

David Kramer

It took courage to stand up on a public stage in South Africa in 1983, when PW Botha, at the height of his powers, was breathing fire and brimstone about the Total Onslaught and to sing a song about the futility and self-destructiveness of a white soldier's life on the border. But David Kramer is in the long and honourable tradition of the poets and the singers... from Wilfred Owen through Donovan, Joan Baez, Pete Seeger and John Lennon... who in times of crisis have stood up against the horrors of war & expressed the longing for peace in ways that politicians have found threatening.

In the turbulent and fearful South Africa of the 1980s David Kramer is the one who had both the courage and the skill to find a way to communicate an uncomfortable and unpopular truth to a wide audience when few others could do so. His song about 'my friend Johnny Lategaan', *On the Border*, was to haunt & challenge a generation of conscripts sent off to protect the white laager.

But, important though this was, David Kramer is much more than a protest singer although, as Taliep Petersen once remarked to him, "If I sang what you wrote, they'd lock me up". Over the years he has evolved from the simple country boy in his red *veldskoene* to a major cultural figure who digs ever deeper in his exploration of South African identity.

It is an exploration that has not been without pain. Echoing Anna Akhmatova's great poem about living in Russia in the 1930's...

*No, not beneath an alien sky
Nor protected by alien wings—
I was there with my people,
There, where, alas, my people were.*

...David Kramer was to write about South Africa in the 1980s.

*As for me I don't think that I'll be leaving
I belong here. I'll be staying where I was born
These people are my people
These places are my places
It's not easy to mend a heart once it's been torn*

Like Akhmatova before him, David Kramer earned his right to speak the hard way. He wrote from within. And he never abandoned the people amongst whom he grew up.

He was born in Worcester which would be offended, I know, if I referred to it as a klein dorp. But in those days it was not very large. And it is quite dry. But it would be foolish for me to try and describe a place where a future Nobel prizewinner for Literature was going to primary school just at the time that David Kramer was born.

They live, writes John Coetzee about his own Boyhood, *in a housing estate outside the town of Worcester, between the railway line and the National Road. The streets of the estate have tree-names but no trees yet...All the houses are new and identical. They are set in large plots of red clay, separated by wire fences.... every time the wind blows, a fine ochre clay-dust whirls in under the doors...* [JM Coetzee, *Boyhood*, pp.1-2]

But it was not always as desolate as this.

It is true, writes Coetzee as he grew older, *He would like to live like this forever, riding his bicycle through the wide and empty streets of Worcester in the dusk of a summer's day, when all the other children have been called in and he alone is abroad, like a king.* [Coetzee, p.25]

Perhaps it was the very tension of the co-existence of bleakness and beauty in one small place that created both artists.

David Kramer's first CD, *Bakgat !*, which was released in 1980 was banned in its entirety by the SABC which was shocked both by its language and its politics. There would come a time when David Kramer would win a special award for his contribution to Afrikaans. But prophets do not always have an easy time. Yet David Kramer was irrepressible and soon his songs, both haunting and humorous, were doing what all good art does: helping people to reflect more deeply and to see in new ways. And so *Blokkies Joubert*, the 1931 Springbok hero now reminiscing in front of the TV in the old age home a little bit north of Beaufort West shot to the top of the charts; as did *Montagu*, the song about die klein Karoo; kannaland. These were indeed his people; and his places

Although he started out alone on the stage, with his guitar, David Kramer is not a loner. Much of his best work has been in collaboration with others, notably in three shows with the comedian, Marc Lottering and then, even more famously with Taliep Petersen. It is striking how many of the best musicals have been created by a pair of writer-musicians working together. Gilbert & Sullivan; Rodgers & Hammerstein; Rice & Lloyd Webber all did much of their most memorable work as a team. I shall say more in a moment, when talking of Taliep Petersen, about the fruits of this collaboration. For now let us simply note one highlight: Their musical *Kat & the Kings* which premiered at the Dock Road Theatre [which Kramer directed for six magical years] in 1995 won the coveted Laurence Olivier Award for the Best Musical in London in 1999. At the same time each member of the cast won an Olivier award for Best Performance in a Musical. Subsequently it went on from the West End to great acclaim on Broadway in New York. Meanwhile a second cast performed all over Europe, including in Austria, Germany & Holland, for two years. Given that *Kat & the Kings* was originally written to provide work for a few unemployed actors there is surely a case to be made for it to receive a special presidential award as one of South Africa's most successful job-creation ventures.

Soon after this, David Kramer did something yet more extraordinary. He travelled, together with Jan Horn, through some of the remotest areas of the country looking for unsung musicians. And he drew them together in a production which from its first performance at the KKNK [Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees] in 2001 & subsequently at the Baxter theatre in Cape Town electrified the audiences. The *Karoo Kitaar Blues* drew from the deepest wells of South African history. They were unforgettable.

In the world of theatre he plays many roles and has won awards in most of them: as set designer; lighting designer; producer; director; actor; singer; facilitator; interpreter; writer; social critic; and so much more. Yet he remains accessible, generous, modest, humorous and vulnerable. A wonderful, creative presence in our national life. And no more so than this week with the opening, at the Baxter, of the *Kramer Petersen Songbook* with its exuberant celebration of their twenty year partnership.