

South Africa: Paradise Is Closing Down

BY JAN KNIPPERS BLACK AND MARTIN C. NEEDLER

We went to two theatrical performances during our visit to South Africa in July, 1979. One was at a faintly sleazy nightclub in the stylish Hillbrow section of Johannesburg, whose familiar aspect was puzzling until we realized that it reminded us of the Kit-Kat Klub in *Cabaret*.

"Mrs. Idi Amin preened herself in front of her mirror before going to bed"—here the paunchy, middle-aged M.C. rocked from side to side on his tiptoes—"and asked, 'Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who is de fairest one of all?' And the mirror answered"—this with a tightening of the jaw and a thinning of the lips—" 'It's still Snow White, you black bitch, and don't you forget it!' " Some in the audience laughed, some didn't.

The other performance, held in a converted market, was a well-written and well-acted new play by an Afrikaner who writes in English, because that's where the audiences are. Called *Paradise Is Closing Down*, it placed four symbolic characters—a strong-willed, closed-minded Afrikaner woman; a wise-cracking, English-speaking Jewish girl; a helpless mousy girl from Rhodesia; and a young colored boy—in a set of politically charged circumstances from which there was no satisfactory way out.

Perhaps for South Africa too there is no satisfactory way out—but this is not to say that the situation is stalemated or stagnant. There is movement in South Africa today; yet it is all too likely that the present changes will prove only cosmetic, masking but not fundamentally altering the brutal realities.

A black poet who had lived in exile for twenty years spoke to us of a new confidence and self-assertiveness on the part of blacks. Whites are no longer as casually arrogant and brutal as they were when he left the country. The civil rights movement in the United States and the independence of so many African states have emboldened South African blacks to stand up for themselves, and whites have become circumspect, even courteous.

The fact that he could return to the country without being jailed is itself a sign of some relaxation on the part of the regime. That relaxation had its limits, however. Apartheid is still very much the rule, and its crassness and ugliness have to be seen to be believed. One

bus for blacks and another for "coloreds" and Asians run along streets that whites avoid, where the goods in the shops are shoddier and the prices higher. There is no pretense of "separate but equal"; treatment of nonwhites is clearly exploitive, the facilities second-rate.

Urban nonwhites have been cleared out of desirable residential areas and dumped in "the townships" far from the city center. Soweto, the "Southwest Townships" of Johannesburg, is an urban jungle dominated by the *tsotsis*, or hoodlums. A waitress told us that she spent almost a third of her wages taking taxis the ten miles from the restaurant to her house in Soweto. It was too dangerous to take the train and then walk home from the station.

But apartheid is fraying at the edges. This is due less to formal condemnations of the system by the United Nations and foreign governments than to the pressures exerted indirectly by day-to-day diplomatic and commercial dealings with a multiracial world. The classic example: Although "Asians" constitute one of South Africa's several nonwhite categories, the Japanese, because of their economic power, have been given "honorary white" status.

More significantly, a business establishment may request an "international" designation, which enables it to serve foreign blacks along with whites of any nationality. Local blacks take advantage of this from time to time. But only the more expensive places get the "international" designation, so this opening is obviously available only to a small minority of South African blacks.

Internal economic pressures also threaten the system. White merchants are beginning to see the potential of the enormous market of black consumers. Many stores still have separate entrances for whites and nonwhites, but nonwhites are increasingly boycotting such stores and the signs have begun to come down. Rather than contend with the awkwardness of seating only whites, many cafes and short-order eating places outside the cities have no seats at all.

That the authorities fear organized opposition among blacks is clear enough. Even the whites assume that political surveillance is systematic and widespread and that the black townships are crawling with government spies. More than one black detained for political activities has, according to the subsequent official report, "committed suicide" by jumping out of the tenth-floor window of Johannesburg's police headquarters—the

floor on which the interrogation center is located.

The actual extent of organized black opposition is difficult to gauge. Members of the originally nonviolent African National Congress, its ranks swelled by recruits from the Soweto riots, are training in Angola and Zambia for guerrilla warfare. But within the country black political activists—whether their goals are modest or grandiose, their means violent or nonviolent—must operate clandestinely.

The most visible source of persistent, hard-hitting criticism of the Nationalist government is the English-speaking press. English South Africans in general are quick to dissociate themselves from the crude racism of the Afrikaners. But one need not doubt the selfless courage of some and the sincerity of many to note that English-speaking liberals are the most comfortable group in South Africa today. Enjoying the comforts and privileges of being white, they also have the luxury of clear consciences; they can protest their liberalism and blame the brutalities of the system on the Afrikaners.

But not all Afrikaners are unthinking reactionaries. There is a young, more liberal generation that has left the "laager," the armed camp of Afrikaner mythology, and is genuinely trying to come to terms with the realities of the multiracial society that is South Africa today. Unfortunately, one after another of this group is finding the atmosphere of Nationalist-run South Africa stifling and is emigrating—to the Netherlands, to Britain, to the United States.

"GUEST WORKERS" IN THEIR OWN LAND

Yet for most whites South Africa remains Paradise, with an equable climate, an extraordinary range of plant and animal life, and breathtaking natural beauty. It is, for the most part, a rich land, where anything grows or can be dug out of rock—half of the world's gold, 20 per cent of its gem diamonds, and who knows how much of its uranium. "If I were a white South African, I'd fight to the death to keep it too," said a black American church official.

By most of the standard economic and technological criteria South Africa is clearly a highly developed country. Its cities glisten with the shapes and textures of modern architecture. They function as smoothly as any in the U.S. and Europe, and they offer as much to the consumer, though at lower prices. American tourists visiting South Africa feel they have taken a time machine back to the American South of thirty or forty years ago. Polite black servants wait on tables, stand behind counters, fill up gas tanks. We were always addressed as "Madam," "Master," or "Boss," an experience we found acutely embarrassing.

In 1980, twenty-six years after the U.S. Supreme Court's school desegregation ruling, the issue of separate and unequal education has sparked violent protest in South Africa. Protest and boycotts that began in Capetown's colored schools spread to both colored and black schools throughout the country and were joined by clergymen and others of all races.

Average per capita expenditure on the education of white students is more than ten times that spent on black students and three times that spent on colored and Asian students. Furthermore, technical educa-

tion—the only kind that would prepare nonwhites for most jobs that are currently open to them—engages only a half of 1 per cent of secondary school students. H. F. Oppenheimer, chairman of the Anglo American Corporation, South Africa's dominant mining enterprise, has argued that the shortage of skilled workers is the biggest problem facing industry. According to Oppenheimer, this shortage causes unemployment among the unskilled as well, and some 100,000 jobs are currently unfilled because trained workers are not available. Obviously, the South African economy could not function without black labor.

The workers in the diamond mines, employed on six-month contracts, come largely from the independent black countries of Southern Africa—Swaziland, Botswana, and Lesotho, which are more or less economic dependencies of South Africa, and Zambia. A recent reform in labor law has extended to them the right to join segregated unions. As migrants, however, they cannot expect political rights. This "guest worker" approach that is followed in the mines is what the Nationalists would like to apply to native South African blacks. Under the "homelands" policy all black South Africans—even those who have lived all their lives in Johannesburg, Capetown, or Pretoria—are to be assigned to one of the rural homelands, analogous to our Indian reservations. If one loses his job and becomes a burden upon or a threat to white society, he may be treated as an alien and "deported" to his homeland.

What is ahead for South Africa? Elsewhere on the continent violent confrontation has led to varying degrees of black liberation. The resolution of the Rhodesian conflict, giving birth to Zimbabwe, has been to some South African whites a source of relief, to others a source of anxiety. But the South African struggle will not evolve like Rhodesia's. White South Africans have too much to lose, the Afrikaners have no place to go.

Thus far violence has been sporadic and, from the government's point of view, well contained. But whites are running scared. Many fear that the least exception to the generalized segregation will lead to the collapse of the entire scheme of apartheid. Even the concession allowing for racially mixed sports, granted by Prime Minister P. W. Botha, who assumed power in 1979, has generated a right-wing backlash in the Afrikaner governing National party.

It cannot be said that the fears of whites are wholly irrational, but they contain the seeds of self-fulfilling prophecy. The Armageddon envisioned by one liberal Afrikaner friend of ours may well come when his people, always shadow-boxing and overreacting, finally provoke reluctant blacks into armed confrontation.

The Armageddon scenario cannot be ruled out, but there are other possibilities. Former Ambassador Andrew Young's analogies to the civil rights movement in the U.S. may not be far off the mark. Knowledgeable observers believe that most blacks are confident, sensing that time and international pressures are on their side. A new generation of Afrikaners may realize, as the English-speaking community has done all along, that the dismantling of formal segregation will not necessarily mean an end to white privilege, much less a thoroughgoing social and economic upheaval. **WV**