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DEPARTMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURE

MONGANE WALLY SEROTE:

I was born in Sophiatown, Johannesburg on the 8th of May 1944. I left Sophiatown with my mother when I was small to settle in Alexandra Township. I grew up and lived here until 1974 when I left South Africa to study at Columbia University for my MFA, which combined writing and film making.

Before I left South Africa. during and after my school days, I worked as a gardener, mechanic

and at a bottle store as a packer in Collendar factory, but most times I learnt from the streets of Alexandra. (By 1974 when I left South Africa I was working as a copywriter, at an advertising firm called Johnson Walter Thompson. By then, I had also worked in the ANC underground for which I was detained in 1969 for nine (9) months in solidarity confinement. When I was released, in 1970, my first book, "Yakhali' nkomo" was published. I was by then working with people like Stephen Bantu Biko, with whom I natured a warm friendship, which led us to talk endlessly, into the early hours of the morning for days on and about our country. It is these discussions and through endless reading that I became more and more convinced that I must become a fighter against apartheid. But also.

it is my close association with the likes of Biko, Pityana, Joyce Sikhakhane and others, which

created a deep curiosity among us to know our country. We travelled its length and breadth

and met people from different parts of our country and from different backgrounds. Nothing could convenes one more about the cruelty and brutality of the apartheid system against black people.

I was by this time convinced that if I write, and write as honestly as I could, I will contribute to the fight against the evil of the apartheid system. I saw, I heard, I experienced

and I was the more out ranged by my country. So I wrote. In 1974, I left. I lived in New York

from 1974 to 1977. Martin Luther was dead and so was Malcolm X. Vietnam and the Ceril rights movement had died down. America was incredibly quite and I know it was not innocent.

So I travelled, I kept late nights talking. I heard once when James Baldwin was answering a

question about this quietness say! "I am not a repentant son..." I agreed totally with him I

was not a repentant son, I found that to be an apt answer for any restlessness.

June 1976 happened in South Africa, In a sense it was not any surprise for me. I always knew

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that the authorities in South Africa would not hesitate to kill a thousand or a million or more black children if they are left to do it. It is this and the fact that I was unrepentant and I must say fear of all this that made me persevere to explore human relations by writing. Poetry in 1976, seemed to burst at the seams, unable to contain the bulge of the implications of human relations. I thought I would make films, but in the meantime, I thought I should write novels, short stories, plays and may return to poetry at some time. When I reached Botswana from the United States in 1977, we founded Medu Art Ensemble. I met good men like Tim Williams, and later Mandla Langa and Thami Myele and women like Teresa Devent. I was then given the opportunity to work in photography, painting, filming, theatre, writing and music. Thami Myele was killed by the SADF in 1985 in Botswana one of the South Africa's best painters went just like that. I was a fully fledged member of the ANC by this time. The ANC gave me a chance to travel, to meet people, to question political systems of the whole world, to seek the best solutions to what boils down to human relations. I worked in various structures of the African National Congress including in Umkhonto we Sizwe. I was lucky, I met and many times discussed with men and women I admire most like Oliver R. Tambo, Raymond Mokoena, Cassius Makoena, Joe Jele. Florence Mphahlele and some young dedicated men and women who were not reluctant to this illusive issue: human relations. I left Botswana in 1986, for Britain. I worked there in the ANC Office as a cultural attaché, having been the head of the African National Congress Department of Arts and Culture since 1983. For the first time I looked at Europe in the eye. Europe, like America has shown how civilisation can contribute to human relations. It is here where some of the most important experiments on human relations take place: The rights of women, the rights of gays, the rights of the disabled, the rights of children. I saw also educated men and women in large numbers, I had come from where the uneducated are in the majority, I saw communication systems function at their best: planes, train, ships, buses, taxis, phones, faxes, computers, human beings were willing to reach out to each other. The west in my view has missed the boat - it knows very little about human relations. I was absolutely shocked by the rumblings of the beginning of the fall of the Eastern block. Up until then, my optimism was based on the fact that there was an opposite to capitalism. Apartheid being a brainchild of capitalism is evil. Europe and America convinced me. The eventual fall, we know very well as human beings, about human nature and about human relations. I was apprehensive, pained and uncertain because of this finding when I left London in 1990 for Johannesburg, after sixteen years of being in exile. I am back in South Africa now, I am heading the Department of Arts and Culture of the African National Congress once more. I

listen, I watch, I ask, I give my view. I have not stopped writing. I must find a better way of asking: What is human nature and human relations? I must write. I watched the bombardment of Iraq on television. I watched Mandela and De Klerk pit the future of our country to the nation, and as foolish as this may sound, I kept thinking a prisoner and his goalers are talking. It seemed a very difficult issue for me to handle. How does one forget that a large chunk of one's life was spent in jail, sent there by the same man who argues about freedom with one? But as they were talking at CODESA, I was conscious of the fact that since that time when Mandela announced the suspension of armed operation, violence, organised political violence was spreading in South Africa. I could not help but want to know who between them was talking about the future of all South Africans. This is very important. White people in this country are unable to listen to a black person. What must Mandela do?

I ask and ask.

What must we as South Africans do to arrive at a common national consciousness. A consciousness which will oppose violence and not seek to know whether it is out to blacks . whites, xhosas or zulus-what must we do to arrive at this consciousness?