

# What I brought with me...

JR asks three British South Africans to tell us what aspects they have taken from their home country that continue to affect them in Britain today



**JANET SUZMAN**

Children are pragmatic, their lives limited to what they know with no sources of comparison until much later on. I didn't know I was privileged until I learned the meaning of that word.

From our home in Johannesburg, we used to drive six hours to a family farm in Natal in the cooler month of July and I would spend heavenly days exploring the dense primeval forests, thickly hung with ropes of wild fig, lying in the valleys close to the small stone farm house. That is, when I wasn't annoying our Zulu cook's younger brother, Ambrose. I was 4 or 5, Ambrose 10 or 11, and I tagged after him, watching with wonder as he strangled chickens for the table.

And then at 6 I had to start school. Eventually I clicked that Ambrose wasn't learning to read, wasn't at school. When I asked about this I was told that there was in fact a little farm school for the local kids. My parents found these things uncomfortable to talk about. This early realisation, that I could read and Ambrose couldn't, began a dim awareness that something – what? – was not as it should be.

We had servants but I didn't know anything was wrong with that as they were spoken to politely and were dressed in clean cotton and there were only friendly-sounding exchanges in the house. The kitchen was the nicest place to be, listening to their laughter and stories.

Shame came to me later in life that I couldn't understand their language. I recall the actor John Kani accusing me of racism when I first met him at Athol Fugard's house, because I couldn't be bothered to understand his language. I replied that I was the loser, and I still feel that.

I didn't know my famous Aunt Helen well as she was away sitting in Parliament in Cape Town. But my family would proudly go to the visitors' gallery on arrival in the Cape for the Christmas holidays, and observe Hellie at work, a small tailored figure in blue amongst a sea of grey suits. We'd listen to her sharp-tongued ripostes with a glow. Once, I remember, when she finished a speech and walked out of the chamber, a couple of cross-benchers muttered in Afrikaans as she passed them: "Mooie toespraak, Hellie" – meaning "good speech" – without raising their heads. They didn't want to be seen praising the lone, courageous Jewess so they stayed ducked down. Cowards, I thought.

My paternal grandfather – a colleague of General Smuts – had been MP for the South Peninsula so politics was a continual stream running through the family landscape. He was in the old United Party, from which Helen Suzman's Progressive Party broke away to lean, as far as it dared, further left. So I was raised in a decent liberal-minded secular Jewish environment. We were not religious, though on the High Holy Days my father plunged into a sort of Jewish gloom as if not to lose touch with his ancestors. My mother wouldn't go near a shul.

All the time of this growing-up, what seemed ordinary – catching the bus to school without a green stripe on its front – slowly slotted into place as the vast jigsaw of Apartheid. Then, as the hormones began to rage, so did the anger at the inequalities I saw around me. By the time I was a student at Wits, the full spate of student rebelliousness against the status quo took me over, and has never left me. Injustice makes me feel ill. My greatest joy has been to work with black colleagues, and expiate that vile sludge of enforced separation by doing plays.

My production of *Othello* (1987) – the story of a black man humiliated by a white thug, makes me proud. Shakespeare can write about humiliation down to the last jet of spittle. All I wish is that Jews everywhere would remember what that is like. ■

**Dame Janet Suzman came to London in 1954 to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA).** The mask hanging on the wall was made for her by Koos, the prop man at Cape Town's Baxter Theatre. She stars in *Solomon and Marion* by Lara Foot, the Baxter Theatre CEO, at the Coronet Theatre, Notting Hill, 4-29 November. See page XX for the listing.



**DAVID LAN**

I'm sure I would not have been able to characterise it this way at the time – but what I think I brought with me was a strong sense of moral unease. And, moving around a lot, living in several different places, perhaps I brought a relativism, a sense of values being different in different places, and that's fine. Why did I study social anthropology? Because I didn't understand why people live the way they do and I wanted to understand it better.

I grew up in a left-wing family; my grandfather was a Trotskyist. He left Lithuania when he was not yet 20 and brought with him a very modern set of ideas. They weren't religious people but they lived within a close Jewish community in a poor part of the town. They supported each other. I remember photographs of my grandfather and my father going off for picnics with the Lenin Club, a study club for intellectuals. My grandfather was a typesetter but he couldn't speak English when he arrived so couldn't work at that in South Africa. My grandmother worked as a dressmaker but it took them a long time to earn any sort of living.

They saw themselves as free but powerless, despite being white in a white-dominated society. To some extent they identified with black labour, like many Jewish families from that part of the world, and became close to the trade union movement, to the resistance movement. People like Joe Slovo and Albie Sachs were frequent visitors at my grandparents' house.

So I grew up taking for granted that we were the opposition, that the way we lived

**“I brought with me a strong sense of moral unease”**

was wrong. I knew we had servants who were black, who were paid very poorly and lived in very poor conditions. When you're a child you can't change the way you live but you can feel it very strongly, and I think I did. Why? I don't know, there were plenty of kids who didn't, who felt that their position in society was God given. It's taken me my life to really squeeze racism out of my system. As a child I didn't think I was a racist person but growing up in that appalling circumstance it's a difficult thing to totally avoid.

I used to do conjuring as a kid and started the Cape Junior Magicians' Circle, so there's something that I learned there about starting things, making things happen, organising things – a Jewish characteristic? And I got into the theatre through performance as a somewhat inept child magician.

The University drama school in Cape Town in 1970 had a sense of itself as the avant-garde, an engagement with the ideas of Peter Brook and the Polish theoretician and director Grotowski. That linked to my sense of the unfairness, or lack of authenticity, in the way we lived. I guess I was trying to find a way back to a kind of intellectual, emotional

and social authenticity through theatre – it was slightly disingenuous, our lives were so inauthentic theatre couldn't fix it. We hadn't changed the way we lived but we were kids and we wouldn't really want to do that. Even so there was something powerful in this idea of a community created through theatre. ■

**David Lan left South Africa in 1972.** He was born in Cape Town in 1952, trained as an actor and started writing plays. In London he trained as a social anthropologist, conducting field research in Zimbabwe, his resulting book becoming a classic in the field. Meanwhile he continued to write and direct films, drama documentaries and plays. In 2000 he was appointed Artistic Director of the Young Vic. The Young Vic production of Kander and Ebb's musical *The Scottsboro Boys*, the story of nine young black men wrongfully accused of raping two white women in 1930s Alabama, opens at the Garrick Theatre, London on 4 October. David Lan was talking to Judi Herman.



**CHIEF RABBI  
EPHRAIM MIRVIS**

My South African background has enriched my life immeasurably. Having grown up in the era of apartheid, my upbringing inspired me to strive to do what I can to strengthen peace and unity and to uphold the dignity of every human being.

From South Africa I brought with me the warmth of life-long friendships, an appreciation of spectacular natural beauty, a love of the outdoors and a passion for sport.

I was blessed to witness at first hand the manner in which a relatively small Jewish community can maintain its traditional values and make a major positive impact on society.

The Lithuanian Jewish way of life, which epitomises South African Jewry, has given me a love of tradition, pride in my Jewish identity, an appreciation of education, the enjoyment of kichel and herring and the fear of a **ferible**. ■

**Ephraim Mirvis left South Africa in 1973.** He was born in 1956, son and grandson of South African rabbis, and left to study in Israel. He took up a rabbinical position in Ireland in 1982, and was Ireland's chief rabbi from 1985 to 1992. He came to London as rabbi of Kinloss Synagogue and took office as Chief Rabbi in 2013.

**Ferible**

This word does not appear in our article South African Yiddish (page 58). The Jews of Ireland had already told us it was theirs! (*JR* October 2008) “It meant being broiges – that is, justifiably outraged... And of course those quick to take offence were *feribledik* and had to be handled with kid gloves.” Asher Benson in *Jewish Dublin: Portraits of Life by the Liffey*