

Interview Marcel van Heerden

28th April 2014: Bezuidenhout Valley

Interviewer: Vanessa Cooke

VC: OK Marcel. Just an introduction. How did you come to be involved in theatre?

Mv: In theatre?

VC: In theatre.

Mv: Um... my mother was an actress when she was young. Um...when my brother, I mean very young. She was like sixteen when she finished matric. And then she was part of the touring companies for about six years. When my brother and I were born um... she, she couldn't keep it up. Also the lifestyle, they had with my father. And er..., and then when we were teenagers, she started directing plays again. Amateur plays. And she, she basically started the Klein Libertas in Stellenbosch. The club existed before that, but she er..., breathed life into it, and it became, and it's still...

VC: The theatre. The open air theatre.

Mv: No, no that's...

VC: Libertas.

Mv: The Groot Libertas – but the Klein Libertas.

VC: Oh I know, I know exactly.

Mv: Yes. So um that preceded the Libertas Amphitheatre. So yes I was um... around performances and um... people working on plays, rehearsing and watching my mother work. That's how I,my passion for it started. And when I went to study, it seemed the logical thing to do.

VC: And then how did you come to Joburg?

Mv: Um...

VC: And how did your...?

Mv: The first time I worked in Joburg was with Barney Simon. Um... The Space Theatre opened in Cape Town 1972 and I was a first year student. There was a production and the Downstairs opened with Athol Fugard's STATEMENTS AFTER AN ARREST UNDER THE IMMORALITY ACT, and Upstairs we had a play called GILGAMESH, which was not really a play. It was um... a kind of silent, dance theatre.

VC: Was that with Alex Mavro?

Mv: Alex Mavro, Tessa Marwick –

VC: And was Michael Light, Michael Light. What was his name? No.

Mv: No it's going to take time if we try to remember all the names but Midge Pike was the musician.

VC: Ja.

Mv: And um I got involved in that through Jacqui, because Jacqui Singer and I were in a relationship at the time and she was, she'd just finished studying and she was one of the um er... first people, the founding members of the Space Theatre.

VC: Mm.

Mv: With Brian Astbury, Yvonne Bryceland and Athol Fugard was involved as well um... Barney came to Cape Town to see, to be there for the opening of the Space and he saw the show that we did called GILGAMESH. Um and um he started talking to me and said that he'd like to work with me. So at the end of that year, during the university holidays I came to Joburg to do my first theatre work here, which was with him. And that was DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS – Eugene O'Neill play with Nerina Ferriera translated into Afrikaans and um... Barney did an adaptation um...he wanted to um somehow once we started talking he kind of became convinced that it should be done in Afrikaans. Um and it ja, the was the first show. It was Carel Trichardt and Aletta Bezuidenhout. I then went back to Cape Town, finished my studies, came back here and um in '76 and the Market Theatre started that same year.

VC: Ja you were in MARAT/ SADE.

Mv: Ja. So that's how I got into theatre and that's how I came to Johannesburg.

VC: OK.

Mv: That's what you asked me isn't it?

VC: Yes

(they laugh)

VC: Yes. And then OK MARAT /SADE we know was 35 people.

Mv: Yes.

VC: On the stage.

Mv: Uh huh.

VC: And what do you remember particularly about that?

Mv: MARAT/ SADE was an extraordinary process. It's um I mean it's the, I don't know if this is the time to say it, what the full title is THE PERSECUTION AND ASSASSINATION OF MARAT AS PERFORMED BY THE INMATES OF THE CHARENTON ASYLUM ON THE DIRECTION OF THE MARQUIS DE SADE. Um and it's this dialectic between the classical Marxist and the Extreme Individualist um.... My understanding anyway.

VC: Ja.

Mv: Um so it was a very brave and a very clever um show I think for – to set the tone of what the Market Theatre was going to be about. And the show for me, I mean I was one of a big group of Ensemble Actors as you've mentioned . I played, I played the – Barney rolled more than one part into two – more than two parts. For the one person I played which was the character who does the Lord's Prayer to Satan and other one who had the speech about "Man is a mad animal". Um.... those were my two big monologues. But for the rest I was one of the inmates. Er... the process was um...

was totally extraordinary. He sent us into the city to go and look at people on the streets and to see if we could find our characters um and as you know, I mean you were playing one of the lead characters um and um Newtown at that stage was not the Cultural Precinct it became. It was um... There was a slaughter house shortly before we moved in there and the smell of it was very strong around there so it um I don't know I always associated that smell or the abattoir with MARAT /SADE.

VC: Ja.

Mv: Personally. There was that, you know. When I did that speech about walking on the skulls of people um... it's kind of – I've always had that smell in my nose. But that was my personal experience.

VC: And then, I don't know what you did in between. Next play I've got is MOTHER COURAGE.

Mv: Maybe I should get my CV out quickly.

VC: Ja.

Mv: Can you pause it coz I might forget.

VC: Ja, coz this I got from the book.

Mv: OK here we go. Theatre. Um right. Do you want to be able to look at this?

VC: You can give me a copy, if you can, at some stage.

Mv: Well just look at this one as we go. You can see. I'll just quickly tell you which were Market Theatre.

VC: Okay.

Mv: BEGEERTE, TEN BULLS was not. MARAT/ SADE then I moved to Johannesburg. VOICE OF THE WHALE – that was the Michael Blake.

VC: VOICE OF THE WHALE okay.

Mv: Then there was, then I did ?? there were various little things like Breyten Breytenbach poetry on his birthday, while he was in prison. I read his poems on his birthday every year, to the public.

VC: You see that's interesting. That's not in the book.

Mv: You know it was at the Market Theatre, um... EAST.

VC: EAST.

Mv: Market Theatre.

VC: MOTHER COURAGE.

Mv: MOTHER COURAGE, CINCINATTI. Where then.

VC: EQUUS.

Mv: No it wasn't at the Market.. oh it was, ja, ja.

VC: Believe it or not.

Mv: COLD STONE JUG.

Mv: MOTHER COURAGE, CINCINATTI, WIERETUIN, COLD STONE JUG and SLOPER?

VC: Ja I've got SLOPER.

Mv: Round there 1980.

VC:' 81 there's a mention of it.

Mv: Um I think it was on '80 because VERLATE SKOOLMEISIE happened in '81 after that and that was at the Baxter.

VC: Oh Okay.

Mv: That was also Baxter ?? that was..

VC: Market.

Mv: I've got that one.

VC: BRECHT ON BRECHT I've got.

Mv: SLOPER that was not at the Market.

VC: Breyten '82 '83.

Mv: OUTERS.

VC: Ja.

Mv: OUTERS you've got.

VC: Ja.

Mv: BLOODKNOT '87. That was the last time I worked with Barney, ja. So and then after that at the Market I did um the CRUCIBLE yes with Lara Foot.

VC: Yes what year was that?

Mv: 1997.

VC: Oh that was late we're not going that far. So that's June.

Mv: OK so those are all the Market Theatre productions.

VC: Cool.

Mv: Alright so you've got all of those. Right.

VC: Ja.

Mv: Okay.

VC: Okay.

Mv: Good.

VC: Okay um...

Mv: Yup.

VC: MOTHER COURAGE and WHALE were the same year.

Mv: Same.

VC: Same year?

Mv: Same year.

VC: 1977.

Mv: Yes yes yes. Um... MOTHER COURAGE what are you asking?

VC: Well remember it didn't do very well.

Mv: Mm.

VC: MOTHER COURAGE.

MV: Ja.

VC: But, but we all thought that it was good work.

Mv: Yes.

VC: And I always remember thinking I never understand why it did so badly.

Mv: Mm. Mm.

VC: Whether it was Brecht or whether it was Barney.

Mv: The timing perhaps.

VC: The timing. I mean it, it. I never understood it. I think if it had been done later.

Mv: Ja.

VC: People would have understood it better.

Mv: I did a very small part in that um... I was really a supporting role. I was an officer um so (pause) ja look I don't have a, I can't...

VC: Big memory about it.

Mv: Big, big memory of it you know.

VC: Okay.

Mv: The biggest memory was the night I had the broken tooth. And one night I came up on stage and I had to be this, start this passionate speech to Yvonne Bryceland. As I started speaking my tooth flew...

VC: (laughs)

Mv: And I caught it.

(both laugh)

Mv: In the light I caught it and I stuck it back in my mouth and it kind of somehow stuck and then I remember saying to Yvonne, after the show "Did you notice something?" She said "You were – you can take it down about you know." Just too weird. The memory I have of that show.

VC: And VOICE OF THE WHALE?

Mv: It was a, it was a sort of a Sunday afternoon um... you know Cedric [Sundstrom] used to organize these kind of soirees type of thing.

(they laugh)

Mv: and Michael Blake the composer had, had written this new piece and so Cedric got somebody to, actually I can't remember who, to direct me um um... a movement er, to do a movement expression thing, to the music. Now I remember I was in just about nothing.

VC(laughs)

Mv: I was in a g-string and covered in baby oil.

VC: My god.

Mv: Swimming around the floor.

VC: Okay right.

Mv: And that's what and I remember someone not pitching for rehearsal and then it messed up the one performance – anyway that's all I can remember.

VC: About it okay and then Breyten Breytenbach you did, you read on his birthday.

Mv: Yes ja.

VC: Your initiative.

Mv: That was organized. I see on the list here there are two of them on the list that I did at the Market Theatre, but there were others I think the year that I moved to Johannesburg also I read it, I read his stuff um... but that was at Wits or, or some other venue.

VC: Right.

Mv: It was organized by his friends by John Myers, Neils Coetzee, his friends, ja.

VC: And did he know about it?

Mv: Yes.

VC: Yes.

Mv: Yes he also smuggled poems out of prison which were we, which I read..

VC: Read ja.

Mv: Which was great because they'd never been published. They only existed for then you know.

VC: Ja fantastic.

Mv: Mm.

VC: Can I – EQUUS.

Mv: It was with Mario Schiess.

VC: Mm.

Mv: I played the horse.

VC: Mm.

Mv: Nugget. I enjoyed that a lot. That was a good production. It was with Marius Weyers and Aletta Bezuidenhout in the leads and a young boy called Jacques Malan.

VC: It was in Afrikaans.

Mv: Ja.

VC: And Bo Peterson, a young Bo Peterson as the girl um... – I thought it was a really a really fine production.

Mv: I remember that.

VC: Mm.

Mv: Cos it was also Afrikaans which...

VC: Ja

Mv: was unusual.

VC: At that stage.

Mv:Ja.

VC: And then we get to EAST.

Mv: Ooh that was an amazing experience. Um it was er... who's the writer again?

VC: Steven Berkoff.

Mv: Berkoff – first time I'd heard of Berkoff. Um Barney wanted to do it um... with Ron and I. Lesley Knott was in it. Peter Piccolo was in it um... and David Eppel but we couldn't perform it the public because it would have been you know, it would have been taken off straight away because it's so full of swear words, profanity, there may have been some nudity. Er... and so we performed it in the Laager, before it was actually even the Laager.

VC: It was the Café still.

Mv: Yes.

VC: Ja.

Mv: On tables um... and I, I had to learn a Cockney accent, well Londoner, East End accent, which was tough very tough for me and it was wildly energetic and wildly er..., it was a, I thought it was a beautiful show. I was so inside it I can't really tell. I know you saw it.

VC: Ja, no it was amazing. Really was.

Mv: It, it felt really...

VC: And we'd never really heard of Berkoff.

Mv: Amazing yes it was great to be in. One of my biggest memories of that was when we were rehearsing I'd been reading a book on the Hell's Angels by um... Hunter Thompson.

VC: Yes.

Mv: And one of the things he mentions in the book is that these Hells Angels would kiss in public. Big open mouthed kisses.

VC: The men ja.

Mv: The men – just to shock people. And er... I told this to Barney.

VC: Oh you shouldn't have.

Mv: And of course you know.

VC: (laughs)

Mv: Ron and I had to kiss.

(they laugh) and at a certain point we had, had to have a passionate kiss, and you know Ron.

VC: Ja.

Mv: Ron doesn't hold back hey.

VC: No he was doing it for Barney.

Mv: Yes and the biggest challenge was that he wanted us to, after the kiss to say. Hey man you know how we enjoyed it.

VC: (laughs)

Mv: Ja so that was just one memory.

VC: Coz you were also in - now we get to CINCINATTI and that was..

Mv: That...

VC: Our big improvisation play.

Mv: CINCINATTI for me was a massive turning point in my, in my career. BEGEERTE was the first big part I ever played and um... that was – I'm sorry I'm just going back to BEGEERTE.

VC: No that's fine.

Mv: But that kind of um... taught - that was the beginning of a mentorship which has never really stopped, you know in terms of theatre. That's my reference – is um... is, is the work I did with Barney that is still the way I approach theatre – and film to a certain extent. But especially theatre. Um... I mean we discussed that in the interview you (sic) did for World in an Orange um... so the work process and all of that, you know is in that, I don't know ...

VC: I mean I think you should talk about what you remembered.

Mv: You see, when you worked with Barney the work never stopped .

VC: That's true.

Mv: I lived with him. I lived in his house when we did BEGEERTE. I was 21 years old and um... it was a major journey. It was, you know, by the time you went on stage you were so informed with all the kinds of stuff. You could hardly, you couldn't really do anything wrong because everything had been, everything was so absolutely specific what your intentions were and um...

VC: There was no question of making a mistake really.

Mv: Not really because you were so inside it that you, you know, um ja exactly. You know you can – also...

VC: ??

Mv: When you're that age there's no problem with memorizing lines or anything like that. So um... anyway so by the time we did CINCINATTI. I think I'd grown to really understand how, how he functioned um and again, you know, we were sent out to, to find characters and stuff. Not really in my case, it wasn't so much as finding a character um. Let me try and be succinct about this. Um... In our friendship, my friendship with Barney he asked about ones' life a lot as you know.

VC: Ja.

Mv: Um... he loved stories so he, you know he asked, he knew so much about me, by then about my how I grew up. My mother etc you know my mother was an important force in my life. I grew up without a father etc and he also knew that I used to go as a child by train to go visit my grandmother, had this little plot on the Orange River and I used to go there, visit the people there. The foreman and his wife, and it was a very, very simple life. There was no electricity, no running water and I, I just loved going into the veld with the sheep so um... and I had a relationship with the little coloured boys from the areas. Friendships you know. And I spent weeks just being in the veld.

VC: In the holidays, did you go there in the holidays?

Mv: Ja Um. And even getting there was a whole journey. It was like a train journey to De Aar and then you had to swop trains and then you eventually go to Putsonderwater, I think, and then you got on a bus, and then the bus took you to near where the place was and they fetched us by donkey cart from there. So it was like a journey that I went on, you know, and he kind of got into that.

VC: For you guys.

Mv: Also there was a, a young guy who um worked on the railways. He was the son of this family.

VC: Ah.

Mv: And he, I even slept over at his - he stayed in a hostel in De Aar railway hostels, and on one of these journeys I slept over there. And so what Barney did, is he kind of said to me I must imagine being that guy, Koos.

VC: Coming to Jo'burg.

Mv: Koos – my character had a different name – um arriving in Johannesburg from that place. That very isolated and um deep rural kind of place. Arriving in Johannesburg and then I dressed we found clothes for him, we found a suitcase for him.

VC: I always remember the suitcase.

Mv: And I went, he sent me to the station just talking to, to people. and that's where this er and the er that was, the station in fact a pickup place for gay men.

VC: Yes.

Mv: Ja.

VC: Park Station.

Mv: More than one.

VC: Ja.

Mv: guy tried to pick me up um... And I always just acted this very simply guy who was completely...

VC: Oblivious.

Mv: Oblivious to their intentions.

VC: Right.

Mv: Um... and that set him off on a – on a thought process. Ron's character, who was an immigrant.

VC: And secretly gay wasn't he?

Mv: Yes so he had us meeting at the station. He had Sam, Sam Williams, as the um...

VC: Night-watchman.

Mv: Night-watchman, on the station and ...

VC: And you also met Thoko.(Ntshinga)

Mv: Thoko – the white side and the black side. So I wandered onto the black side of the station and got chased out by Sam.

VC: Ooh he was very fierce.

Mv: Ja so that's where those scenes came about. So it, you know. By the time, by the time we were actually playing the parts, it was formed, that whole.

VC: Ja.

Mv: You know I knew what the room looked like in De Aar, you know, I came from.

VC: You had the whole history.

Mv: I know what, that it was like on - what this character's mother and father were like. I knew what it was like on the trains etc etc you know. All of that.

VC: Was already there.

Mv: Was already there, which is an incredible gift for an actor.

VC: Mm.

Mv: Because you've got the whole life...

VC: Ja.

Mv:... of the character. You know, there's no guess work.

VC: No. no pretending of...

Mv:No.

VC: No.

Mv: And ja, you know, so um... and I think its echoed in my work, and in my life. CINCINATTI – er..., that there in a way I mean now I'm, I'm in my 60's and I still feel like, in terms on Johannesburg, I still feel like that outsider, Afrikaans guy who came here.

VC: That never changed, hey?

Mv: It doesn't actually change because you see, it was, it's also a class thing. Very much a class thing as well. You know, you, you see you are the, you're not the guy who grew up in Waterkloof or Afrikaans Stellenbosch.

VC: ??

Mv: He's from a working class background.

VC: But it was so beautiful the way Barney allowed that to happen.

Mv: Mm.

VC: Didn't try to make him bitter or –

Mv: He...

VC: ...and that was it.

Mv: Yes I mean he...

VC: That was you in a way.

Mv: It was terrifying innocence, I remember, that's how he described it. It's not that he's a racist. He just doesn't know anything else.

VC: No.

Mv: It's not that he er...

VC: Beats people up.

Mv: No – you know thinks that black people are bad. He's they just like...

VC: Alien.

Mv: Aliens no different to what is and everything is, so you know, and but of course he's grown up in this privileged white South Africa.

VC: But he wasn't that privileged.

Mv: No and I think that's what's interesting is...

VC: Ja.

Mv: It's that class, class thing.

VC: Mm. Ja.

Mv: In its own way.

VC: Okay then.

Mv: And then I end up with you.

VC: Yes.

Mv: And then you give me a bed.

VC: Yes. Give you a bed.

Mv: Sleep ??

VC: You come to the club with Ron.

Mv: Yes.

VC: I was just there at the club dancing.

Mv: Yes.

VC: As was my wont in those days.

Mv: Ah hah. Of course there was invented stuff that we wrote together.

VC: Mm.

Mv: The story about my aunt, his auntie trying to seduce him. Stuff like that I got from, one gets from the life, then you fictionise it gets but, but what I also want to say about CINCINATTI, I must stop now, is that it was the first time that I understood that I could play a comedy.

VC: Yes.

Mv: Um and it's been a reference point for me, in terms of comedy ever since.

VC: ??

Mv: Um those scenes with Ron and I on the bench er... the timing and the, the earnest, the earnest the serious playing comedy in a serious way.

VC: Yes (laughs) you weren't playing comedy at all.

Mv: Yes and the stakes being that high.

VC: Ja.

Mv: You know.

VC: And the people understanding the whole thing.

Mv: Yes.

VC: And laughing.

Mv: It was a major lesson in my comedy function.

VC: I think it was a major work for all of us.

Mv: Ja ja.

VC: Then we did a show called DRY DREAMS. Do you remember? It was a protest play.

Mv: It was a once off hey?

VC: Donald Howarth.

Mv: Yes it was a once off.

VC: Mannie wouldn't pay his airfare back to London.

Mv : (laughs) Is that what it was?

VC: So he wrote a play. We performed it as a protest against Mannie. We called ourselves the Fleamarket Players.

Mv: (laughs)

VC: Coz we couldn't afford to come to the Market.

Mv: It was the Venus de – David, David the state of David.

VC: It was ridiculous.

Mv: I wore only a leaf I think.

VC: And I wore a kimono, or something weird. Whatever those Geisha girls wear. (Laughs) But that was fun.

Mv: It's not on my CV.

VC: No I'm sure it isn't. It's not on mine either. Then there was Brecht n Brecht well there were a lot that year. There was SLOPER which you say is '80s actually. Then OUDISE, BRECHT ON BRECHT were all in 1981. I don't know when COLD STONE JUG - that was quite early as well.

Mv: No that was later.

VC: But we did BRECHT ON BRECHT which was meant to be a sequel to CINCINATTI in some ways. Do you remember?

Mv: Yes.

VC: And then it didn't work.

Mv: That's right.

VC: And so all of us who were gonna be in that sequel. Had to do BRECHT ON BRECHT.

Mv: That's right that's right.

VC: We had two weeks or something.

Mv: It was extremely tough.

VC: Terrible it was scary.

Mv: Mm.

VC: Actually.

Mv: Ja ja I - the pieces that I remember was – I don't know if we have go into that in detail now. Um... was the actor chasing his hat.

VC: Oh yes.

Mv: That long poem that I had to do. It was like a rap.

VC: Oh yes.

Mv: Rap poem, a soldier talking. They were carrying me around, and I was dead. That was really difficult for me.

VC: And Lesley had a difficult one as well, the Jewish wife.

Mv: Yes.

VC: There were lots of very hard things in there.

Mv: Yeah.

VC: One thing that it did teach me, probably you as well was if something is not working you have to give it up, which was the project.

Mv: Ja.

VC: That we had to give up. Sadly but –

Mv: Yes .

VC: And Mannie was wrong. Mannie just wanted something in the theatre.

Mv: Oh I remember now. We did some improvisations with Lesley.

VC: Mm.

Mv: I had to go to a nightclub with Lesley.

VC: Didn't work huh?

Mv: I had to, Lesley and I had to be naked at some point.

VC: Oh gosh.

Mv: Which was something else for her.

VC: Yes.

Mv: I didn't care so much.

VC: But I think it was a good lesson in a way.

Mv: Yes.

VC: I found in the future from that.

Mv: Mm.

VC: Okay it's not gonna work.

Mv: Absolutely.

VC: So stop.

Mv: Absolutely.

VC: So stop now.

Mv: Ja ja ja. Quite right um... you want to talk about SLOPER?

VC: Ja, ja I don't remember SLOPER.

Mv: Okay SLOPER which means demolisher um... was the beginning as far as I'm concerned, of, of, of Afrikaans protest music. I wanted to perform Johan van Wyk's poetry. I wanted people to hear his poetry. And other writers, having done Breyten Breytenbach. I just felt that they could say it so much better. The poets could say it so much better than the songwriters could, most of the songwriters.

VC: Ja.

Mv: you know, with exceptions like James Phillips.

VC: Ja James Phillips you see (refer to Carol). She didn't know who James Phillips was.

Mv: James he was a major guy, major guy. I mean that **Hou My Vas Korporaal** was an extraordinary protest song, um... Reggae Vibes is cool and so on. Um... ja I mean that's a whole other conversation but so I got together with Jeremy Crutchley um er... coz he is a guitarist.

VC: Right.

Mv: And er um... we tried to make Johan's poems into, into music. Um... it was performed in the front where later became the restaurant.

VC: Yes, yes.

Mv: We shared the evening – the late night show to us was Pieter Dirk Uys, trying out, just trying out poems things. Which was the beginning of his...

VC: Wow, of his van Aardes and that.

Mv: Of Evita Bezuidenhout.

VC: That's right.

Mv: All of that.

VC: That's right.

Mv: That was the beginning of Evita actually, after he's written commercial plays and so on. It was, it was directed by Chris Pretorius and it was just, it like really just throwing a zap at the audience. It was very wild and very um... anarchic and we ended it with a that long poem that was um... written by the Plastic- the Czechoslovakian Provo group – the Plastic People of the Universe um... and it was a piece called They are Afraid which Johan van Wyk translated and adapted from this for South Africa. It was a list of the hundreds and one things that people or scared of – um... and it's, it's very political um... you know, and then it becomes more and more absurd, you know, they not only afraid of democracies and of the Bantustans, I mean democracies of – they were scared of typewriters of roneo machines.

VC: (laughs) Roneo machines.

Mv: Afrol masjiene (they laugh) Um... they scared of – and they become scared of the ants in the walls, the ants in their lawns and the in their walls, and um... you know, and then they scared in their huge houses, and they scared etc, etc it's hard to explain. Then it ends with they are 101% scared. Hulle is honderd en een persent bang. So why should we be scared of them? So that was the statement really.

VC: Ja.

Mv: Er... so that's what SLOPER was. And that was then um... which got me to later start the band Koos.

VC: Right.

Mv: Um...and then alternative – then they came to us. We were playing pool in town, and then these people came to see us and they said we're going to change our names we gonna call ourselves Johannes Kerkorrel. I'm going to call myself Koos, Koos Kombuis then actually it was before, so on and so on – let's organize a big concert and that was Die Eerste Alternatiewe Afrikaanse Rock Konsert and then we met and they said let's start this thing called Voelvry and Neil Goodalls didn't want to go on tour.

VC: Oh God.

Mv: Then we only played at Wits. They wouldn't allow us to play at, we said Okay we'll play the universities, played at Wits and they wouldn't allow us at Tukkies and they wouldn't allow us at RAU.

VC: Scared.

Mv: Us. They allowed other bands but not us.

VC: Not you.

Mv: And then they went ton tour and that started the Voelvry so SLOPER was...

VC: So that started there.

Mv: Stated there with SLOPER. Um anyway so that was SLOPER. OUDISIE OM DIE EINDE VAN DIE AARDE TE VERHOED. Can I talk about that?

VC: Yes please, I don't know, I don't remember that.

Mv: OUDISIE OM DIE EINDE VAN DIE AARDE TE VERHOED means Audition to prevent the end of the earth – was based very strongly on the Baader Meinhof gang.

VC: Okay.

Mv: Um er... and it was not so long after they all died in prison, and I, it was, there were three characters on stage. It was me and a woman called er... oh god just wait I'll have to check. I can tell you.

VC: I can look it up.

Mv: Leona Botma, Leona Botma who wasn't an actress and never became an actress. It was Leona Botma and me. Dale Cutts um... and the set up was basically these two these two people, people who had obviously , the Baader Meinhof, based very strongly on, on Andreas Baader and a combination of Ulrike Meinhof and Enskyn so it was the two of them in hiding and there was a television set in the centre of the stage. There was a live chicken and there was a bath. I heard about some strip show a woman did in her bath, and I wanted to, I wanted to have a bath onstage.

VC: Right.

Mv: So John Nankin directed it and he actually did plumbing so –

VC: It worked.

Mv: Practical bath. So er...we, we recorded videos of that looked like reality, it looked like stuff that could be on TV, but it became just a little bit strange.

VC: Off, mm.

Mv: And we also actually had the TV on sometimes.

VC: You had the SABC you mean.

Mv: You see.

VC: Yeah.

Mv: So sometimes the audience would be watching the SABC TV you know. All be just didn't realise that they were just sitting there watching TV. And then these other things would be cut in and...

VC: So it was all weird.

Mv: Ja.

VC: Ja.

Mv: Ja but it would be – it didn't appear weird.

VC: Mm.

Mv: It was just like what are we...

VC: ...watching.

Mv: Fuck this actually.

VC: ??

Mv: It seems real but it's – can this be you know. So it was like that and Dale was actually the writer, okay of the, of the, he played the writer.

VC: The writer ja.

Mv: So there was this writer called Wessel Pretorius, who was Johan van Wyk, taped all two monologues – all he talks about is this disastrous relationship with women.

VC: (laughs)

Mv: His car.

VC: Chevrolet whatever.

Mv: Ja and his writing, because he's writing, so um... and as I said there was a live chicken as well. So the play starts with a song called It's A Rainy Day with Leona and I arriving on plastic raincoats and then I take my coat off and I've got nothing on underneath and I get into the bath.

VC: I think I remember that.

Mv: The audience is very close to us – it's like because you see we didn't want to talk politics we wanted also to challenge the censorship and all the sexual taboos.

VC: Ja.

Mv: You know which, um especially in the Afrikaans world which I think was a very big thing. Um... the Calvinist world.

VC: Thick.

Mv: Thick ja. So I spent a lot to the play lying in the bath.

VC: (laugh)

Mv: With people like this close (indicates) from me, you know. Showering, washing my hair.

VC: Just carrying on normally.

Mv: Carrying on and what was very nice is that she sat often on the bath watching me. Also the audience were watching her, watching me. And ja, it was, as I said, about the Baader Meinhof, the basic the bottom line was that if there are Afrikaans people who feel that if things don't change politically then they may just want to start plant bombs.

VC: Violence ja.

Mv: There could be violence ja. Because they end up in the electric chair – in the play ja. The chicken. He takes the chicken and walks down on the railway lines – out onto the railway lines.

VC: Was it in the Laager?

Mv: Yes.

VC: Yes.

Mv: It was in December so it was warm but we had the doors open so that audience could see out.

VC: So they could see him walk off with the chicken.

Mv: So he walks off with the chicken. He comes back with a dead chicken.

VC: Oh that must have freaked...

Mv: It freaked the hell out of them (laughs). Because we had one in formalin you know. And we auditioned the chickens. The one that made the most noise was the one.

VC: Quacks.

Mv: The one that had its head chopped off. The other one played the part. And so he interrogates the chicken and stuff like – anyway. So that was what OUDISIE was about.

VC: It was a proper protest play.

Mv: Absolutely.

VC: Ja.

Mv: To me that was a very, very important...

VC: I do have...

Mv: ...piece of work.

VC:...memories, certain.

Mv: John still wants to...

VC:...Images.

Mv: ...bring it back.

VC: John Nankin.

Mv: He wants to do it now. In Cape Town. Er... anyway.

VC: He was amazing actually. Okay then we get to OUTERS. Or do we get to COLD STONE JUG before that?

Mv: I don't know it's on my...

VC: But OUTERS.

Mv: I think it was COLD STONE JUG yeah.

VC: Yes.

Mv: Well COLD STONE JUG was – I think an extraordinary piece of theatre. Ja it's Herman Charles Bosman in prison.

VC: Ja.

Mv: Um... also an ensemble piece and I mean I liked played a transvestite.

VC: Yes that's right.

Mv: Ja, a character that Barney invented. He's not in the book.

VC: Stephen Gray must have loved that.

Mv: Stephen Gray liked that. He's not in the book so ja so he was the rabbit, you know, he was this...

VC: I remember that very well.

Mv: And also very much an Afrikaans boy, a moffie who ends up in prison and finds er..., finds his life there. It's like KING RAT.

VC: Mm.

Mv: You know that is his life. It actually makes more sense for him to be there.

VC: To be there.

Mv: He has a far stronger identity being a rabbit in prison than...

VC: ...he did before.

Mv: He wouldn't survive outside, you see, which is fascinating you know.

VC: Nice part, hey.

Mv: Mm great part for me, ja. Um... and ja and you know a major journey that he took me on, you know, just to – discovering that sexuality.

VC: Ja.

Mv: Um – of course I had to rehearse in a dress.

VC: Of course!

Mv: (laughs) Can I take this one out? (refers to the dog).

VC: You want to go down (to the dog).

Mv: She's not going to.

VC: Okay I'm not going to look at her.

Mv: Alright. Where are we? COLD STONE JUG.

VC: COLD STONE JUG.

Mv: Well COLD STONE JUG was for me some of the best theatre work I've ever done. Even up to this day. Um... I played two parts in it. I played Stoffels the condemned prisoner in the first scene.

VC: Oh yes, yes.

Mv: Where um... Mike O'Brien – it was Mike O'Brien who played Bosman where he ends up in the condemned cell.

VC: Yes.

Mv: And Stoffels – it's a big scene between them and then Stoffels gets taken off to hang – to be hanged.

VC: You played that as well.

Mv: Then I came back – then I played Jakes. For the rest of the show.

VC: I saw um... – Mncedisi Shabangu did a production.

Mv: Mm.

VC: Did you see that one? He did it, it was black prisoners.

Mv: No, I would have liked to have.

VC: It was amazing actually.

Mv: Same script.

VC: Ja same script. He got the same feeling as you guys had.

Mv: Mm. Mm.

VC: It was interesting . Then we get to OUTERS.

Mv: Ja OUTERS um... you weren't in that?

VC: No.

Mv: No.

VC: It was Marie [Human] and Lida [Meiring].

Mv: Mm.

VC: Mm.

Mv: Well um... at that stage of my life I didn't really want to play the part but ?? because of survival I played a lot of bad guys on television.

VC: Oh right.

Mv: Um... just like obvious casting you know. And because I did it well once they kept on casting me as that. And I had to take the job because if money um... so he was like a Judas figure. He was a real sort of snake of a... in the story.

VC: Mm.

Mv: Um... and I didn't, in retrospect I had no foot to stand on really – it's absolute bullshit um... you know for me not wanting to play a bad guy. It was nonsense.

VC: (laughs)

Mv: Um... so.

VC: So you kind of...

Mv: I kind of pushed against it.

VC: ??

Mv: No but I did.

VC: You did in the end.

Mv: Ja absolutely. It was through going in the streets um... I mean that was – the process was fantastic because he, we would arrive at work in the morning and then um... discuss what happened the previous day and then dress down.

VC: And go out.

Mv: And go into the city.

VC: I once met Marius in Bok Street – ja I was just doing whatever I was doing and I said “Marius,” and he said “Go away, go away. Don’t look at me, don’t talk to me.”

Mv: Ja.

VC: (laughs)

Mv: Um... he sent us out with one big rule – no money, not allowed to carry any money, and we had to watch tramps, watch how they lived, people who were down and out, people on the streets um and if possible beg for money which is really tough.

VC: Hard.

Mv: You know, the first time you had to do it and er...

VC: It’s the way people look at you, as well.

Mv: Ja and you see the other thing so well particularly for Marius and for me.

VC: You were known.

Mv: We were very well known on television so people recognised us and I also couldn’t stay in a group. I mean you couldn’t put me and Marius...

VC: No.

Mv: ...together, Guys [de Villiers] wasn’t that well known yet um... who else, was being recognised? It was mostly us, um... maybe Nicky Rebelo to a certain extent um... but - so people did recognise me and they’d say “No but you so and so. “ You know and then you’d have to say no.

VC: Leave me alone. Go away.

Mv: Then we’d come back in the afternoon and tell our stories which we taped and then transcribed and then he shaped it into a story. A proper narrative. Um... but it was a tough process. Very tough. I remember walking down from the Market to here (his house) to Bertrams where there was a home, like a shelter.

VC: Jessie’s Mission. That one. No.

Mv: It used to be an old boxing gym. There was a shelter down there and I remember walking to the shelter and asking for food and they gave me some stale bread and some very thin soup. In fact they didn't even have soup, it was just bread.

VC: Old bread.

Mv: Ja and tea, I think. But it was, was an amazing process, you really, you. I think you never looked at tramps in the same way again.

VC: No.

Mv: We had to make up your mind, are you giving people stuff or not.

VC: Ja.

Mv: Then there's BLOOD KNOT.

VC: BLOOD KNOT.

Mv: That was with John Kani and I um, and er... the last time I worked with Barney er... it was a wonderful, wonderful experience um... he kind of felt that you know, South African actors should, all should at one stage play Johnnie, in er... PEOPLE...

VC: HELLO AND GOODBYE.

Mv: HELLO AND GOODBYE, it's Johnnie right?

VC: Right.

Mv: And Laurie, what is name. Laurie in BLOOD KNOT. Ja no it was amazing.

VC: Was that the fist Fugard that you'd done?

Mv: Yes. It was a very, it was a conventional process in a way. Far more conventional than...

VC: It was a script.

Mv: Ja because it was a script. We had to learn it um... to do it and halfway through, after the run started, Barney went away. I think the play suffered a bit.

VC: Mm.

Mv: Ja I mean, you know what – I'm not going to talk about John but he, he's different now, but in those days I think he used to dominate a bit.

VC: Mm.

Mv: So um... but still it was a very, very good...

VC: Experience.

Mv: Experience. Ja I don't know how good I was but I loved doing it.

VC: I think you were, as far as I remember.

Mv: Right (laughs).

VC: I can't remember anything. (laughs).

Mv: Well.

VC: And WIERETIUN?

Mv: WIERETIUN. Okay that was 1979.

VC: I'll look it up.

Mv: Ja.

VC: Okay.

Mv: Um.... Okay WIERETIUN. I did two short films with Chris Pretorius who was like 23 years old. He came back from studying art in New York and he wanted to do, he was quite influenced by the Futurists and the Dadaists and the um..., some quite obscure um... New York filmmakers and performance artists and he wanted, he saw me in CINCINATTI , he wanted to work with me so we did two short films. The one was called ANGST, 15 minute film um... and the other one was called DIE MOORD, and then he wanted to do more films, and I said to him "Listen you know it's such a process, it's such it's so hard to get money for films."

VC: So it was all for free.

Mv: "Such a mission you know, ja, um, I'm sure we can work at the Market if I, if we come up with something." So I got hold of Johan van Wyk's writing. He had a series of letters that he'd written.

VC: Okay.

Mv: Um, yo, he had a, a crush on (laughs).

VC: Chris or Johan?

Mv: Johan, he was in the same class as Jane Alexander you know Jane Alexander the sculptor?

VC: Yes.

Mv: This is like back in...

VC: Oh Lord.

Mv: History. So he had this big crush on Jane and then he wrote all these letters to her but he never sent them.

VC: Sent them, shame.

Mv: So it was these letters. Um... so we shaped that into a play.

VC: Okay.

Mv: Um which Chris directed. It was his first theatre directing. Bo [Petersen] was in it um... and we performed it in what's now the Barney Simon Theatre um... ja I think it was a, actually pretty good actually. It was a ...

VC: I think he's clever, Chris.

Mv: Mm. It started him off on a whole thing. He started the Glass Theatre.

VC: Yes I remember that.

Mv: Yes.

VC: And he found Robyn [Orlin].

Mv: Ja okay that was, that was WIERETUIN.

VC: Oh.

Mv: Wiere – seaweed.

VC: As opposed to diere- Garden of Algae.

Mv: Chris you know like it's a play on the word diere-tuin. But it's wiere, seaweed

VC: Amoeba and things.

Mv: No, no see? Seaweed.

VC: Oh Okay. Then there's CHLORINE, CHLORETTE.

Mv: That was a very fringe thing. It was. It was just performed I think once on the roof of the building across...

VC: ...of the office.

Mv: Of the offices, ja. Ivor Powell wrote the play. It was about. It was a relationship kind of play, but it was a very destructive relationship and it was also very kind of, what's the word, cerebral, I guess. Very complex piece of writing you know I...

VC: He was a journalist wasn't he?

Mv: Yes, yes. Um... and er ja so then um so I had this big bike accident so, I mean, they, they – well I could hardly walk you know but they wanted me in the play so, and I was the lead.

VC: (laughs).

Mv: So ja it was a tough one.

VC: Probably the audience thought that was your costume.

Mv: Yes.

VC: Ja.

Mv: It was, basically I was still in a brace.

VC: Shame.

Mv: Back brace and so on.

VC: And to get up those stairs.

Mv: Ja so we had to take the brace off just before the show started and I had to roll up and down – hectic, no it was a tough one um... I'm not sure how good it was.

VC: Ja I just remember the hair and a few other things from that night.

Mv: Hm?

VC: I just remember your hair being shaved off.

Mv: Ja.

VC: Not much else I must say.

Mv: John Nankin had these massive weights on his boots.

VC: Ja that's right.

Mv: So he walked very, very slowly and there was another guy on roller skates.

VC: That's right.

Mv: Who moved extremely quickly.

VC: It was a performance art piece.

Mv: Performance art piece ja.

VC: That's what one can call it. (pause). Just to end off – The Market Theatre now obviously we're not just talking about the building, formed a large part of your theatre career.

Mv: Ja.

VC: So what does it mean to you?

Mv: I have a kind of ambivalent feeling about it now because I mean I still love going there, watching plays but I kind of feel a little bit like um... it was my home, but more than my home, it was more like my church um... coz theatre in a way I think is like church. Its ritual you know and I think for an actor that's the purest place um... you don't disrespect the theatre because it's an appointment with an audience and it's an appointment that you have to keep um... and it's not, you know it's different every night. As it's a different group of people who come to, to have a ritual there. (pause) I drifted away from the Market. Also got very much into films. I had always had a passion for films but when I think of, of – if somebody had to ask me where do you, as a theatre person and that I mean almost like as a Christian or a Buddhist or as a whatever your belief system is, then I would consider that to be my, that was like my Mecca, it was my place of, you know that was my like Holy Place um... I still have that feeling about it. When I go that I still feel like I'm from there.

VC: It hasn't gone away completely.

Mv: In that was it has a unique, absolutely unique place in my life, and my life as at theatre practitioner um you know there's no other reference point.

VC: Ja.

Mv: That has that status, and that um... weight. Yes because, I think because it for me it was a place of truth, you know. That was, I mean. Most of the stuff I did there – we didn't mention THE CRUCIBLE.

VC: Oh right yes.

Mv: Which I did with Lara Foot but most of the, the vast majority of the work I did with Barney Simon and he um... he taught me that there's no other way except to go for the truth. And I don't mean that in a kind of clichéd, it's not like a, it maybe sounds a lot easier to say that it is.

VC: It's not an easy thing to do.

Mv: It's not an easy thing to do you know, but um... it kind of defined it, it defined me as an actor I guess. You know that's my reference point. That's when I'm really lost about how to go about things I remember, it comes back to me, those times when you stood on the stage and it was just you and Barney and that relationship that I will never, I'll never move away from that because that's really that thing of – "I don't believe you, you know. And until I believe you, this is not working."

VC: Can't go on. I remember crying my heart out.

Mv: You know, I mean you'd start to speak you'd say two lines and he'd stop you, because he knew where you were going. And I, it makes total sense to me. It's like a musician playing a chord and it's either sharp or it's flat or it's off, or it's the wrong chord, but you can immediately tell the song is not going to work, you know.

VC: And then you can do it until it does.

Mv: Yes you can find it and it was that, that kind of assistance.

VC: He didn't, he never gave up.

Mv: Mm. So to me the Market Theatre is the building where all of that took place and where I, kind of, um... wherever, whatever I do when I work on television or radio, whatever performance I do that's my, my true north you know.

VC: Ja. Thank you Marcel.

Mv: Sure.

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