“Getting back to writing”

An Interview with Mtutuzeli Matshoba

by James Munnik and Geoffrey V. Davis

I'd like to begin by asking you about the course of your career over the years in which you were incarcerated in South Africa and were unable to leave. In Europe you are best known for the collection of short stories Call Me Not a Man (1979), which has also been translated into German, and then there is the play Seeds of War (1981). What have you been up to since publishing these two works?

Some of the things I've been up to I really wouldn't talk about, but I have involved myself in film, I have involved myself in painting – oil painting. I've actually done a lot of diverse things, that were of course related to the struggle for liberation, if I might call it that. I stopped writing for a while to do other things that I thought were more immediate in terms of contributing to the struggle for liberation.

Both these works – your collection of stories and your play – were banned almost immediately after publication. What was the effect on you as a writer? Was that one of the reasons why perhaps you shelved the idea of writing for a certain time? Or was that something you were able to come to terms with?

It definitely was one of the reasons I shelved writing, because I told myself that if they can ban literature, then one can do other things to actually continue with this struggle that I dedicated myself to.

Do you feel in the present situation that you would like to get back to writing?

I am actually getting back to writing, because I am at present working on a full-length novel titled Villains, Victims, and Heroes, which is more or less about my

* This interview was held in Paris on 29 January 1993.
experiences at a time that I was not allowed to say anything, at a time that each time that I wrote a thing it was banned or it was questioned – all those interrogations and things that I had to undergo.

One thing I’ve always personally been very interested in is the background to the writing of the play Seeds of War. How much does it relate to your personal experience? I read the report of the Surplus People Project at the time and thought that it had to do with a particular set of forced removals in Lebowa and the Makgato people, and their story. Here in Europe it was never possible to find out whether you had been personally involved in that and how you related to what sounded like a fairly specific removal, although of course it is given more general significance in the play.

My relation to the story is that I was assisting with research of forced removals – I think that was at the height of the forced removals – and I was working in the Department of Social Anthropology of Dr. David Webster, and a lady called Joanne Yawitch, who was actually doing this research, and I was assisting them as an interpreter and going there with them. And I had direct contact with the man who wrote about that man that ended up hanging himself in the rafters of his house. So my involvement was very direct in that I went there and spoke with the people about forced removals. And I gathered this material and it became so much for me that I felt this had to be recorded in some way. At first I intended to write it as a novel – but the urgency of it made me mix all the forms that appear: prose, poetry and a bit of drama.

You took up the idea of a “proemdra” that Mothobi Mutloatse had been propagating at the time. Have you tried to develop that form at all since?

No, I didn’t develop that. I did this subconsciously, as such: the dramatic impact of the experience of the forced removals, the way in which people expressed it poetically in terms of the way people speak, the oral aspect of it, as well as the prose for the background. I didn’t do it consciously, and I think Mothobi Mutloatse coined the term “proemdra” immediately after I’d written that.

Has the play ever been performed? Or have you ever tried to have it put on?

No, it wasn’t performed in South Africa, but I have heard from people who were at Solomon Mahlangu College in Tanzania that they did perform it.

What are your duties with the ANC at the moment? You have some sort of cultural role; how do you define that role and what in fact are you doing?