

## WEEKEND REVIEW

SATURDAY-SUNDAY, MAY 10-11 2008

# Through the sharp lens of a resilient storyteller

*Photographer Peter Magubane takes MELANIE LAWRENCE on a trip down memory lane*

**N**ELSON Mandela says Peter Magubane's photo stories on apartheid "helped pave the way to transformation in SA". He has endured great personal sacrifices. Yet this formidable man continues in his 54th year of photography to document the "day-to-day life of people".

As we drive through Sophiatown, en route to Soweto, Magubane recalls his childhood on these streets. The old mining town-style houses stand on historically loaded soil.

It's hard to imagine the legendary days of the Sophiatown that gave birth to activists and artists such as Magubane. Those streets own his boyhood memories: the first camera his father bought him; his mother's love and discipline; the matchbox home his family filled; his memories of being stabbed one day while playing on those streets.

Picture 1955 in Sophiatown. It's a Saturday night. The swanky gents and classy dames are out on the town. Dressed to the nines. High heels rat-a-tat-tat on the dusty streets. The seductive jazz draws you into a nearby shebeen. Inside foot-tapping saxophones and social debates fill the air.

In the corner a handsome, 23-year-old Magubane discusses news beats with his Drum friends, Can Themba, "the English master", and Bob Gosani, "the brilliant photographer". In less than a year Magubane has worked his way up the magazine's ranks from driver to photojournalist. They are some of the many stars that Sotown has raised.

Where others chose the political platform to confront the social injustices of apartheid, Magubane chose the camera. "I wanted to document the lives of black South Africans at the time. That was what drove me to photography." He had no idea what the years ahead would have in store for him.

Through zigzagging back roads, we arrive in Soweto. Today Magubane will be scouting the scrap heaps and coal yards for underage workers. He's finishing the final shots for his book covering decades of child labour in SA, from as early as the 1950s until today. This is just one of his many projects.

His sturdy frame is strong and much younger than his 76 years. His presence owns the space it occupies.

The same passion that led him to expose the atrocities of apartheid yesterday, continues to drive

him to portray the social struggles of today.

Return with Magubane to the late 1950s. He is making his mark on the world. Having recently covered his first big assignment for Drum magazine — the African National Congress — the magazine's editor, Tom Hopkinson, is very satisfied with the young cameraman's work. Magubane will continue to work on exposés with Drum writers, such as the "Nude Pass Parade" covering the degrading pass laws and treatment of black people in SA.

The following year, Magubane will win first and third place in a photographic competition. The white photographer who takes second place will not shake his hand. Despite the rampant prejudices of the period, an unstoppable career is launched. In 1959 he will cover a harrowing story on farm labour titled Farm Labour Today: We Call It Semi-Slavery. This story will cost him dearly.

At the same time, Sophiatown is being desecrated. Torn to the ground. Along with the other families, his is forcibly removed. Uprooted and relocated to Diepkloof.

We drive into the Soweto scrap yard. Giant rusting teeth bite into the air. Magubane is looking for the young boys who work here. They abandon school, to earn as little as R5 a day collecting and selling scrap metal. "Many of them are playing truant, and don't understand the value of education," he says.

Magubane often goes beyond the camera to help the people he photographs. Over the years he has helped to reunite many runaways with their parents. He explains that he will not interfere until, "They come to me. 'Madala! Madala!' they call me, 'I want to go home'."

Only five of the 35 boys and girls he has helped have returned to the streets.

During the late 1960s, youth in other parts of the world are expressing liberation through music and drugs. On home soil, the photojournalist — now in his 30s — is covering momentous events for the Rand Daily Mail such as the Rivonia trials and the Sharpeville funeral. "I had never seen so many dead people," he says.

It's painful to bring up the past, but he does so graciously. "I would find a person struggling, dying in Sharpeville." But the photographs came first. "It was only after, when I got home, when I ask myself, 'What are you doing?'"



**STRUGGLE IN FOCUS:** Peter Magubane at his 2005 exhibition of Nelson Mandela photographs. Magubane endured multiple arrests, including a 556-day stint in solitary confinement. Picture: TEBOGO LETSIE

But the next morning, it was back on the streets with camera in hand. He was driven by the belief that, "The world will respond!"

It's off the tar road and into the heart of the Jabulani coal yard. Miniature mountains of depressing nuggets block out the surrounding world. Dumpy, squat, make-do homes sit sadly on the grit. A young mother hangs bright clothing on a line, while a baby boy plays in the sooty muck. Chicken cages are piled up everywhere and a few escapees run in clucking circles. A bitter smell saturates the air.

Starting as early as sunrise, these boys shovel heavy coal for donkey-cart deliveries across Soweto. In winter the skyline is smudged by them. "It's warmer here. They have coal and they have shelter." Magubane looks out the window. The biggest issue facing these children — exploited and devastatingly poor — he feels, is "without a doubt, education. Without education, there's nothing you can do!"

A tough man recognises the photographer. "He's one of my boys," Magubane cheers. "He has been working here for years."

It is poignant that the boy Magubane photographed in the '70s is his lead to the coal boys of today. He has made his contact, so we leave this Armageddon moonscape for the livelier streets of Zola.

Teenagers decorate the curbs and parks. We overtake a withering woman driving her wheelchair in the left lane.

Sometimes Magubane's work might step on toes. When he does get threats, he says very firmly, "I don't take threats!" He is a stubborn man, who is angered

when he doesn't get his own way. I can imagine most people backing down to his authority. After all, this man has gone up against the fierce reproach of a nationalist government, and has prevailed.

An otherwise normal day in June 1969 is life-changing for the newsman. The brutal fist of censorship will strike down hard. It is not the first time he has been harassed by the police, but this time he is dragged off to Pretoria Central Prison.

There he is interrogated about his farm-labour photographs. They demand he tell them if he "has been sent by the communists to put SA in a bad light". They charge him under the Suppression of Communism Act and he is imprisoned in solitary confinement. Made to stand for five days and five nights on unstable bricks, he collapses on the fifth day.

Later that year, after being acquitted of the charges, they rearrest him immediately under the Terrorism Act.

Six months later, he is charged again under Section Six of the Terrorism Act, allowing for his indefinite detention.

The Rand Daily Mail publishes in May 1972: "When they took Magubane away ... they turned him into a nonperson ... even his photographs may not be captioned."

He is detained in solitary confinement for 556 days. Upon his release, he is forced to resign from the Rand Daily Mail and placed under a five-year banning order. True to his personality, he breaks the order and

**Continued on Page 2**

## ESKOM CAN BE SUED

Load shedding is causing havoc in the economy. If you suffer damages, you can sue Eskom. The process is however more complex than just suing them. This seminar will unpack, in non legalese, the principles in terms of which Eskom can be sued. Guidelines and practical tips will also be given as to how to prove a claim against Eskom.

### ESKOM SEMINAR PROGRAMME

9:00 - 10:00	Why can you sue Eskom	11:15 - 11:30	Tea break
	Is a contract necessary?	11:30 - 12:00	Steps to be taken and restriction of damages
	Liability of Eskom without a contract	12:00 - 13:00	Defences Eskom will raise
10:00 - 11:15	Damages	13:00 - 14:00	Lunch
	Different types of Damages	14:00 - 15:00	Paperwork needed to prove damages
	What you can and can't sue for	15:00 - 15:30	Panel Discussion and wrap up

Presented by: Willem Krog (B Juris LLB LLM) Admitted attorney.

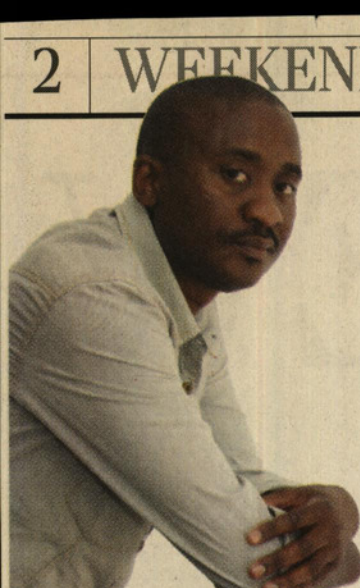


**Cost:**  
**R2850 per delegate (ex VAT).**  
**Group rates negotiable.**

**Cost includes:**  
**Course material, teas and lunch**

**Date & Venue:**  
**16 May 2008 – Glenvista Country Club**

**Booking Deadline:**  
**8 May 2008**  
**lauren@onthebox.co.za or 011 482 7354**


Mlungisi Zondi

# 100% Zuluboy

## Phuthu westerns and fake gangster rappers

**R**AP music makes my stomach turn. I'm suspicious of its pervasive Americanism and the cultural hegemony media moguls wield over undiscerning consumers the world over, more so in gullible Africa.

Look how silly our children look, with their oversized basketball shirts, drooping pants and gangster gait that reminds one of a constipated Nguni cow.

That's strange coming from a former cultural mutt. Twenty-three years ago, with my dusty feet curled up on my parents' brown velvety sofa, spaghetti westerns were the best form of escapism for children my impressionable age.

It allowed escape from the glare of the scowling pantsula and marauding comtotsi, and the rubber bullets which could graze my ankle if I dared stray too far away from the safety of my folks' yard.

Can I equate this supposedly noble resistance art form with the bestselling Fong Kong of all times? Do contemporary South African artists and musicians have anything better to offer, aside from this phuthu western, South African rap?

Watching the South African Music Awards (Samas) last week, I was convinced we do.

I suspect that, at the rate at which African youth ape the American ghetto, the motherland will in no time adopt the filthy rag that is rap music, and soak up all the bad language, aggression, misogyny, anomie and reverse racism.

Out the sturdy African hut flies E'skia Mphahlele's African humanism and Mfuniselwa Bhengu's idea of weaving ubuntu into western capitalism.

While watching the Sama awards

ceremony, an idea struck me like a bolt of man-made Pietersburg lightning: indigenous Africans' version of rap music must seem childlike to the record label boss flopped on an animal-print swivel rocker chair in a designer office somewhere in Los Angeles.

Imagine Suge Knight of Death Row Records, sucking a cigar and chuckling philosophically: "Yo, nigga. Dem brodas in da motherlan' are trippin'."

Rewind to my adolescent version of imported popular culture and I'll quickly look for an anthill to bury my head in faster than you can whistle an Ennio Morricone score.

As recently as 1985, I couldn't be caught dead fiddling with slingshots and wire cars on Friday evenings. This had nothing to do with girls and pubic hair. Spaghetti westerns were the rage.

Remember director Sergio Leone's attempt — in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* — at re-enacting a major Civil War battle in Texas? The excessive violence in the 1966 epic turned prissy America off, while the unlikely cavalry battle amused critics. For the record, no major battle took place in Texas during this war.

But how we adored Leone films.

On Mondays at school, following the flighting of a Leone western the previous Friday, you looked like a wimp if you didn't take part in the stories about gun-fights and hangings.

Watching the quintessential cowboy hero ride into the sunset, I had no inclination the cast was Italian — or Spanish. Or that Leone had customised a genre Hollywood had outgrown.



**STRIKING A POSE:** Youngsters look to rappers from the US for inspiration. Picture: GABRIELLA FABBRI

Come to think of it, the last time anyone worth his cinematic salt had bothered to make, let alone watch avidly, a spaghetti western was in the mid-1970s.

The early 1960s marked the beginning of the end for the western, leaving continental filmmakers to fight over B-grade budgets, washed-out actors, and unrealistic plots. It's easy to discern that the surreal, grotesque desert plains in *The Good,*

the Bad and the Ugly are not the Wild West but the Mediterranean countryside.

Such embarrassing geopolitical faux pas are a likely scenario if African children persist in their obsession with this ghetto garbage called rap music.

At the Samas, the immensely talented young African men and women the award organisers chose as presenters-nominees reminded me of director Leone's Fong

Kong spaghettis. If it wasn't rapper HHP pounding his chest and jabbing aggressively into the air, a la Biggie, after winning the best hip-hop category, it was the laaitie presenter with cornrows giving groupies fake orgasms with his private-school twang.

Yet stunned silence bordering on discomfort filled the packed hall when a virtually unknown folk music singer from KwaZulu walked up to the stage to collect the award for best maskandi album.

No one had heard of Umgqumeni's i-Jukebox. Or the uncle from Ncandweni Christ Ambassadors, who took away the top-selling album award.

Unless Africa does something about its self-imposed cultural bondage, things it takes for granted will in the not-too-distant future fly over its head as objects and subjects of lecture-room discourses.

I, too, was embarrassed to discover recently that an academic had written a book about African headrests, what my late granny used to call is'qamelo, as opposed to the western umqamelo.

It's not so much the cultural imperialism the west wields that irks me. I accept it as a global village inevitability. After all, had civilisations not been subjugating and copying each, there'd be no Kaapse Klopse and Durban beach rickshaws.

It's our failure to elevate ourselves that gives me sleepless nights.

I don't pretend to understand why Chinua Achebe's character, Okonkwo, an Igbo from the west African author's deepest creative recesses, had to wrestle instead of stick-fight.

But I'd rather see my child wrestle than gang-bang.

### JA-NEE

Nim Geva and Hannah Morris

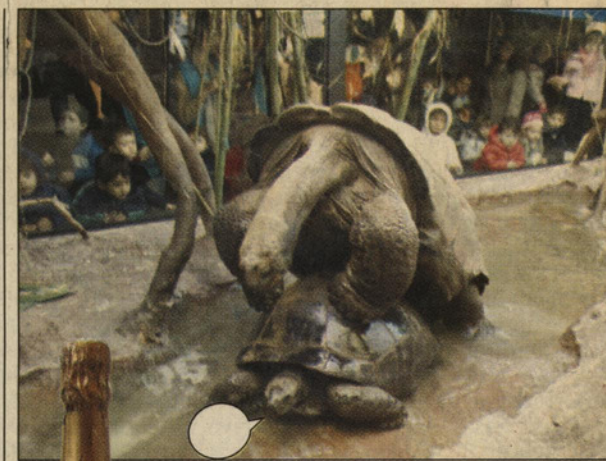


Yes, life sucks, but it's just a phase.

### FREE SPEECH

What are they saying?

A prize will be presented to the writer of the winning caption according to the sole criterion of how long it makes the staff of The Weekender laugh. The prize will be a bottle of Benoît Lahaye Champagne. Mark entries **BUBBLE** and e-mail to [weekenderwin@bdfm.co.za](mailto:weekenderwin@bdfm.co.za) or fax to (011) 280-5505, to reach us by Tuesday at noon. Please include your name, telephone number and address. The winner will be announced next week.



**LAST WEEK'S WINNER**

"I wish I was human, they have quickies." Submitted by Gary Michaels, Bryanston

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## Photographer who helped free SA

Continued from Page 1

yet again, in 1972, he is dragged off to serve another six months in prison.

As soon as he is out and able, he is back on his news beat with the Rand Daily Mail. "No one was going to stop me from telling the truth!"

"I have paid a price for being a photographer in this country." With poise he explains how he found ways and means of surviving in solitary confinement. His strength came "from God, and I knew that I had done absolutely nothing wrong! All I had done was to photograph the children working on farms."

"I could hear the other prisoners scream right through the night, being tortured. If I had thought I was the only one, I would have gone cuckoo. It helped me a great deal to know I was not the only one suffering. There were others suffering worse than me, on Robben Island, serving life sentences."

Today he is a calm man who is quick to laugh, and it is clear he hasn't allowed resentment to fill his heart. "Forgive, and go on with your life. Don't forget, but go on with your life."

The main intersection of Dube is a bustling, multilayered whirl of 21st-century township life in SA. Magubane joins a patient queue to buy mealies. We chat about development in Soweto, the

new Maoponya Mall and the stadium. About crumbling curbs and nonexistent pavements. About the people still without houses. He says passionately, "You cannot separate politics from people."

It is June 16 1976. A phenomenon has swept the land. Word has spread like invisible fire. The black youth guard a secret closely. Not even their teachers or parents know of the planned march.

The nation will be shocked this cold winter morning, as news leaks of the protest against inferior Bantu education. It starts in Soweto, spreads to Alexandra, next to Pretoria and so its flames extend.

When journalists are prohibited from entering Soweto, Magubane is on the scene, equipment loaded. A soldier with a camera. In the distance he sees sinister black smoke. A signal of action on the ground. He flies between these sites. Police shots resound across Soweto. It is chaos. Magubane has more photographs on June 16 than any other photographer. Black-and-white images of the school-children fleeing from the downpour of bullets intended to kill them.

Mixed emotions of terror and liberation saturate their faces.

This powerful turning point in a land of oppression, forever recorded by Magubane's shutter.

During the course of the continuing uprising, he is assaulted various times and

has his nose broken by police. But the photos come first.

The world sees the undeniable horror, the brutal retort and madness of apartheid. And the world responds.

Later that year, when the police incite the Mzimhlope Hostel dwellers to attack township residents, Magubane works into the night covering the violence.

As he passes his Diepkloof home on his way to the paper's offices, he sees his home ablaze. He is powerless as he watches the building crackle to the earth.

Again in August he is detained with other black newsmen for 123 days.

As we pass the tourist queues outside Madiba's old shoebox home, spilling into Vilakazi Street, our conversation turns to his time as official photographer to Nelson Mandela.

Those years, between 1990 and 1994, were, "Wonderful! Wonderful!" He expresses his gratitude to Madiba for the amount of material given to him: close-ups of his release, his symbolic return to Soweto, and his early presidency.

This year, Magubane hopes to express his gratitude with an exhibition during Mandela's birthday celebrations.

Magubane has 16 books, many of them banned from local bookstores at the time of publishing.

His subject matter is broad, from vanishing cultures to life in postdemoc-

racy SA. "My photographs should educate the entire world, not only South Africans," he says.

The 1980s opened international doors for the photojournalist. An assignment for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees expanded his cause into Africa. "Through photography I have seen most parts of the world," he says. The starvation he witnessed in Somalia and Ethiopia "hits you right on the forehead". But he hopes his photos inspire someone to help.

He was Time magazine's photographer in SA. On one assignment for them, in 1985, he covered a student's funeral in Natalspruit and was shot 17 times. Back on the beat as soon as possible, in 1986, he stepped in to save a mother and daughter from an enraged crowd in Leandra.

At the end of our journey, as we enter his home, we are greeted by a vibrant painting of an Ndebele woman. His lounge is filled with bright, beaded pots and wooden carvings. In the corner an antique gramophone sits proudly near a black and white photograph of Magubane posing with a saxophone. From behind a straw hat, a young Sophiatown gent strikes a pose.

Light pouring in through a window illuminates Magubane's trademark white hair. He has an exhibition coming up, called *Apartheid in Focus*. He shows me a



**SOPHIATOWN GENT:** This image of the young Peter Magubane hangs in his lounge.

harrowing image taken in the '50s. Lines of black men, applying for mining jobs, made to parade naked. We both sit in a moment's silence, until he breaks it.

"So, that's apartheid for you. Oh, that exhibition is going to shock people."