

RICHARD RIVE

(1 March 1930 - 4 June 1989)

Martin Trump
University of South Africa
~~Richard Rive (born, March 1931)~~

Books

African Songs (Berlin: Seven Seas, 1963); ~~Short Stories.~~
New York: Macmillan, 1970);

Emergency (London: Faber, 1964); ~~A novel.~~

Selected Writings (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1977); ~~Stories,~~
~~essays, and plays.~~

Writing Black (Cape Town: David Philip, 1981); ~~An autobiography.~~

Advance, Retreat (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983); ~~Selected~~
~~Stories.~~

"Buckingham Palace", District Six (Cape Town: David Philip,
London: Heinemann, 1986; New York: Ballantine, 1987);
1984; ~~A NOVEL.~~

The Emergency Continues (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989);

Richard Rive was born in Cape Town in 1931. He attended schools in the city and later graduated in English at the University of Cape Town. He trained as a teacher at Hewat Training College, Cape Town, and, in subsequent years, gained degrees in literature from Columbia and Oxford universities. His Oxford doctoral thesis was on the works of Olive Schreiner.

Rive ~~has~~ spent most of his life in South Africa, a point worth noting, as virtually all black South African writers of his generation left the country as exiles during the 1950's or 1960's. Rive had been a teacher or an instructor of teachers for most of his working life. ~~At present,~~ He ^{was} ~~is~~ head of the Department of English at the Hewat Training College in ~~Cape Town,~~ ~~and~~ for many years. On the 4th of June 1989 he was murdered in his home in Cape Town.

Rive grew up in a poor area of Cape Town called District Six. The "District" is the setting in much of his fiction. Despite its poverty and the violence that haunted its streets, District Six is recalled fondly, but with little sentimentality, by Rive, as a community in which people from different backgrounds and with different creeds lived together in a form of harmony that is virtually unknown in the broader South African society. In 1966, the authorities declared District Six an area set aside for the exclusive occupation of "white" people. Over the next few years, much of the "District" was bulldozed and its residents forced to seek new homes.

At one and the same time, District Six symbolises^z~~s~~ the destructiveness of apartheid and of a community that gave the lie to the system of racial segregation. This dual kind of symbolic significance is at the heart of Rive's fictional treatments of this area.

In this discussion of one of the key themes within Rive's writing, I have tended to forgo a chronological account of his work. Let us, then, trace developments within his writing.

Rive's first collection of stories, African Songs, was published in East Germany in 1963. Rive believed that as most of its stories were intensely critical of the forms of oppression practiced in South Africa, he was best advised to seek a publisher beyond the borders of his country. The authorities in South Africa paid ironic tribute to the force of the collection by banning it soon after it appeared.

Rive's stories offer a series of views of people battling with the particular difficulties that the system of discrimination in South Africa forces upon them. This is not to suggest that this is a bleak, humorless collection. On the contrary, there is a great deal of humour in many of the stories. Indeed, the humorous sense of irony here and throughout Rive's writing is possibly its most distinctive feature.

Five of the twelve stories in the collection describe the arrest

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of a person who has defied the apartheid laws. Shame forms no part of the character's responses to detention. On the contrary, their arrest simply adds to their dignity. There is pride in having defied the unjust regulations of the country. For instance, the narrator comments about Karlie, one such character, in the story, "The Bench": "He had challenged and he felt he had won. Who cared at the result."

This spirit of courage and almost reckless defiance of authority forms an important dimension of Rive's next work, a novel called Emergency. Set against the background of the civil unrest in South Africa that followed the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960, the novel describes the difficult challenges that face a small group of characters. These characters are mainly school-teachers and students who are hounded by the security police. Certain of them flee the country, while others remain to continue the struggle against oppression within South Africa. This work was banned in South Africa shortly after its publication in England in 1964.

By this time, Rive had also edited and contributed to two important collections of African prose-fiction. Quartet and Modern African Prose were early titles in Heinemann's African Writers Series. Writers who were at early stages in their careers, such as Alex La Guma, James Matthews, Chinua Achebe, and Ngugi, were given a voice in these volumes.

During the 1960's and 1970's, Rive travelled widely, spending a

couple of years (1965 and 1966) in America while studying for an M.A. at Columbia. Later, from 1971 to 1974, he lived in England where he completed his doctorate at Oxford. His output of writing was not very great during these years. His keynote address at the African Literature Association conference in Bloomington, Indiana, in March 1979, formed the kernel for his next full-length book: an engaging autobiography entitled, Writing Black.

This work offers, apart from its chronicle of the life and adventures of Richard Rive, an informal guide to the growth of African literature and its teaching since the early 1960's. Written as a kind of traveller's diary, Rive presents a number of sketches of African and Afro-American writers and critics. He touches on some of the debates within the development of African literature. The autobiography makes it clear that Rive is little persuaded by the calls for an African or black aesthetic. For Rive, African literature takes its place among other world literatures and must be assessed along with them and by means of the same standards and critical techniques that are applied elsewhere.

In 1983, Rive's selected stories entitled, Advance. Retreat, appeared. Among the older pieces, there are a couple of new works such as the title story. It is among his best.

"Advance, Retreat" offers a humorous account of the events surrounding the production of Macbeth by a "Coloured" secondary

school in the Cape. Rive wittily calls the characters by their stage-names and plays upon the incongruities which arise between the behaviour of the contemporary characters and their stage personalities. This is how Lady Macbeth is introduced in the story:

There was a loud bang at his door. He looked up, straining through the dull ache, to see Lady Macbeth framed in the entrance, swinging a tennis racquet in her hand. His headache cleared slightly at the sight of her. She was the very ample gym mistress who insisted on wearing very tight tights especially when she knew that he would be around. He didn't mind that. At rehearsals they had their private little game. He would slap her backside and say, "This castle hath a pleasant seat." She loved it.

Rive also gives an amusing account of the political tensions which surround the production. Many of the students and staff are aggrieved at the racial aspects that arise in the project.

Early in the story we are told:

There was a spirit of rebellion especially among the more radical pupils who were strongly influenced by Macduff, who taught them history. They put up notices about a darkie Shakespeare and a coon Macbeth.

Throughout this story, Rive satirizes² the way in which racial categories have come to possess the thinking of his characters to such an extent that, paradoxically, they often become the dupes of the system they are resisting.

Dissent reaches boiling point when the school learns that the principal - Macbeth - intends staging the production in front of a segregated audience in a so-called "white" area. In a very amusing denouement the chastened principal recants when it comes to taking the play out of the township and begs his cast to

remain faithful to the production:

Forgive me when I break down like this. It is only because I feel so strongly for you, my people. To those who accuse Retreat Senior Secondary of racialism, I say, this is not a coloured Macbeth, nor a white Macbeth," he stared pointedly at Macduff, "Nor a black Macbeth, but a non-racial Macbeth, a non-ethnic Macbeth. And a pox on him who says otherwise!

Like fellow South African satirical writers, Herman Charles Bosman and Christopher Hope, Rive here sees and exploits the absurdity and humour which often lies behind the racial obsessions of many of his countrymen.

The novel, "Buckingham Palace", District Six (1986), ~~as has been discussed earlier,~~ travels back into the past in order to recall the defeats and the triumphs of a community that was broken up by the forces of apartheid in Cape Town. It is arguably his best individual work. In it, he manages, by means of chapters that focus closely upon individual characters or small groups of characters, to utilize ^z one of his greatest talents: namely, his ability as a short-story writer. The unity of the novel is achieved by means of the common destiny that faces all of his District Six characters. ^{Rive later adapted the novel into a play which was performed in Cape Town shortly after his death.}

There is a great deal of potency in dealing with the destruction of a community like District Six in the way that Rive does. In

the first place, he celebrates qualities in the "District" that are being ravaged by the policies of apartheid, such as trust between people of different backgrounds and the spirit of cooperation that exists between residents of a close-knit community. But there is no doubt whatsoever that the forces of violence ultimately have their way. District Six is finally destroyed by the authorities and its residents scattered. Yet out

of this defeat, a spirit of resistance has arisen. This is very clearly illustrated in Rive's recent novel "Buckingham Palace", District Six, which brings to fruition many of his earlier treatments of this subject.

Towards the end of the novel, for example, one of the characters says what is clearly intended as a kind of programmatic note about the work:

The children must be reminded of the evils that greed and arrogance can cause. We must tell about the District and the thousands of other districts that they have broken up because they wanted even more than they already had. We knew that District Six was dirty and rotten. Their newspapers told us so often enough. But what they didn't say was that it was also warm and friendly...That it was never a place - that it was a people. We must tell how they split us apart and scattered us in many directions...They are trying to destroy our present but they will have to deal with our future. We must never forget.

The act of recalling the past in the way in which it is done in Rive's works becomes an act of resistance and affirmation in itself.

Richard Rive is not the only author to have dealt with the destruction of a vibrant South African community. Fellow writers of his from the Cape, such as James Matthews and Alex La Guma, have also paid homage to the community that was District Six. Further afield, Can Themba, Bloke Modisane and Miriam Tlali have written about the similar destruction of Sophiatown in Johannesburg.

Rive's stories and novels about District Six share much with the works of these authors. In this respect, his works form part of

that central stream of South African writing which deals with communal responses to the institutionalized violence of the state. Rive, like many of his fellow writers, finds an answer to this violence in the communal strength of the people in places such as District Six.

Rive's works of the 1980's indicate that there is little falling off in his powers as a writer. Indeed, after the long gap since the first works of fiction appeared in the 1950's and early 1960's, there ~~appears to be~~ ^{had been} a renewal of creative energy in his recent work. ~~This is worth celebrating as Rive is one of South Africa's~~ ^{His death deprives South Africa of one of its} most urbane writers.

4 Richard Rive was murdered in his home early on Sunday morning, 4 June 1989. Shortly prior to his death he had completed a play-script based on his novel, "Buckingham Palace"; District Six. The play opened in Cape Town days after his murder. A fortnight before his death Rive had completed a novel, The Emergency Continues (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989). This work is a sequel to his earlier Emergency. ~~In his posthumous novel, Rive describes conditions under the renewed South African state of emergency of the 1980s. Andrew Dreyer and other key characters from his earlier novel reappear in the later work. Rive's untimely death occurred when he was at the peak of his literary powers.~~

Add to references on RICHARD RIVE:

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“*Buckingham Palace*,” *District Six* (Cape Town: Philip,
1986; London: Heinemann, 1986; New York:
Ballantine, 1987);
Emergency Continued (Claremont, South Africa:
Philip, 1990).

OTHER: *Quartet*, edited, with contributions, by
Rive (London: Oxford University Press,
1963);
Modern African Prose, edited, with contributions, by
Rive (London: Heinemann, 1964; revised,
1967).

PLAY PRODUCTIONS: “*Buckingham Palace*,” *Dis-
trict Six*, Cape Town, 1989.

Richard Rive, a well-known South African fic-
tion writer, was born in Cape Town on 1 March
1931. His father was an African/American, and his
mother a South African “coloured.” He attended
schools in the city and later graduated with a B.A.
in English at the University of Cape Town. He
trained as a teacher at Hewat Training College,
Cape Town, and, in subsequent years, earned de-
grees in literature from Columbia (M.A., 1966) and
Oxford (Ph.D., 1974). His Oxford doctoral thesis
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Rive spent most of his life in South Africa, a
point worth noting, as virtually all black South
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Rive grew up in a poor area of Cape Town called District Six. The district is the setting for much of his fiction. Despite its poverty and the violence that haunted its streets, District Six is recalled fondly, but with little sentimentality, by Rive, as a community in which people from different backgrounds and with different creeds lived together in a harmony that is virtually unknown in the broader South African society. In 1966 the authorities declared District Six an area set aside for the exclusive occupation of white people. Over the next few years much of the district was bulldozed, and its residents were forced to seek new homes. At one and the same time, District Six symbolizes both the destructiveness of apartheid and a kind of community that gave the lie to the system of racial segregation. The dual symbolic significance is at the heart of Rive's fictional treatments of this area.

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Five of the twelve stories in the collection describe the arrest of a person who has defied the apartheid laws. Shame forms no part of the characters' responses to detention; their arrest simply adds to their dignity. There is pride in having defied the unjust regulations of the country. For instance, in "The Bench" the narrator comments about Karlie, one such character: "He had challenged and he felt he had won. Who cared at the result."

This spirit of courage and almost reckless defiance of authority forms an important dimension of Rive's next work, the novel *Emergency* (1964). Set against the background of the civil unrest in South Africa that followed the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960, the novel describes the difficult challenges that face a small group of characters, mainly schoolteachers and students who are hounded by the security police. Some of them flee the country, while others remain to continue the

struggle against oppression. This book was banned in South Africa shortly after its publication in England.

By this time Rive had also edited and contributed to two important collections of African fiction: *Quartet* (1963) and *Modern African Prose* (1964). Writers at early stages in their careers, such as Alex La Guma, James Matthews, Chinua Achebe, and ~~Ngũgĩ~~ wa Thiong'o were given a voice in these volumes.

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Rive also gives an amusing account of the political tensions that surround the production. Many of the students and staff are troubled over the racial problems that arise in the project: "There was a spirit of rebellion especially among the more radical pupils who were strongly influenced by Macduff, who taught them history. They put up notices about a darkie Shakespeare and a coon Macbeth." Throughout this story, Rive satirizes the ways in which racial categories have come to possess the thinking of his characters to such an extent that, paradoxically, they often become the dupes of the system they are resisting.

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The novel "*Buckingham Palace*," *District Six* (1986) travels back into the past in order to recall the defeats and the triumphs of a community that was broken up by the forces of apartheid in Cape Town. It is arguably Rive's best individual work. In it he manages, by means of chapters that focus closely on individual characters or small groups of characters, to utilize one of his greatest talents: his ability as a short-story writer. The unity of the novel is achieved by means of the common destiny that faces all of his District Six characters. Rive later adapted the novel into a play, which was performed in Cape Town shortly after his death.

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and its residents are scattered. Yet out of this defeat a spirit of resistance has arisen, clearly illustrated in "Buckingham Palace," *District Six*, which brings to fruition many of his earlier treatments of this subject.

Toward the end of the novel, for example, one of the characters states what is a kind of programmatic note about the work:

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