

REQUIEM FOR SOPHIATOWN

CAN TEMBA

REALISM can be star-scattering, even if you have lived your whole unthinking life in reality. Especially in Sophiatown,* these days, where it can come with the sudden crash of a flying brick on the back of your head.

Like the other day when Bob Gosani and I sneaked off towards our secret shebeen in Morris Street. We were dodging an old friend of ours whom we call the Leech, for he is one of those characters who like their drink—any amount—so long as someone else pays for it.

Well, this secret shebeen in Morris Street was a nice place. You take a passage through Meyer Street over haphazard heaps of bricks where houses have been broken down, you find another similar passage that leads you from Ray Street into Edith Street, where you find another passage, neater, having always been there, between the Coloured School and Jerusalem-like slum-houses, you go down a little, and suddenly there it is.

Quite a fine place, too. A little brick wall, a minute garden of mostly christmas flowers, a half-veranda (the other half has become a little kitchen) and the floor of the veranda polished a bright green.

Inside, the sitting-room may be cluttered with furniture, it is so small, but you sink comfortably into a sofa as one of the little tables that can stand under the other's belly is placed before you, and you make your order. Half-a-jack of brandy!

How often have Bob and I not whooped happily: "Yessus! the Leech will never find us here." So, though there were directer routes to this place, we always took the passages. They say these people can smell when you are going to make a drink.

But that day, as we emerged into Morris Street, it was as if that brick had just struck us simultaneously on our heads. That sweet, little place was just not there. Where it should have been was a grotesque, grinning structure of torn red brick that made it look like the face of a mauled boxer trying to be sporting after his gruel. A nausea of despair rose up in me, but it was Bob who said the only appropriate thing:

"Shucks."

*The freehold area in the west of 'white' Johannesburg which has been declared a 'black spot' and is in the process of demolition—its black residents being forcibly removed to the regimented location of Meadowlands.

Here is the odd thing about Sophiatown. I have long been inured to the ravages wreaked upon Sophiatown. I see its wrecks daily, and through many of its passages that have made such handy short-cuts for me, I have stepped gingerly many times over the tricky rubble. Inside of me, I have long stopped arguing the injustice, the vindictiveness, the strong-arm authority of which prostrate Sophiatown is a loud symbol.

Long ago I decided to concede, to surrender to the argument that Sophiatown was a slum, after all. I am itchy nagged by the thought that slum-clearance should have nothing to do with the theft of free-hold rights. But the sheer physical fact of Sophiatown's removal has intimidated me.

Moreover, so much has gone—veritable institutions. Fatty of the Thirty-nine Steps. Now, that was a great shebeen! It was in Good Street. You walked up a flight of steps, the structure looked dingy as if it would crash down with you any moment. You opened a door and walked into a dazzle of bright electric light, contemporary furniture, and massive Fatty. She was a legend. Gay, friendly, coquettish, always ready to sell you a drink. And that mama had everything: whisky, brandy, gin, beer, wine—the lot. Sometimes she could even supply cigars. But now that house is flattened. I'm told that in Meadowlands she has lost the zest for the game. She has even tried to look for work in town. Ghastly.

Dwarf, who used to find a joke in everything. He used to walk into Bloke's place, catch us red-handed playing the music of Mozart. He used to cock his ear, listen a little and in his gravel voice comment: "No wonder he's got a name like that." There is nothing that Dwarf loved more than sticking out his tongue to a cop and running for it. I once caught him late at night in his Meadowlands house washing dishes. He still manfully tries to laugh at himself.

And Mabeni's, where the great Dolly Rathebe once sang the blues to me. I didn't ask her. She just sidled over to me on the couch and broke into song. It was delicious. But now Dolly is in Port Elizabeth, and Mabeni, God knows where.

These are only highlights from the swarming, cacophonous, strutting, brawling, vibrating life of the Sophiatown that was. But it was not all just shebeeny, smutty, illegal stuff. Some places it was as dreams are made on.

I am thinking of those St. Cyprian's School boys who a decade ago sweatingly dug out the earth behind the house of the

Community of the Resurrection, in order to have a swimming pool. It still stands, and the few kids left still paddle in it. Some of those early schoolboys of St. Cyprian's later went up to Father Ross or Father Raynes or Father Huddleston who wangled a bursary for them to go to St. Peter's, then on to Fort Hare, and later even Wits, to come back doctors.

Their parents, patiently waiting and working in town, skimped a penny here, a tickey there, so that they might make the necessary alteration to their house, or pay off the mortgage. And slowly Sophiatown was becoming house-proud.

Of course, there were pressures too heavy for them. After the war, many people came to Johannesburg to seek for work and some hole to night in. As they increased they became a housing problem. As nobody seemed to care, they made Sophiatown a slum.

But the children of those early Sophiatonians—some of them—are still around. It is amazing how many of them are products of the Anglican Mission at St. Cyprian's. I meet them often in respectable homes, and we talk the world to tatters.

Mostly we talk of our lot in life. After all, too often we have been told that we are the future leaders of our people. We are the young stalwarts who are supposed to solve the problems of our harassed world.

"Not political unity, we need," one would say; "our society is too diverse and unwieldy for that. Just a dynamic core of purified fighters with clear objectives and a straightforward plan of action. That is all."

Another: "No! We must align ourselves with the new forces at play in Africa today. There already is the dynamicity. The idea of a one Africa has never been put as powerfully as at Accra recently. You see, Africans, wherever they are, have not a territorial, a local loyalty: they don't feel that they belong to a South Africa or a Federation or a Tanganyika or a Kenya or a West Africa; but with Africans in the whole of Africa. In fact, many of us are wondering if Arabs and Egyptians are also Africans. They probably are."

Still another: "But if the boys in the North are getting busy, shouldn't we start something here ourselves?"

"Waal, you see, our ANC here has been caught with its pants down. The Africanists are claiming that Accra has proclaimed their stand. And the ANC representative there could only discuss the tactical difficulties of the ANC in South Africa with

her special conditions.”

“Ya. But this African Personality idea, how does it mean to us? What does it mean, anyway?”

“I’ll tell you. In the world today are poised against each other two massive ideologies: of the East and of the West. Both of them play international politics as if we’re bound to choose between them. Between them only. We have just discovered that we can choose as we like, if we grow strong in our own character. But there’s more to this. The West has had a damned long time to win us. Win us over to Western thinking. Western Christian way of living. Their ideas of democracy and their Christian ideals were wonderful, but they did not mean them.

“Let me explain. We are quite a religious people. We accept the idealism of Christianity. We accept its high principles. But in a stubborn, practical sense we believe in reality. Christian Brotherhood must be real. Democracy must actually be the rule of the people: not of a white hobo over a black M.A.

“To us, if a witchdoctor says he’ll bring rain, we not only want to see the rain fall, but also the crops sprout from the earth. That’s what a rainmaker’s for, nay? If the bone-thrower says he’ll show up the bastard who’s been slinging lightning at me, I expect him to swing that bolt of lightning right back. So if the priest says God’s on my side, I’d like to see a few more chances and a little less whiteman’s curses.

“But, in any case, Christianity is now an anaemic religion. It cannot rouse the ancient in me—especially the Chaka instinct I still have. Now, you and I are educated guys. We don’t go for the witchcraft stuff. And we don’t want to go for the juke-box stuff. But much as we deny it, we still want the thrill of the wild blood of our forefathers. The whites call it savagery. Ineradicable barbarism. But in different degrees we want the colour, and vigour and vibrant appeal of it all. So the tsotsi seeks in the cowboy the way to strut across the streets with swaying hips and a dangerous weapon in each hand. So the zionist thumps his drum and gyrates his holy fervour up the streets. So you and I and these guys here discuss politics, teasingly dancing around the idea of violence.

“All it means is that in wanting to express her demand for democratic self-determination, Africa is also releasing her ancientmost desire to live life over the brim. That’s how come

we sometimes seem to talk in two voices.”

“Wait a minute,” another shrieks, “wait a minute. We’re not all like that. Some of us would like to get things right, and start anew. Some piece of social engineering could get things working right, if our moral purposes were right, not just vengeful.”

“Sure, but our masters have taught this damned thing violence so well by precept—often practice—that they get you to believe that it’s the only way to talk turkey to them.”

We do not only talk about this particular subject. Our subjects are legion. Nkrumah must be a hell of a guy, or is he just bluffing? What about our African intellectuals who leave the country just when we need them most? But is it honestly true that we don’t want to have affairs with white girls? What kind of white supremacy is this that cannot stand fair competition? What will happen if a real topmost Nat gets caught by the Immorality Act? In fact, all those cheeky questions that never get aired in public.

But it always ends up with someone saying, “Aw shut up, folks, you got no plan to liberate us.”

Somewhere here, and among a thousand more individualistic things, is the magic of Sophiatown. It is different and itself. You don’t just find your place here, you make it and you find yourself. There’s a tang about it. You might now and then have to give way to others making their ways of life by methods not in the book. But you can’t be bored. You have the right to listen to the latest jazz records at Ah Sing’s over the road. You can walk a Coloured girl of an evening down to the Odin Cinema, and no questions asked. You can try out Rhugubar’s curry with your bare fingers without embarrassment. All this with no sense of heresy. Indeed, I’ve shown quite a few white people “the little Paris of the Transvaal”—but only a few were Afrikaners.

What people have thought to be the brazenness of Sophiatown has really been its clean-faced frankness. And, of course, its swart jowl against the rosy cheek of Westdene.

Ay, me. That was the Sophiatown that was.

I shall have to leave these respectable homes of my friends and stumble over the loose bricks back to my den. I hear tell that Blackie is still about in his shack behind the posh house in devastated Millar Street.

Blackie’s landlord is still facing it out, what the hell for?

Since the Rathebe case most of the standholders have decided to capitulate. They are selling out like rats letting the passengers sink. Solly got caught in this—the newest racket. His landlord told him nothing. Waited for him to pay the next month's rent, although he knew that he was planning to sell out. The Resettlement Board has been very sympathetic with such cases; it has told tenants not to pay landlords rent any more, for they may suddenly be given yesterday's notice and the G.G. will come to break down the house over their heads.

Solly was not at home when the landlord trekked. When he got there he found his furniture was left outside and a policeman was guarding the house. Poor Solly had to rush about looking for some place to put his stuff for the night. Half-a-dozen friends helped.

And still I wander among the ruins trying to find one or two of the shebeens that Dr. Verwoerd has overlooked. But I do not like the dead-eyes with which some of these ghost houses stare back at me. One of these days I, too, will get me out of here. Finish and clear!

