new South Africa is that of the ordinary black female township dweller. This figure is perhaps hinted at in the secondary, allusory character of Dora the striking maid, but it is an understandable omission in view of his avowed reticence in portraying members of the black population. This noticeable gap is perhaps symptomatic of the wide gulf that still persists between the different communities in the new unified South Africa.

Audience reaction

As in any comic performance, the audience reaction is at least half of the show. There is no canned laughter here, and the responses of the coloured citizens of Manenberg are perhaps some compensation for the visual absence of the majority group of South African women. These responses are fascinating, as I suggested earlier. One of the reasons for the political support for the National Party of this particular group is their sense of insecurity and fear of losing their relatively comfortable lifestyle in a more egalitarian South Africa committed to varieties of "affirmative action." It is quite possible, however, that this particular audience is self-selecting, composed mostly of minority ANC sympathisers from the coloured community in Manenberg. Their obvious

recognition and complicity with Pieter-Dirk Uys in the targets of his satire suggests perhaps that they share his marginal status and his detached point of view in relation to the political mainstream of the new South Africa. It is interesting that the Muslim group seems not at all shocked or disturbed by his demystification of traditional gender roles, and it may be because, in relation to a unified multi-racial South Africa, they share more strongly with him the sense of being a vulnerable minority group. As such they probably have a particularly acute awareness of the political dynamics of the new régime. In other respects they perhaps also form part of a sophisticated Cape Town audience which is used to greater artistic licence than in other parts of South Africa: it is possible that the group may even include some former inhabitants of the bulldozed coloured bohemian quarter of Cape Town, the celebrated District 6, which in its pre-apartheid heyday contained a sizeable Muslim population.

It is interesting to observe that the male members of the audience are prepared to participate even to the extent of wolf-whistling at the comedian's most extravagant female impersonations. This might lead one to suggest that this form of gender-bending is actually quite unthreatening to traditional gender roles inasmuch as it is a process of substitution, not of questioning, and thus in some respects reinforces those roles. To laugh at the stereotypes caricatured by Pieter-Dirk Uys is therefore not necessarily subversive in relation to the traditional economy of gender relations. Hence the audience's laughter derives perhaps more from a politically-motivated complicity than from any fundamental questioning of gender, whatever the underlying intentions of Pieter-Dirk Uys himself.

Some concluding theoretical remarks

This performance represents what is probably an ephemeral and transitional moment in the ongoing process of transformation of South African society. It is all the more important, therefore, to try to situate it in relation to more general, theoretical concerns. Are we dealing here with a moment in the progression towards a post-colonial

society, in the process of detaching itself from the outdated and exploitative models of the apartheid era? Or are we witnessing the replacement of colonial patterns of exploitation with neo-colonial ones? Certainly some of the more acerbic observations of Pieter-Dirk Uys suggest that there is at least a threat of the latter: the perpetuation of the old ruling elites, or the replacement of one privileged elite by another; the opening up of the country to foreign capital and influence, particularly American. Much depends on the originality of the solutions found to the country's most pressing problems, such as the chronic housing shortage alluded to by Pieter-Dirk Uys in the row of green-roofed cardboard boxes he lines up along the front of the stage. The moralistic wagging paternal finger of P.W. Botha has worryingly found its way into the repertoire of gestures of Nelson Mandela, as a symbol of continuity rather than change.

In terms of gender politics, there are reassuring signs nevertheless that the "double colonisation" of black women is no longer taken for granted, even in white suburban households, if Pieter-Dirk Uys is to be believed. Even the maid may have become a company director and enjoy the use of a cell phone! The authority figures he lampoons are still all male ones, however, with the notable exception of Winnie Mandela, whose disgrace perhaps serves to underline the general rule. His women figures are still very much dependent on the reflected authority of their husbands — or ex-husbands — and their supposed superiors. All in all this seems to me to be a reasonably accurate reflection of the current state of play in South African society: on the right track towards the genuine emancipation of women, but with still a long way to go.

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VIDEOGRAPHY

Pieter-Dirk Uys in Manenberg: television programme directed by Lol Lovett; based on *You ANC nothing yet*, written and performed by Pieter-Dirk Uys; produced by Holmes Associates/Michael Kustow for Channel 4 (UK) and the South African Broadcasting Corporation, 1996.

