

Volume 5 July 2008

# WITSReview

The magazine for **ALUMNI** and friends of the University of the Witwatersrand



## Wits Theatre celebrates its **25th birthday**



**IN THIS ISSUE:** Wits tackles xenophobia • Interview with Johnny Clegg • Profile on Hofmeyr House

## Wits' music man:

Earlier this year Wits honoured Johnny Clegg with an honorary doctorate in music. "It was a wonderful moment for me," says Clegg. "The great irony for me is I don't read a note of music! My music comes to me like it does to many Africans, through ear and feeling."

*By Tara Turkington and Kate Thompson*

**Photos by Kate Thompson**

# Johnny Clegg



One of Wits' most famous alumni, the iconic musician who embodies a unique South African spirit and *chutzpah*, is a series of contradictions. He's the white boy who *can* jump (and do the high-kick, even in his fifties); the Jew who speaks fluent Zulu; the thoughtful poet in a pair of colourful African pants; the talented musician who can't read music.

***He's the white boy who can jump;  
the Jew who speaks fluent Zulu;  
the thoughtful poet in a pair  
of colourful African pants;  
the talented musician who  
can't read music.***

Born in 1953 near Manchester in England, Clegg's early years were a blur of migrations, to Israel, then-Rhodesia, Zambia and South Africa. By the time he was 10, his parents had divorced and his mum, Muriel, had remarried a journalist, Dan Pienaar, and relocated to Johannesburg.

"Johnny loved classical guitar but I couldn't afford the guitar, let alone the lessons, so I said he must wait," recalls Muriel Clegg. "At this time - the 60s and 70s - Yeoville was a-buzz with migrant Zulu workers. They used to walk past the house in the late afternoons and early evenings, strumming their Zulu guitars.

"One day he asked me to buy him a Gallotone guitar, he said it was cheap. I thought it had a horrible, tinny sound, but he said it was perfect for Zulu music."

Young Johnny used to go to gatherings in the townships and learn to play music, remembers Muriel. "One time he came home and told me he had been humiliated. When he started playing, everyone had laughed. It was because the song was very vulgar. It was about a woman's private parts. He said I had to get him proper Zulu lessons."

She called around to find a school that offered Zulu as a matric subject, but had no luck. A friend put her on to a Zulu lecturer at Wits, but he told her the four years till Johnny matriculated was not enough to learn Zulu. "He said Zulu was as structured as Latin. I said, 'Please, just meet with him.' Johnny went off to Wits on his bike, and after their talk the lecturer called me. He said he was amazed at Johnny's determination to learn, and that he already had the sound of Zulu in his head. I told him it was because he has a musician's ear, and had been playing Zulu music."

In 1971, he was the only white person in South Africa to write Zulu as a matric subject, passing with ease. It is typical of his determination and will to succeed.

Irene Dyson is one of Johnny's cousins. "Our mothers were sisters," says Dyson. "Johnny is quite a bit older than me, but I remember our house in Cyrildene had a very big garden, and Johnny was always in the garden with Siphon [Mchunu, his partner in his first group, Juluka], stick fighting or dancing.

"Johnny always had a magic about him," continues Dyson. "He would tell fascinating stories and loved to make us laugh with his funny, funny mad stories.



***Johnny told me that I could forget about ever seeing him in a suit and tie. He wanted to be a game ranger.***

He has a great sense of humour and is a born performer. He has also always had a unique perspective and amazing insight into people.”

When Johnny was slightly older, recalls Muriel Clegg, he started talking about a career. “Johnny told me that I could forget about ever seeing him in a suit and tie. He wanted to be a game ranger.

I called around and heard that game rangers in those days earned about R40 per month, and I said to him ‘I don’t think that’s a career.’

“Des and Dawn Lindberg were friends of mine, and I had promoted their albums,” explains Muriel. “We met an Englishman at one of their soirées. He was an amateur anthropologist. He had trekked from Cape Town to Cairo with a

snake in his bag, and people thought he had some kind of power, but he had never held an academic position because he didn’t have a degree. He said I should let Johnny do what he was already doing, and he told me about a course in social anthropology at Wits. He said Johnny would always have a job if he had a degree.”

And so, says Johnny Clegg, “I spent 10 years of my life on the Wits campus – three years teaching, and the rest as an undergraduate and honours student.”

But university wasn’t exactly a song for Clegg, well not at first, anyway. “I really didn’t get it. I was the most kicked-out-of-class person... I wasn’t prepared for the transformation from one to the other, from school to university.”

In his first year, he studied social anthropology, politics, Zulu (where all the students were white and the lecturers were black), and phonetics and linguistics, which he dropped for English. “Zulu was the only one I passed,” he smiles. “Wits didn’t care.

***“Wits didn’t care. They said,  
‘If you don’t want to be here, fine!  
Go play cards in the canteen!’  
And I went and played cards  
in the canteen.”***

They said, ‘If you don’t want to be here, fine! Go play cards in the canteen!’ And I went and played cards in the canteen.”

But there were seductive moments in politics and anthropology. When he repeated his first year, he received the highest marks achieved in anthropology in 25 years. “I worked very hard and spent a lot of time in the library, and really grew to enjoy the life of the mind.”

He worked his way through those years, managing a chicken farm in Knoppieslaagte, north of Johannesburg, which inspired Juluka’s first local hit in 1976, *Woza Friday!* “One Monday morning, we had lined up to hear about the week’s work from the owner. A worker next to me scuffed his shoe and mumbled “*Woza Friday!*” (“Come on Friday!”). It was a shebeen hit, and by the next year, we’d done a gold record.

“I also got involved in other activities at university,” says Clegg. “I joined the fencing club, the weightlifting club (where I dislocated my shoulder), and briefly, the athletics club. I was also active politically, especially in the Industrial Aid Society. I was translating their pamphlets into Zulu.”

Before he knew it, he says, “I found I was already an anthropologist, just by what I’d been doing on the streets of Joburg. In anthropology, fieldwork is critical. I had linked up with the

migrant labour force and had been involved in participant observation since I was 14.

“I have very good memories. It was a time I was stretched to my limit, and I grew in many respects. That is the ‘civilising force’ of good, strong academic institutions. It was also a time of tremendous turmoil – there was the promise of change, but never any guarantees. We were always protesting on the pavement outside Wits and having the police chase us.”

In his first job at Wits, as a “temporary, assistant, junior lecturer”, Clegg says he soon realised that, “teaching, in a way, is also a performance. I told a lot of stories and used anecdotes, and enjoyed the process of sharing knowledge.”

His music had already started to become popular by then, and “I was a bit of a celebrity lecturer,” he laughs. Then Juluka had a top 40 hit in England with *Scatterlings*, and “I had to decide whether I’d be a performer or an academic performer.”

*How have his audiences changed over time?*

“In the late 70s and early 80s the audiences were mostly migrant labourers and students.” Then in the 80s, with his later group, Savuka, “We started doing very well overseas, and we played mostly big arenas. Juluka arose at the time of the cultural boycott, so audiences overseas were sceptical, and at home were sometimes resistant. Both environments were hard, and it was difficult to work. If we’d emigrated, it would have been easier.”

Nowadays, Clegg says his audience “Really depends on the venue. I did a show in Pretoria recently where the audience was mostly black,

but sometimes it's mostly white. There are very few cross-over venues. Newtown is one."

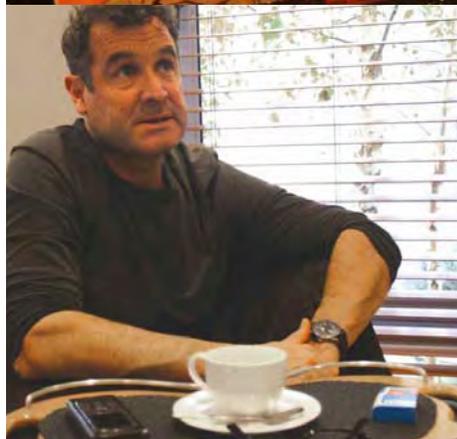
*What does he listen to?*

"Everything! I watch MK, MTV Base, VH1, MTV. I hop radio stations. One thing I never used to listen to is classical music, but that's changed.

"Music is going through so many transformations – in terms of the business model, the music itself, song formats are changing, for example becoming non-linear. It's an exciting time."

*What's the hardest lesson he's ever learned?*

"To recognise opportunity, and understand the value of that opportunity. Opportunities occurred and we did well, but often we didn't recognise the value of that opportunity. We think opportunities just come along, but they are actually very special moments. Siphos used to say "*ithuba liyadlula*" – opportunity comes and moves across the horizon, and if the hand of your mind doesn't reach out and grab it, it's gone." But, Clegg adds, "On the other side of the coin, it's important not to wait for opportunities, but to make them." He says he learned this lesson with Juluka. "At first, people were listening to us on the radio and thinking it was the funniest music they'd ever heard. People laughed at the music, called it bizarre, but still we went out and played wherever we could: in school halls, embassies, Des and Dawn Lindberg's lounge, the Detainees' Parents' Support Committee meetings. We got known simply because we made that opportunity work for us.



***“If you love something,  
if you have passion for it,  
it is the strongest expression of  
who you are, and that is what the  
rest of the world responds to.  
It’s infectious, it’s inspiring.”***

“If you love something, if you have passion for it, it is the strongest expression of who you are, and that is what the rest of the world responds to. It’s infectious, it’s inspiring.”

*The public Johnny Clegg aside, who is he at home?*

Clegg says he and his wife, Jenny, have been together 28 years, and have two children, Jesse and Jaron. He admits he’s hyperactive. “I get very depressed if I am not doing anything. I get bored easily. I can be a bit like a squash ball trapped in a box. I also put things off until there is huge pressure to do them then I enjoy the adrenaline of overcoming them – a tendency that runs up speeding fines! I call them ‘concertina moments’.” And like most artists, he says, he has moments of self-doubt and insecurity. “You put yourself at risk all the time, and make yourself vulnerable.”

He loves reading: history, culture, futurology, travel, humour – “I read five books at a time,” and is still involved with migrant communities, spending time at hostels and dancing on the weekend. He travels overseas for three months a year, mostly to Europe (he has particularly strong followings in France, Belgium and Germany), Canada and Australia.

*From where does he draw his inspiration?*

Clegg says a lot of his ideas come from visiting the hostels and overhearing conversations in Zulu. “The people there have incredibly complicated lives. They have a constant connection with the real world. There is an intensity to it. Their use of language – idioms and proverbs – is so rich.

“When I’m really dry, I walk through Exclusive Books, noting down the titles of books. I extrapolate something out of the titles and use them as a kick-off point to spark ideas.” When he writes, Clegg says he will go into the studio and write 20 songs within a few days.

*Does he know when a song is going to be a hit?*

“I knew *Asimbonanga* was a hit. I knew *Scatterlings* was a hit. Most of the hits come out of a particular historical moment.” But he hasn’t always known – “*I Call Your Name*, I didn’t know.”

He talks about coming full circle and the irony that his new album has not been played much on the radio because it is openly critical of regional politics, much like *Asimbonanga*, about Nelson Mandela, was in its time in the 80s. He says his song about Zimbabwe, *The Revolution Will Eat Its Children (Anthem for Uncle Bob)*, has received little airplay.

As the first line of *Great Heart*, that unofficial South African anthem goes, “The world is full of strange behaviour.” That is Johnny Clegg the anthropologist speaking. But then there’s that hopeful voice, never quelled for long in Clegg’s lyrics: “I know I can make it on my own if I try/But I’m searching for a great heart to stand me by/ Underneath the African sky ...”