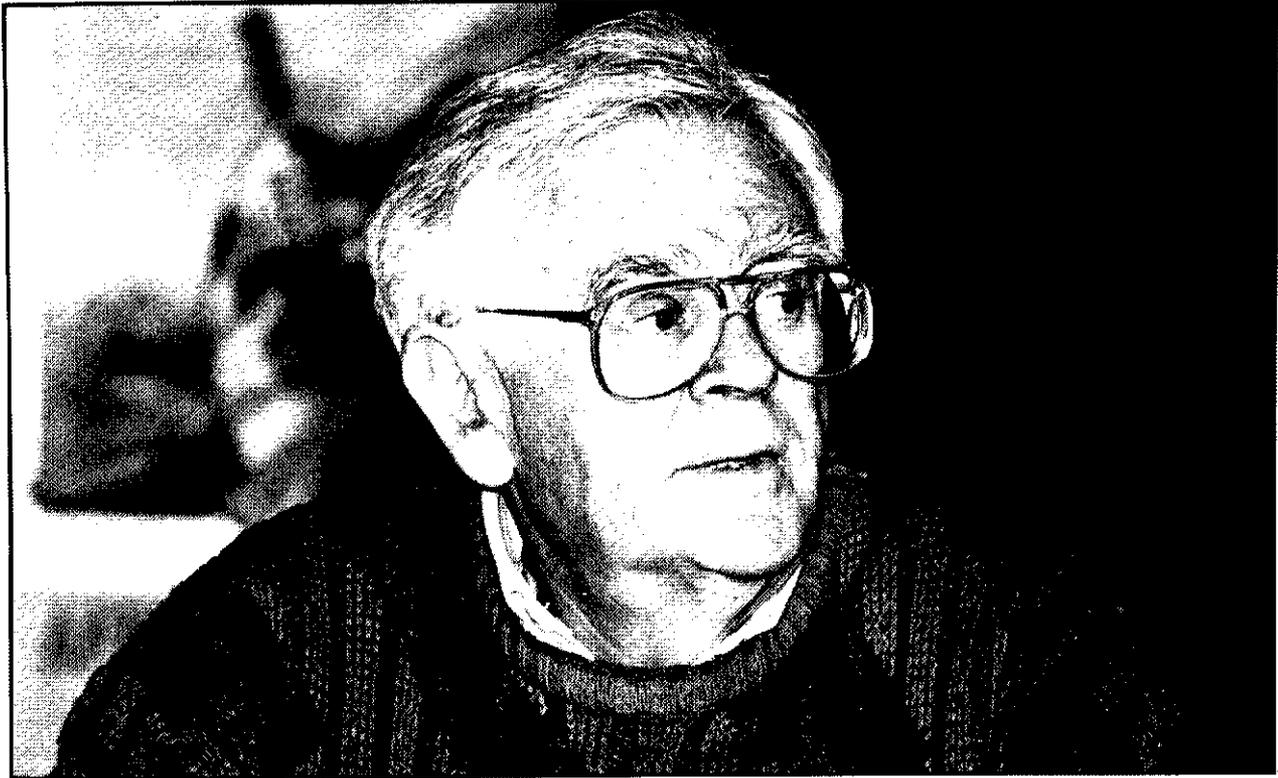


Joe Slovo



Abdul Shariff - Impact Visuals

Ode to a Mensch

BY LINZI MANICOM

The following is based on the address given at the Memorial Service for Joe Slovo, in Toronto, January 15th 1995.

Growing up as a nice-white-middle-class girl in South Africa in the 'Sixties, I got a full dose of the regime's panoramic, demonizing, anti-communist propaganda. There, in the Sunday papers, next to the techno-colour photos of fluffy-blond bikini girls, would be a muffled, murky shot of Joe Slovo, under such headlines as: Colonel in the KGB, Pre-eminent Public Enemy, Ruthless Revolutionary. Such epithets, heard through the filter of enhanced cold war sensibilities, cut this figure as even more malicious and menacing than our

own notorious BOSS (Bureau of State Security) agents.

Some years later, in London, I met the man and had to work to quell the sense of incongruity. For here was this benign, open-faced, affable figure, his soft voice cast in a thick Jo'burg accent. Just like any old "Joey" (as we called that city's residents). The only point of identification with things severe and Soviet that I could make out, were the distinctively Brezhnevian eyebrows.

In interviews in the very last stages of his life, Joe talked of feeling privileged to have participated actively in so many phases of the liberation struggle. I was privileged to have known Joe through just one of them. It was the period follow-

ing the Soweto Uprising, the late 'Seventies, and thousands of young South Africans had been forced into exile in several African countries. Joe, when passing through Dar es Salaam in his travels between Europe and the various ANC communities in Africa, would come and stay. He liked my cooking and there were long, late nights around the dinner table, talking, joking, debating, with bottles of Konyagi and Dodoma wine to take care of the tropical thirst.

There is often a quick and comfortable intimacy to friendships formed in exile (along with the sometimes fierce antagonisms). So much can be assumed to be held in common: there is of course the culture and memories, romanticised

remembering

in even more vivid hues; the revolutionary project and the binding marginality it confers; a political discourse inflected with acronyms and Afrikaans slang-words that only the initiated can decipher; and a coterie of personalities to subject to affectionate gossip. With Joe the "feels-like-I've-known-you-for-years" phrase really applied. For he was an enormously congenial and open man, not one to allow differences in political opinion and affiliation to preempt personal connection.

Joe, at this time, was strongly advocating that exiled South Africans live and work in post-colonial Africa, in those countries that were struggling to put in place more democratic and redistributive programmes. Practical exposure to the realities of reconstruction would be invaluable preparation for a clear-eyed and grounded approach to South Africa's own post-apartheid phase. He was convinced that such experience would be drawn upon in his lifetime and mine, a prospect I couldn't always hold onto. He was particularly enthusiastic about FRELIMO's socialist project and he and Ruth First persuaded my partner and me to move down to Mozambique at the end of our sojourn in Tanzania, for an immersion course in quotidian post-Independence. A year later Ruth was blown apart by a parcel bomb and I joined the community of grievors that gathered around Joe and his daughters. Abdullah Ibrahim and Ekaya played at the memorial concert in Maputo, days after the tragedy, music that will forever evoke that shocked, shattering time and the sense of political regrouping and resuscitation that follows moments like those.

There will no doubt be formal biographies that extol Joe's extensive theoretical and practical contribution to South Africa's liberation. I await, with more interest, Joe's own account and analysis of the political times he lived and worked through. (While in Maputo, he was, with characteris-

tic enthusiasm and enjoyment, writing up his memoirs, intrigued and challenged by the task of recuperating, interpreting and imputing a narrative to passages of political history). Then there are the numerous other biographical moments, scattered through the memories of those of us who knew him and who bear the imprint of his political legacy in quite personalized and formative ways.

This was a time of intellectual ferment within the broad anti-apartheid movement, at home and abroad. Rigid and rusty theories of "the revolution" were being shaken up from two directions. Black Consciousness, initially regarded with some cynicism by the liberation movement's old guard as "petit-bourgeois" and "idealist," was clearly resonating deeply and powerfully with a whole generation of black South Africans. The young South African refugees in Tanzania and Angola were vibrant with ideas, vigorous in their analysis and freshly imbued with "struggle" experience. They pushed all of us who were outside of that political moment to take account of what today would be spoken about in terms of identity politics and racialized subjectivity.

Around the same time, taking root amongst university-based white intellectuals and also informing political work within a growing independent workers' movement was a non-Communist, "ultra-leftist" marxist analysis. Both these political discourses challenged the prevailing communist orthodoxy of the "two stage revolution" and "colonialism of a special type."

Unlike some of his fellow party members who were dismissive or actively hostile to these new political-theoretical currents (and to those espousing them), Joe engaged with them. He read the stuff, debated it, resisted it, and took some of it on board. This capacity for engagement, for rethinking, for reformulating ideas, for self-criticism, with-

out abandoning the framework of communism, is exemplified in his pamphlet "Has Socialism Failed?", which circulated in 1990. Many a discussion around these ideas took place on long, bright beaches and over empty dinner plates. In the course of them, I - young, idealistic, intellectual, experienced only in the realm of clean, prescriptive theory - was gently being educated about politics-for-real. For I was learning to see and heed the implications of Joe's keen sensitivity to, and respect for, African culture and nationalist aspirations, as well as the ways those configured the broader, composite (gendered, racialized, class) political culture in which we were immersed.

Joe's political pragmatism and honed strategical sense have been much commented on in recent years. What I had learnt from him in this regard mediated my reading of "Has Socialism Failed?" Let me explain. A tiny section of this document registered significantly for me as a feminist within the ANC. For in it, he criticizes the soviet model of political party organization, one which very much shaped the ANC, in which the women's organizations (like the trade unions and the youth organizations) are mere "support bases for the ongoing dictates of the state and party apparatus." The implicit argument here is for a relatively autonomous women's organization which is both led by, and reflects the interests of women, which exists, not merely to purvey the party line, but to address issues of gender oppression. Now, Joe was far from the initiator of this critique within the liberation movement. A sector of women within the Party, the ANC and other mass democratic organizations had been voicing it for some years, some of us getting our knuckles rapped for breaking ranks, in the process. And Joe, like other Movement leaders, had had to be pushed - by his family, by his women comrades, by the influence of international feminism - into acknowledging gender equality

as a political issue. But Joe, in lending his public and authoritative voice to that position gave it a weight and legitimacy that South African women were still, even then, having to fight very hard to achieve. Under the influence of Joe's "strategy-and-tactics" approach, I was able, instead of whining about the tardiness of his intervention on this issue and his not going far enough, to see his intervention as having helped to consolidate a credible space for the advancement of a more democratic and gender-aware politics.

How did Joe keep it up – given the long, slow and often bitterly painful historical moments he lived through, even though interspersed with times of progress and celebration? How did he retain his optimism, energy and capacity in ever changing, ever more challenging contexts? Much of his sustainability must be attributed to his capacity to jive, joke, and "jol" as we say in the vernacular.

Joe embodied – vividly – two characteristics that are definitive of the political culture of the South African liberation movement: partying and dancing, and a self-satirizing sense of humour. We didn't need an Emma Goldmann to lay down her criterion: "If I can't dance, I don't want your revolution." The two are coterminous for most South Africans. And the practice of transforming dire, tragic and ludicrous political circumstances into jokes that spread across the communities like flash fires is one that has probably sustained us all through moments that would be otherwise emotionally insupportable.

We have all seen Joe, in various television clips (like at the first SACP Congress on home territory since the 1990 unbanning) toy-toying away in the front lines – indefatigably, it seemed. Joe would also boogie along with the best of them at parties, with a idiosyncratic dip-'n'-flip of his shoulders. He was a fine "ballroom" dancer too. One of

my fondest memories pictures Joe at an ANC wedding in a Dar es Salaam suburban home. A couple of pigs from the ANC farm in Morogoro were "braai-ing" over a half oil drum, booze was flowing, township jive music was blaring. The main room was seething with sweaty, jubilant dancers who overflowed into the yard until early morning. Joe and I were grooving in the midst of all this when he suggested we foxtrot (I think that is what it is called). I didn't even bother to protest because I could see there was no way we were going anywhere in the packed, hopping room. I was wrong. Joe placed his hand firmly in the small of my back, seized my hand in his and with deftness, grace and determination proceeded to manoeuvre us – gliding, turning, smoothly – into the spaces he found and made. It struck me later that this was a metaphor for the way he operated politically. With great charm and skill he knew how to get where he wanted to go, taking others with him, without stepping too painfully on anyone's toes.

And then there was Joe, legendary teller of jokes. His repertoire consisted of long-winded, irreverent stories that deflated the sacred cows and satirized the foibles of the Soviet bloc and Stalinism, along with a collection of classical van der Merwe (the Newfies of South Africa) jokes. Even if I could remember more than the punchlines, I wouldn't here risk replicating a joke, for I don't want to violate my aural memories of the rich, Yiddish accent in which Joe recited these epic tales. Amongst friends and comrades, you would know who had recently been party to a Joe joke session for the catch phrases tended to find their way, as colloquialisms, into our everyday exchanges.

The one joke I can remember and will record – for it is pertinent – is a story that was always represented as being "true" as in, "it really happened." I think however it might well have achieved apocryphal

status through its many retellings in varying states of conviviality and inebriation. It concerns a meeting of Communist Party representatives from different countries where the "educational" item on the agenda was a discussion on Self-Criticism. The various participants were proclaiming the value of self-criticism as a strategy for learning from one's past mistakes, for correcting personal shortcomings, for improving organizational performance. Joe, fully supportive of Self-Criticism, made a spirited contribution. After the long and constructive discussion, when the comrades were gathered in the corridors for a break, Joe was approached by a comrade from a certain country (which here shall remain unspecified, me not wanting to perpetuate national/racial stereotypes). He congratulated Joe on his contribution to the debate but went on: "I think what you say about self-criticism, Comrade Joe, is all very well and good. But tell me how you solve this problem? We have found that some people, when you self-criticize them, are not happy. They don't like it."

A final vignette: I received the news of Joe's death when in the throes of an emotionally turbulent and draining set of struggles with my rebellious adolescent daughter. She, much to my frustration, has so far learnt only the first part of the tenet by which I have raised her: Question authority, not your mother! Joe was staying with me in Dar when my pregnancy with this same progeny was confirmed. My "partner-in-pregnancy" was in the States at the time so Joe got the full brunt of my exuberance, terror, preoccupation, awe, doubt, wonderment etc. He, veteran father of three daughters, his mind presumably on bigger issues, neither yawned, consoled nor emitted platitudes. Far from it. He was thrilled, celebratory, supportive and excited on my behalf. "Having and raising a child in the most extraordinarily rewarding, wonderful, challenging

remembering

experience. Nothing compares," I remember him saying, more than a few times over the course of his stay. Joe's death took me back to that time, those words, and imparted a wonderful sense of strength and perspective to carry me forward. Any project as important

as parenting or the struggle for social justice will go through its troughs and its trophies, its despair and victories. The important thing is to be reflective, to re-examine the context, to renew oneself, above all, to stay up-beat in meeting the challenges of changing conditions

and shifting exigencies. Joe's life was a testimony to this approach.

That such reflections, prompted by Joe's death, continue to generate such inspiration, is a tribute to the quality of the legacy he left us all. A mensch during his life, and beyond. Hambe kahle, Comrade Joe.
