

# A Tale from Arkadia

## How was growing up in Johannesburg?

I had an idyllic childhood as Johannesburg is the City of Gold; it is full of violence and vibrant energy. I was born of Lithuanian Jewish parents so I am first generation English speaking. Before I went to school I spent a lot of time with my mother and father and younger brother travelling quite extensively around South Africa as my father was a travelling salesman. I was brought up in a racist society and although I was from an immigrant background I was part of the privileged white minorities. As a young boy I didn't know any different, that was the conditioning of the society at the time.

## What were your experiences in being one of the few white members of the Congress movement at that time?

By the age of eighteen through a cousin I came in contact with the Indian Congress Movement which was based near the factory I had been working in since sixteen in Johannesburg.

This led me to become a member of the congress of democrats which was the white section of the congress movement which was made up of the African National Congress and the Indian Congress. So I suddenly became politicised and broke all the barriers of colour and conditioning which the society had imposed on me, it was quite a revelation. It was 1955 and the Congress movement didn't even have an armed wing it was a peaceful movement inspired by the passive resistance philosophies of Ghandi.

I had met a university lecturer called Dr Ronnie Press who took me under his wing at the time when he and many others were preparing for a great event which was to take place on the 25th and 26th of June 1955, It was going to be the Congress of the People where all the people of South Africa were going to make a Freedom Charter for the future. I was to be a foot soldier for the event and was to accompany Dr Ronnie Press on many visits in preparation for the big event. One of the places he took me to one afternoon was a lawyer's office in motor town Johannesburg and when I arrived with him to the office I noticed on the windows of the office were the words Tambo and Mandela. I was sitting in the law office of Oliver Tambo who was for many years in exile and to be the leader of the ANC and Nelson Mandela, I remember it very distinctly because I knew who he was from the congress movement and it was such an honour to be sitting at the feet of such eminent and interesting men.

The congress took place in Klip town, we gathered in thousands to this great event where the freedom charter was going to be laid down. I was selling political magazines and giving out flyers as one of the foot soldier of the movement. Out of the three thousand there were only about a hundred white people. On the second day it was announced that we were surrounded by armed police and as the head of the white police moved up to the platform the whole crowd rose up and sang Nkosi Sikelele, God save Africa, the African national anthem, and that was one of the most amazing moments of my life,

the blood rushed to my head and I felt I was part of this great struggle for freedom from white rule, I felt a great oneness with all the people there but I knew my time in South Africa was limited and I had a choice to either leave the country or stay and commit myself to a long political time and most likely to trials. I left at the end of 1955 to the United Kingdom by ship from Cape Town.

## You moved to London to pursue a career in drama, was it difficult getting your foot in the door?

I arrived in London and eventually went to the Webber -Douglas drama school while working in the evenings in the Haymarket theatre. After this two year period of studying I started work as an assistant stage manager and actor at various repertory companies where I worked on Shakespearian plays and the drawing room comedies of the time.

## What are some of your memories of touring with Orson Welles?

In 1960 I successfully auditioned for a play starring Orson Welles called "Chimes at Midnight" which was to tour Ireland. So I ended working with this Hollywood star who played Sir John Falstaff. I was prompting the great actor in the early hours of the morning at a dress rehearsal in the Opera House Belfast where he screamed out to the dark auditorium saying "If this kid prompts me once more, I'll leave the stage" and boy did I quake!