Richard Fox, Mbongeni Khumalo and Nadine Botha

Interviewed by Alan Finlay

Richard Fox is a Johannesburg-based performance poet. His poetry has been published in various local journals, both print and online, as well as in anthologies of contemporary South African poetry. A manuscript of his poems Garamond 13 *was archived electronically on* donga *(http://www.donga.co.za/newsletters/nl1.html). He is currently working on a consolidated collection of his work which he hopes to publish in book form.*

Mbongeni Khumalo was born in Pimville/Klipspruit, Soweto, and his first book of poems, apocrypha, *was published by Timbila in 2003. A selection of his poems was also included in* Throbbing Ink *(Timbila, 2002). He has published his poetry and short stories widely in local journals, and read at numerous poetry gatherings.*

Nadine Botha self-published her first collection of poems, Compared to not eating tuna or chocolate, *in 2003. Her poetry has appeared in a number of poetry journals, both print and online, and she was included in a group of South African writers who read their work in Holland, at The Crossing Border Festival, in 2003. A book-length collection of her work is to be published by Deep South Publishers.*

This interview took place in Newtown, Johannesburg.

AF: …this place strikes me as quite desolate, at 12 o'clock on a Sunday morning. It is surprising because it's billed as the cultural hub, you know, the beginning of a cultural hub...

RF: Of Jo'burg, of South Africa...

AF: What is your experience like?

MK: It's usually like this on Sundays….

RF: It is pretty dismal. It's a case of you come here to sit down and have a drink and then poetry later, and then 12 o'clock in the morning

everyone is 'out to lunch'. So the cultural rejuvenation....something's amiss. What I see is, there's obviously not a lot of culture to rejuvenate.

NB: I think there's been a lot of corporate buy-in into this area. The problem is with getting artists to participate in the community.

RF: And they're also throwing out the artists: you know the artists living here in the streets and in the buildings. To rejuvenate the buildings they're kicking the artists out. People who create and write: so what type of cultural renewal are they trying to achieve? Ja, they're just trying to basically bring in the large corporates, once again….

NB: Unless there's a special event happening, say at Carfax or Horror Café, this place is deserted. There isn't a night culture. There has to be something specific happening.

RF: They're paying rejuvenation lip-service. That's what it is.

AF: What do you make of that guy who came up to us. Pretty desperate. He could hardly speak....

RF: It's maybe not my place to talk, but don't target the white guy. The white guy doesn't have the cash these days. As I'll say in my poem later on, I'm the white label still. But what can I do? I give where I can. At the moment I'm still thinking: I've got a whole day to get through. It's unfortunate. You get some guy walking up to you expecting you to fork out dollars. You can only do so much. Once a day you give something out, and then, hey....I don't really know what to do....

MK: My poetry's basically about those kind of people who are sociologically born bare naked. Some people are naturally born entitled to something. It's an inequality which is not natural, but man-made.

AF: I suppose the fact that you have destitute and quite basically messed up people in a cultural precinct raises exactly that question. The role of poetry or culture in this kind of society...

MK: Maybe that guy's a poet.

RF: Maybe we're so confused about our cultural surrounds that we passed one of our own on the street and stereo-typed him immediately. That's common in this country.

AF: Do you think there is still a difference in emphasis, in racial terms, between the concerns of younger white poets and black poets?

RF: There might be. The way I see it is, we're both in the same boat right now. In this post-apartheid society, where we're basically regenerating and rejuvenating ties between black and white. I don't know whether there's still so much an emphasis on black resistance poetry or poetry which shocks one into recognition of a situation or a system that is in place and now needs to be fought against. A white liberation poet might go up there and say now we need to take up the struggle again and integrate ourselves more completely. And so there might be some sort of bridge between black and white young poets at the moment working towards a common ground of expression.

NB: Any poet, black or white, is fundamentally a poet when it comes to their poetry. What they might be dealing with and what their social structures are, is them as a person, them as a political entity. But when it comes to the poetic space, you writing poetry and what material you put into that poetry is secondary to the actual structure of the art of poetry itself. And we're bound in seeing the world in a poetic way and a desire to say this is what we see, this is what we like, this is what we would like to see. It might come from a black perspective or white perspective. But there is either a satisfaction or a dissonance which we are trying to negotiate. I think we're bound by that.

MK: I distinguish between an individual voice and a public voice. For me the debate is still raging in my mind. Because every voice is public. Naturally I would be concerned with public issues. I'm part of society. I was born in the era of the fire. I was tear-gassed while I was still in my mother's womb. I was part of the Soweto youth throwing stones and I have smelt their stinking sweat. In a sense I am one of them. Yes, I'm one of them.

NB: What I'm saying is that you use language as a tool for expression, and in that moment of expression we are united. What words, what structures we like to use, what analogies we might use, what references to past experiences, we might not have experienced, we might have read about, we might not have read about, we're still negotiating the same reality, the South African reality at the moment. That expression, verbalising things, that public voice as you call it, is where we are united. Whether we openly content-wise share concerns, social issues or private issues, it is different negotiations of the same reality. Different levels of that negotiation. But at the same time it is a shared negotiation.

AF: Is there any shared negotiation between the beggar and any of us here? It seems to me his world is unrelated.

RF: We did meet in one place, over a particular need. A need to give, and the necessity to withhold. So we're basically in the same situation, the same boat. We meet from different points of view.

MK: I would argue that we're not on the same boat. Actually there are two boats. Although it is not necessarily racially demarcated, it is more or less a class demarcation. So you have this black mushrooming yuppie class, and the poetry that they write is sort of amnesic. They tend to forget their grannies, and where they come from. So I give it a class analysis. It's not necessarily a black-white kind of thing. Like last week I was reading to a German audience in Parkhurst. I find I can relate more to them than I can relate to some of my black friends.

NB: It's classist, but it's also 'knowledgist', or it's 'educationist', or something like that. If someone gives you an idea, it exists in your head, and distinguishes you from someone who doesn't have that idea.

AF: Mbongeni, although your poetry seems to be a public poetry in style, there is a sense of individual alienation that goes along with that....

MK: Dambudzo Marechera said that when he left the UK after Zimbabwe was independent he though that he would be accepted in Zimbabwe. But he was alienated in Zimbabwe. It was said that he had an alienated bourgeois lifestyle. He says: "I've been trotting the globe around, trying to find my people. It's like I'm a black person lost in a white skin". His cultural development was far ahead. So I am not sure I can say if I'm speaking from a private voice or a public voice. A poet must speak from a given perspective. Unless if you want to write propaganda or pamphlets. I also have a problem with politicians. Two years back I had to pull myself out of politics, because politicians want to put their own propaganda in your head, and no self-respecting poet worth his salt would do that.

NB: André Brink quoted someone at my graduation who said that artists dream us into the future. So Mbongeni's poetry expresses a dissatisfaction with the world as it is now, and is saying: do we really want this? It's asking you to question your status quo in terms of how you would like to take yourself into the future. And that is where Mbongeni's poetry is strongly political compared to mine. Although, I think we're united in the sense that we're asking people to say: what do you want to take into the future?

MK: Regarding André Brink, he said a writer or a poet is a sort of moral equivalent of a shaman or a physician. He is giving an x-ray of society and saying: either you accept this and take a cure or you ignore the diagnosis. From that perspective the writer or indeed the poet talks with an individual voice, although it may have public concerns.

AF: Is this individual voice an alienated voice? Do you feel your poetry is expressing that?

RF: I think poets speak out of alienation. They can step back from society and they can see the world we're living in. It's from that individualistic point of view that we can say you're existing, say: "I am different to all of this". Different because I believe in something that is apart from what's happening, and I would like to see something else. Alienated indeed. From the word go. I'm not starting to re-

acclimatize myself to the world, but rather starting to re-climatize the world to myself. Taking a visionary stance and hopefully....

MK: Poetry is a cry of desperation. Paul Laurence Dunbar said in a poem: I know why the caged bird sings. It is singing out of pain, it is beating its wings against the cage. It is a cry of desperation. If you listen to the bird in the cage, you think it is singing, whereas it is sort of lamenting.

AF: How is your poetry a response to this? Or, Nadine, in your case, maybe a sense of absence is more appropriate?

NB: For myself it gives me a sense of centredness. You receive a sense of re-habitation of yourself. Whereas the inhabitation, lack of habitation, might have inspired you to write in the first place. But it's also a sense of self-definition. An attempt at sketchy self-definition, for a moment.

AF: Your poetry seems to be defined by a negative space. What is Nadine not?

NB: Maybe that's it. I can define things through what is not.

MK: I think for me it's more or less a way of psychic cleansing. To use Marechera's phrase: my writing is a way of putting stitches to my soul. Either I write or I go mad. So it's a way of keeping my sanity.

RF: I agree. I write from pure psychological need. If you trap me in a room without a pen or piece of paper I will probably go mad, beating my fists against the wall. It's like an inner storm in me that needs to be quelled and once I've basically written it out on paper it's calm seas for a stretch of period. And then once again everything starts fighting itself and colluding against me inside and I need to strip it bare. And I have to say this is what I'm feeling, even if I don't understand my feelings, but this is what I need to get out of me and once it is basically externalized, you can then leave it and concentrate on yourself again. It is out there, you are content with yourself, you have appeased yourself in one way.

AF: What should the reader make of your use of language, play with language?

RF: What poets basically do is play games with words. It comes down to making language dance, making words move. And putting forward to people and saying I have done this thing. As Mbongeni says, outside the rules of language, that is how poets should work. Things are written, from propaganda pamphlets to school textbooks, within the bounds of language, and poets are taking a new route and saying let's redefine language, let's redefine the ways we can approach the world. It's essential to play with words. you have to take the word and make it do something it's not used to doing, and in that you have probably succeeded in some way.

AF: You're all city poets. Or are you?

RF: We like to think we're part of the urban stance, urban performance artists….

AF: Nadine, even though you grew up in the Free State?

NB: I don't know if that emphasizes the city to me, not having experienced it until maybe two years ago. I was talking to my art lecturer on Monday, talking about identity, and who we are, and how we define ourselves in language is a very Jo'burg trait. Jo'burg has a very metropolitan nature, a multi-racial engagement. We're forced to engage. We can't just sit back in our houses.

RF: It's the nature of Jo'burg to try and strip us of our identity as we fight against it. We then need to establish ourselves through our poetry, having been stripped, and defend ourselves from this onslaught.

NB: Also in the raw economic desire in Johannesburg, there's an anarchism that comes out in that morals are sublimated, prejudices are sublimated in the economic context. Which is kind of exciting. We live in an anarchistic world.

MK: I'm not sure. You're using anarchism in what sense? Unless you mean anarchistic confusion...

NB: Anarchism in the sense that there isn't a hegemonic force telling us that there is a way to be, a way to act. There is on a superficial level, in the way we live. In the suburbs that we live in, in the townships that we live in, but in our personal interactions, and our negotiations of the economic space and interactions with other people, we have to define it ourselves.

RF: There's a focus on entrepreneurship, maybe – literary or economically or politically. You feel you need to go out on your own and justify your existence.

MK: For myself there are no lines drawn by chalk on which I can walk in. There is this new school of rennaissance or ubuntu trying to push us along a particular line and if you are very analytical about words, you will know that the word ubuntu is derived from the word bantu, meaning it is a kind of bantuism in a sense. Therefore we are being channeled along a bantuist kind of path. Well I won't blame our president, because he's also a product of bantu education, so he will want us to come up with his version of bantuism. In my case I speak from a personal space, with no moral pillars that are being erected by people in power.

RF: That's the best place to write from. Create you own values and standards. Your own space in which to work.

MK: Poetry is an inverted state of consciousness. It carries you in levels and layers of thought. Though some people defile the language….

AF: Some people say that younger poets lack a sense of history…

MK: Someone said you must kick the corpse enough to make sure it is dead. In my case I am not sure if it is really a corpse. I have to give more kicks. History is not dead, it is pretty much alive.

RF: A ghost you can't get rid of.

NB: In South Africa we're asked to forget apartheid. At the same time there isn't really a memory of the last ten years. It's almost a blank space…

RF: A grey area…

NB: …There isn't really a memory to replace it with, a space to move into.

RF: Going straight back to the guy who wanted cash. What is his opinion of liberty and freedom? What is his opinion of the death of apartheid? The whip has changed hands. Our leaders are still our leaders and they're still separate from the people. Where's the change?

NB: I think there has been change, but I feel like it's empty space. Ten years of democracy are being celebrated at the moment, but I literally feel like I don't have a memory of the last ten years. Maybe it's just my age.

RF: We grew up, unfortunately, in the death of apartheid. By the time I realized what apartheid was, it was dying. I can read and understand history. but I don't really have such a great historical perspective of what is going on. So the ten years of freedom, they say it was a great change. But unfortunately I was politically inactive. Grossly.

AF: For you Mbongeni, is the present an empty space?

MK: For me actually, I think it is in a sense. I would say the black bourgeoisie have simply climbed into the ship of the white bourgeoisie, and the ship is still going in the same direction. For me apartheid wasn't necessarily the problem in itself. I believe those who were chasing apartheid were actually chasing a phantom. It was a scaffold erected to solidify a certain reality, which is colonialism. That goes far beyond 1948.

AF: So how, in your poems, how do they articulate the current space, how do you fill that space?

RF: We've got a job to do. We have to describe this era. It's a really important era. They're going to look back at the poets. The poets are the historians. We have to make something of this empty space. We have to work something into it. We fill it as best we can. What we are going to now, this Timbila reading. It is an essential part of poetry, the performance aspect. As poets we have an obligation to ourselves to be heard. Not just to write but to be read. We have to go up there and do it.

MK: I carry the substance of the past, but when I check around the container has changed or there is no container anymore. I still have the substance to pour, but I don't find the container.

AF: The people you're addressing in your poems, your more political poems. Do they still exist in the way they did in the eighties? Has the audience changed?

MK: They are there, but they no longer matter, those people. Like you saw Richard push that guy, he no longer matters..

RF: That was necessity. It's an extension of my inner conflict with the economic structures of this world.

MK: Maybe I could say that that guy is actually a mirror reflection of Richard which Richard hates to see. He's running from the self.

RF: Running in circles from the mirror.…