

Third EXTRACT from: (6 pages)
'I STILL CLIMB TREES'
by Drummond Marais

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At the tender age of seventeen I was presented with the most daunting, humbling, exhausting and yet most enlightening opportunity of my entire high school career. I was cast as the gloomy Dane in Que Que High School's presentation of Shakespeare's "HAMLET". This momentous challenge appeared in January 1968, the start of my final year of secondary education. I had already been overwhelmed by the school's decision to appoint me as one of the twelve prefects who exerted powers of peer authority over the general school populace, which numbered about twelve hundred pupils. A daunting task to say the least, as prefect control of the school was secondary only to the staff of some thirty-odd teachers. To say that my appointment had come as a surprise is a major understatement. I could not fathom why they had chosen me at all. Surely an evidently antisocial individual such as myself should not have even appeared upon the list of nominees? Of course I was egotistically gratified by this enormous compliment. Someone obviously believed in my, as yet untapped, organisational capabilities. But as was my fixated preoccupation back then, I analysed this prospect to death. Finally I came to the conclusion that my invitation to the prefects' common room was a democratic gesture; a patronising nod in the general direction of academia and cultural pursuits. It is surely a sad indictment upon my own self-esteem, at the time, that I found it necessary to undermine the blatant privilege and personal accolade of my elevated prefect status. But then again, such were my ever-increasing levels of social and intellectual cynicism.

“HAMLET” was the proposed set-work Shakespearean tragedy for G.C.E. ‘M’ levels that year and so its choice as the annual drama production was timeous. For me, the politically disadvantageous factor was that Patti Edmund-Mack would not be directing this year’s production, as had been traditional for many years. The deputy headmaster, a certain Mr. Van Aaswegen, would be taking the reins for this year’s play. He was an unknown quantity having only recently been transferred to the school, and quite naturally Mrs. Mack's hackles were raised. I was therefore placed in the most delicate of socio-political predicaments. As our rehearsals for “HAMLET” progressed, so did my formal classroom studies of the play under Patti’s knowledgeable tutelage. Through Mrs.Mack’s deft analysis of the text, I learned much about the character that I was in the process of interpreting upon the stage. Although I received little sub-textual guidance from my stage director, who seemed bent upon a stylistically ‘choreographed’ version of this most complex play, every now and then he would give me some food for thought about the Danish Prince, which I would automatically raise for debate in Mrs.Mack’s lessons. Her reactions to my director’s filtered suggestions soon became quite predictable. Outrage and disdain for her colleague. He was so obviously ill equipped to be in control of such an important production. I perceived such a response as immature peevishness, a form of stupid professional jealousy, which somewhat disillusioned me with regards my former admiration of this cultural mentor.

I should hereby record that I had landed this incredibly demanding role after a progressive course of events. Two years prior, and at rather short notice, Mrs.Mack had asked me to replace an actor who had suddenly become ill. I was to play the role of Inquisitor in her one act presentation of the trial scene from Shaw’s “SAINT JOAN”. Now for many reasons, I had not as yet participated in any of the high school’s annual productions. My theatre focus had been limited to my mother’s presentations in Redcliff, in which I had played musical roles varying from the crown prince in “THE KING AND I” to the Artful Dodger in “OLIVER!” These stage appearances had kept my performance fires burning since my debut at the age of seven. However, I had eagerly accepted this opportunity to play the Inquisitor, instinctively knowing that my acting skills required growth and exposition within more formal dramatic presentations. I also happened to be fully aware that there was no one else in the school who was equipped to play the role.

This role required a command of the English language that very few peer pupils possessed. At that stage I was already conscious of the impact of my self-coached public-speaking voice, since I had been commandeered by Mrs. Mack, earlier that year, to present the daily bible readings at school assembly on a regular basis. I was subsequently rewarded with a special Headmaster's Award for such services and regularly received compliments from teaching staff with regards my 'commanding and captivating' renditions of scriptural readings. All of which certainly assisted and enhanced my evolving confidence and self-esteem. So, after a notable performance in "SAINT JOAN", the following year had begun most positively, in a theatrical sense. I was cast as the male lead in Patti Mack's production of "PINK CHAMPAGNE", the Anglophile version of "DER FLEDERMAUS". Being a Strauss operetta, I had been given the opportunity to further exploit my musical talents and thoroughly enjoyed it. After that, yet another one-act extract from a Shaw play, "PYGMALION" in which I played Professor Higgins. One would suspect that such a short-lived but notable track record would have given me greater confidence when auditioning for "HAMLET", but this was not the case. I went along to those auditions hoping to be cast as Horatio, if I was lucky. So landing that most coveted of acting roles became the zenith of my final year at school

Once rehearsals for this production had begun, I soon discovered that I had a good deal in common with that Gloomy Dane. And as every actor knows, it always helps immeasurably to have elements of commonality with the character one is portraying. I unfortunately lacked Hamlet's royal blood and regarding his personal relationships, I also lacked my own best friend Horatio. I was yet to claim a close male friendship, so my imagination had to be employed in order to provide me with a believable imitation of such a concept. But there was so much else we shared. The obvious criterion, and one of the most complex themes to this play, is Hamlet's intense relationship with his mother, Gertrude. The reader will by now accept that the Danish Prince and I both endured an almost obsessive mother-son conflict. Probably for very different reasons, although both of these mother's had severally rushed into their own individual and illicit love affairs, putting fealty to their legal husbands in question. It was a fairly relevant reference for this actor to draw upon. I also found it easy to relate to the very occasional appearances of a ghost-like, yet oddly demanding shadow father figure. For my relationship with the Polonius character, I drew upon every past encounter with sycophantic adult idiots of which I had already experienced quite a few. My obsessive, unrequited and unfulfilled love for Jean Prince became my

motivational inspiration for Hamlet's love for Ophelia. I certainly knew what it was like to be seduced yet spurned, time and again. And then there was the Laertes conflict that I convolutedly substituted for my personal distaste towards my sister's recent choice of a boyfriend, an eighteen-year-old by the name of Arthur Dempster. The final duel between Hamlet and Laertes received every motivational ounce of the masculine outrage and jealous I often felt towards my future brother-in-law. But you will hear more of him later on. And so much for my youthful drawing upon personal experience to create an enacted character.

Hamlet is a confused and slightly tormented young man. So who better to play him than me. As I gradually committed the enormous volume of his universally insightful speeches to memory, I was simultaneously illuminated with major life-concepts, some of which I had already encountered in my current life, and others of which were still to come. Evidence of my devoted focus to the task at hand remains with me today. Although I have had occasion to memorise thousands of lines of dialogue from countless plays ever since, I have necessarily developed a method of regularly clearing my brain. Wiping from my immediate memory all dialogue that is no longer required, in order to provide a clean slate for further assimilation of new information. This habit obviously leaves me lacking if ever I am requested to quote from a passed play. Most other actors I know perform such requests with great ease and aplomb. By personal default, I can only blame the limitations of my own intellectual capacities for being unable to do so. And yet, to this very day, "HAMLET" remains as my only quotable play. Those rich, insightful soliloquies are entrenched in my psyche. Preparing for that role was a life-altering process that lasted many months. I know I was the beneficiary in the end. Although I was a mere seventeen-year-old boy then, I now firmly believe that Destiny provided me with an enormous psychological challenge at just the right time in my physical and mental development for I more than coped with that challenge. I managed to achieve what every human being, and certainly every actor hopes to achieve during a lifetime. I grew. I evolved. My limited life-horizons until then had been suddenly stretched; life-expectations were spontaneously extended, allowing me to understand so much more about human existence in general and myself in particular. But there was still a certain amount of confusion and disappointment to be faced.

The two most powerfully influential women in my life, at that stage, responded to my Hamlet-experience diversely but with uniform negativity.

My mother, who had never overtly praised any previous stage performances of mine, was renowned for referring to my talents as being a genetic given. "Of course he's talented!" she would often exclaim, "...that's only because he's MY son!" Betty always possessed an abundance of self-congratulatory arrogance, and yet after witnessing my first performance as the Dane, my dear mother had only one simple yet subconsciously insightful response to my efforts: "While you were trying to strangle your mother, the Queen, I knew that you were thinking about me!" Her comment confirmed for me an as yet instinctive acting technique. That of honestly applying one's personal life experience when interpreting any role. Truth always results!

The day after our opening night I had rushed to Patti Mack's English class, predictably eager to hear what she had to say. I anticipated criticism of the production in general. That would be obligatory considering her political stance towards the deputy headmaster having usurped her traditional directorial status. But I was not emotionally prepared for her embittered and crushing words: "Well! The production was diabolical, of course. I expected that...but as far as your interpretation of Hamlet goes...Quite obviously, you understood not a word of what you were saying!"

I was understandably devastated. Deeply hurt. My cultural mentor had denigrated many months of concentrated labour and creative devotion to the realms of mere mediocrity. Her insensitive and unnecessarily bitchy quip filled me with a sense of deep failure. Such is the fallibility of humankind, I presume. Role models, heroes, icons are all human at the end of each day. And every human being has at least one faulty attribute. But when egos are out of control, people are capable of irresponsible behaviour and can cause great harm.

Recently I came across a wise old quotation that says: "*Never idealise others; they will never live up to your expectations.*" But I had no such intellectual referencing back then. And because I was in the early stages of developing a tentative self-assertion, based upon tenuous experiential self-worth through minor achievement successes, I could so easily have lost my newly attained self-confidence because of these non-supportive reactions to my 'Hamlet-endeavours'.

However, innate survival came to the fore. Instead I chose the route of emotional distancing and pseudo-cynicism. I withdrew once again. The world and everyone in it, sucked! I was alone on this life journey and I

would manage without anyone's assistance. From now onwards, I would be the only monitor of my progress through life. Only I would have the right to claim or criticise any future personal achievements. I would hold disdain for other opinions thereafter. No one truly mattered but me. A desperate self-defence mechanism instantly took control of my psyche. Instead of being humbly subjected to others, I would henceforth forcefully subject myself upon them. The bullied victim would now transform himself into the empowered manipulator of others. And with this unnatural and unaccustomed, yet suddenly most appealing new credo at work, I adopted a completely different personality. It was the final catalyst to my personal re-invention. I consciously aborted the gentle, sensitive, loving soul that had always been an integral part of me. Little Drummond the sissy boy, had become Mr. Drummond Marais, a power-force in his own egotistical right. A force to be reckoned with and that was when I adopted the mantra: "Life sucks, so fuck the world!"

I would maintain this self-invented pretence of *persona* for the next three decades of my life.

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