No laughing matter

Pieter-Dirk Uys
5 April 2004

South Africa's foremost satirical performance artist takes a look at the South African government's treatment of AIDS.

Is it patriotic to criticise a democratically-elected government or does one censor one’s anger and hope to pass the buck? The passion that surrounds HIV/AIDS in Africa, and in particular the infuriating denials and confusions that emanate daily from Thabo Mbeki’s government in South Africa, has resulted in much anger. Dangerous instinctive reactions that have led to much ice cracking under the feet.

It started in a peak of fury after spending four days in the South African hinterland doing 13 presentations of my AIDS-awareness entertainment to over 20 schools and 9,000 learners, and realising how little hope there is for youth amid the present government paralysis with regard to information about HIV/AIDS.

On Sunday 23 February 2003, I sent an email to whoever could take it further:

THE WEAPON OF MASS DESTRUCTION IS IN SOUTH AFRICA AND BEING HARBOURED BY THE SOUTH AFRICAN PRESIDENT AND HIS MINISTER OF HEALTH. IT IS HIV/AIDS.

An investigative process should be put into place as soon as possible, with vigorous support in local South African and International legal and political circles. This process can result in President Thabo Mbeki and Minister Manto Tshabala-Msimang being summoned to appear in The Hague at the International Court of Justice on counts of Genocide. Rather this happen now than in ten years time, when the world will no doubt look back at 2003 and the actions of the South African President and his minister of health, and realise that by acting sooner, millions of lives could have been saved from an unnecessary death from AIDS.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN PEOPLE ARE DYING TODAY BECAUSE OF GOVERNMENT CARELESSNESS AND POLITICAL NEGLIGENCE.
The time to act is now. Vuk’uzenzele!’ (In Xhosa ‘vuk’uzenzele’ mean arise and act.)

I sent that email to many people, including President Mbeki, minister Tshabala-Msimang and the speaker of parliament. The immediate reaction from government was the following:
Government has noted the email message being circulated by Pieter-Dirk Uys on the challenges of HIV/AIDS facing our country. South Africa is a free country and all citizens, including Uys, enjoy freedom of speech. While we are convinced that there are limits to satire, we do recognise Uys’ right to overstate matters and respond flippantly to serious issues.

Government urges all South Africans to unite against HIV/AIDS, in the campaign of hope and not despair. We would have thought that Pieter-Dirk Uys would realise from his own experiences in AIDS prevention, as most South Africans do, that searching for scapegoats and instant solutions is not the correct response to the challenge of HIV/AIDS.

Working with partners from all sectors of society, government will continue to implement the national comprehensive strategy on AIDS, in all its elements, as the most rational approach to the pandemic.

(Issued by government communications Tues 25 Feb 2003)

There were many other reactions. My favourite email simply said: “Pieter-Dirk Uys, are you mad?”

Yes. Mad as hell! But not as insane as those who think there are limits to satire.

Genocide is a terrible accusation. It means the systematic, planned extermination of an entire national, racial, political or ethnic group. The word “genocide” is mainly associated with the Nazi extermination of millions of Jews, gays, gypsies and others during World War II. We watched more recent examples in Burundi and Rwanda on the TV news while eating supper. Kosovo and Serbia also had their share of planned murder. But does genocide always have to be at the end of a machine gun? Do we have to kill 6 million and ONE people to be worse than the Nazis?

When President Mbeki took over our democratic reins of power from Nelson Mandela, Comrade Thabo wore the red AIDS ribbon. Many celebrated the proof that the new South African leadership would focus on what had without doubt become the most serious threat to our nation: the virus known as HIV and the resulting decline of health through disease called AIDS.

But in the four years that followed the 1999 election, the leadership of South Africa has virtually denied the existence of our present third-world war. At every opportunity the President, his advisors and especially his chosen minister of health have demeaned the seriousness of the pandemic and created havoc among those who seek help. It is leading to thousands of deaths. The national comprehensive strategy is starting to look like a systematic, planned extermination of an entire group of South Africans: those who are poor, unemployed, in prison, on the streets and hopeless. The new apartheid has already established itself. Black and White South Africans with money will live. Those without money will have no access to medicines and drugs. They will die.

Everyone of us reading these words has heard of the pandemic. Many of us know people who are HIV-positive. Some of us have lost loved ones and friends to AIDS. Countless of us have the virus. All of us now think it will inevitably lead to death. We’re wrong. There
is life after HIV, and there is a future with AIDS. It is part of Life, not Death. There are treatments, medical regimes, disciplines and help available to everyone who needs it. But the first step is to acknowledge the existence of the disease. If the leadership ignores the symptoms of a national disaster all the people are left to suffer alone.

How can Thabo Mbeki and Manto T-M be guilty of genocide? They’re not firing guns as in Burundi, or turning up the gas ovens in Auschwitz. The unnecessary deaths of people who depend on government for leadership and don’t get it, is as criminal as firing machine guns into a crowd.

Happily there is much good will in our land. We all have different experiences of the pandemic in South Africa. Anger and frustration find many ways to express themselves. The Treatment Action Campaign speaks with strong moral authority when they demand the right of medication for those who need anti-retroviral drugs. Judge Edwin Cameron and thousands of others live with AIDS as an example of survival and courage. Patricia de Lille, leader of the newly established Independent Democrats, has risen above party politics to embrace the struggle against HIV/AIDS as a new chapter in her commitment to defend democracy against corrupt laziness.

To ignore the terrible danger we are faced with, is to show contempt for life. All the facts and statistics point to the loss of up to half the population of Africa in ten years. If 40 per cent of the work force is HIV-positive, investment will not happen. Over 60 per cent of the armed forces are carriers of the virus. Twenty-five per cent of first year students at universities have tested positive.

And still the minister of health, whose professional and sacred duty it is to protect us, chooses to scoff at the facts. She chooses to add crazy soundbites that would be the pride of any comedian. She proves there are no limits to satire! First came: South Africa can’t afford the cost of treatment as submarines must be built to fight a US invasion. Most recently: why should AIDS be regarded as more important than asthma? Do her words represent the thoughts of her President?

The last two years have taken me round 250 schools and I have met 500,000 young South Africans. I have entertained them with the need to laugh at fear and make that fear less fearful. And because AIDS happens through sex, some “words” like “fuck” and “naai” (Afrikaans for “bonk”) get used to describe where the minefield is. Some parents have complained, a few teachers have been offended, churches have frowned and government is silent. But the children are not. They are inspired and empowered with hope. And they want to talk.

“I appreciated how you did not treat us like stupid kids, but as equals,” wrote a girl in Grade 11, one reaction out of hundreds. “Your show was brilliant and seriously did make people think twice. You showed us the reality, but didn’t scare us. Instead you made us more aware, brave and determined to go out there and make it.”

If we can keep our youth alive, we will have the greatest country in the world. But that means keeping them alive now. Talking to them. Encouraging them to ask questions!

The depressing side is that because the subject of sex is so controversial, no one feels free to talk. And because the President won’t be drawn into the debate, the focus falls away. Imagine if once a week, our President talked on television to people who are
frightened of HIV/AIDS and the stigma attached to it. Imagine how together they could confront their fears and help everyone realise that Life is possible. He could be the Father of the Nation and embrace us with humanity.

Don’t forget we survived Apartheid, the first virus. We were told: democracy is too good to share with just anyone. And so we went through 40 years in the political wilderness because we believed our leaders. They were wrong: democracy is the only solution. And thanks to the freedoms we all enjoy, each one of us can make our voices heard. Today we have violence, crime, corruption, arrogance and denial – all the things that have made us a successful third-world African democracy. But we also have the vote. This we often forget in the rush to complain.

It’s easy and important to criticise a democratically-elected government. That’s part of the deal between politics and society. And what a gift the present government with its Mbekivellian policies is to a satirist. From ANC MP Tony Yengeni pleading poverty from a new Mercedes sportscar, to Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela offering to go to Baghdad to catch US cruise missiles in her teeth It’s unfair to say that the present government is more corrupt than the previous apartheid regime. They’re just better at it. That’s not genocide. That’s tatty politics and they’ll always get away with it, if the people don’t say STOP.

But AIDS is not Politics. It’s Health. In this case, safe sex is not about morality; it’s about hygiene. It’s like brushing teeth. If we don’t protect ourselves, we will get sick. And the only way we will take control of our lives is by talking about our fear. By focusing on surviving a virus. Not denying it’s existence.

Do I want to put the entire South African government in the dock at The Hague? Of course not. We are only here today thanks to the generosity of the so-called former enemies of South Africa. These men and women came out of their prison cells and exile to allow us all a second chance to live in this great land. There are excellent professionals in government, especially in the department of health. But without leadership and inspiration, they cannot catch up with the needs of the people.

The anger in South Africa is growing on every level, from business to suburb. But it’s always where the ground has been freshly dug and the crosses crowd into small cemeteries where the reality strikes home. Mothers are losing children to a disease that has only stigma and no name or recognition. Sons and daughters have lost their parents. Politicians are dying of “backache” and “lung problems”. If Rock Hudson and Freddy Mercury had been members of the ANC they too would have died of “natural causes”.

This denial at the highest level, that HIV/AIDS is the most serious assault on our future, has led to more deaths. The President’s version of what he regards as the reasons for AIDS – poverty, TB, racism, yellow flowers and sticky biscuits – are being religiously repeated so often and given so much credence that the fear and suspicions lead to the rape of babies and the killing of suspected sufferers of the “thinning sickness.” And when a two-month-old baby is raped by a man who thinks it will cure him, does the president say anything?

No.
He flies around the globe in his expensive new aeroplane like Supermouse, trying to solve the problems of the First World, while auditioning for the part of Kofi Annan. He pops into South Africa occasionally on a state visit and shows how much he dislikes us by ignoring us. He confuses us even more with details of an African Renaissance, an African Union and a New Partnership for Africa’s Development, diverting the attention away from the battlefields of fear.

But let us be fair to this consummate politician with such grand ambitions. Let Thabo off the hook. Let him and Manto run the United Nations and let’s find a president who cares for us; a minister of health who heals and embraces us. And together we can all realise that HIV/AIDS as a weapon of mass destruction can be disarmed without fear. By confronting it with information and knowledge. By allowing us our humanity, compassion and humour.

And there is always that final solution. Not the International Court in The Hague. It’ll be the ballot box on Election Day 2004. South Africans can decide who they want to be in charge. Vote!

Vuk’uzenzele!

Mid-September 2003, after months of bullshit from the highest office in the land – and still anti-retroviral drugs are not being made available to the people who need them – Thabo Mbeki drops another hint of his true colours in an interview with the Washington Post. He says he knows no one with HIV. He knows no one who has died of AIDS.

The ice cracks again.

A letter to the editors of South African newspapers went off on Friday 26 September – and was published by most – hours after the news of Mbeki’s words filtered through the barrage of sports details and soap opera synopses:

> When the President of South Africa speaks, he represents a democracy where 5 million citizens have HIV; where more than 600 people die each day from AIDS-related diseases; where 250 babies are born every 24 hours with the virus. Yet our President Thabo Mbeki says to the US-based Washington Post: “I don’t know anyone with HIV... Personally, I don’t know anybody who has died of AIDS.”

He lies and so condemns his nation to death.
It is time to replace this man with a leader who cares about his people!

Not only does Thabo Mbeki spend most of his time outside South Africa, speaking at international political jamborees, but he has now shown himself totally out of touch with his own country.

We are a young democracy, in which this man is but a chosen leader and not the member of a royal dynasty. The African National Congress deserves to celebrate the 2004 tenth anniversary of our young democracy. The ANC is a former liberation movement, now a successful political party, committed to the issues of human rights and freedom. But this party of liberation will soon be remembered by history only as an accomplice to the genocidal Mbekivellian policies of their
present leader.

Replace this failed leader with a comrade of compassion.

There are many politicians in the ruling party, and on the fringes of power. Men and women of compassion and care, of focus and commitment. They are needed now. Replace this failed civil-servant in denial with a citizen who can heal and help, a leader who confronts the problems of our people and embraces our needs and aspirations. No more Thabo Mbeki.

We need leadership to inspire confidence and optimism in our time of national fear and need.
We need to inspire an impatient world to invest in us and believe in our future.

With 40 per cent of our workforce HIV-positive, no one will invest in South Africa.

And yet our President knows no-one with HIV?

While everyone in our country has buried, nurtured, cared-for, said farewell to, wept for and remembered a loved one who has died of this virus that has no cure, our elected President is confused and innocent of the pain and the tears.

Like when Steve Biko died, the then-apartheid Minister of Justice Jimmy Kruger famously said: “It leaves me cold.”

South Africa leaves Thabo Mbeki cold.

There is no time for party politics here.

Replace this man now with a committed leader and let him, or her, lead and help us to live!

Pieter-Dirk Uys

The President’s Rasputin was quick to react. From the office of the president, His minister for the presidency Dr Essop Pahad reacted to my letter with the following observations:

GOVERNMENT-LED EFFORTS AGAINST HIV/AIDS ARE NO LAUGHING MATTER

HIV/AIDS is a serious subject which engages the attention of the nation as never before. For instance, the report of the National Task team, charged with preparing an operational plan on public sector anti-retroviral therapy, is now with the Department of Health, having met the end-September deadline. It is to be discussed by cabinet in the coming days.

Against this serious background the antics of Pieter-Dirk Uys over HIV/AIDS –
curiously afforded serious treatment in sections of the media – are a complicating irritant of minor scale. But some damage is undoubtedly being done to South Africa’s campaign against the scourge in terms of influencing public opinion, particularly the youth, against government-led efforts and, particularly against President Thabo Mbeki.

These government-led efforts are widely acknowledged as the biggest and most comprehensive campaign against HIV/AIDS in Africa, which is presumably news to Uys.

Only last week, the Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, praised South Africa for tripling its HIV/AIDS budget since the last summit of the UN on this issue.

House clowns in any democracy have some, mainly amusement, value. British society through the years would not have been itself without the lampooning of Private Eye and Spitting Image, and the Americans even go further.

Uys’s satire did have a useful influence on enlightenment in the days when there was a total absence of democracy in South Africa, and his lampooning had something to do with helping to change attitudes away from apartheid and repression. But his recent statements on the government’s programme against HIV/AIDS can, if taken too seriously, hinder and confuse the national will to do something about the pandemic.

There is a need for all South Africans to remain resolute in the face of the grave challenge which the government and all sectors are dealing with responsibly and caringly. We should not be swayed by sideshows and contrived controversies.

Unfortunately, Uys undermines what most of us took as a sincere and well-meant effort to spread awareness of the dangers of HIV infection, especially in schools.

Something seems to go wrong and he confuses satire and serious policy pronouncements. Or is this the problem of the editors who choose to air some of his bizarre views in presumably serious columns?

In his latest assault on Mbeki, Uys latched on to third-hand conclusions drawn from what the president said to the Washington Post about whether he knew people in his own family or among his close associates who had died of AIDS, or were infected with HIV.

The president gave an honest answer. He was speaking about his limited circle of family or close friends. And need we be reminded that, even among those people, as many of us well know, no one is obliged to declare their status; nor is a doctor obliged to reveal direct or indirect causes of death to anyone, including a president. Yet it was grist to the mill for Uys and used to make the fanciful call for a personal attack on the president. This, at the very moment when the government is finalising the last element of our comprehensive strategy, ARV treatment. The government can endure the barbs flung by Uys. We do even enjoy him at
times. He was aptly described in one paper that ran his letter as “a comedian”.
Indeed.

Surely the media should not dignify his twaddle by publishing it in serious
columns. Unless of course we are wrong to assume that these are indeed serious
columns.
(Published in the Cape Times, 2 October 2003)

And so here we are in the minefield of fear, denial, death and horror. Too frightened to confront the reality of the virus and too polite to tread where racists aim to go. White criticism of a black government can too easily be seen as racist. Criticism of bad governance must try to rise above petty ethnic bitchery. It is not a crime to point out carelessness. It is a crime to censor the anger and let it slide. It has been said: A patriot is someone who protects his country from its government.

So, as we say in one of our 11 official languages: Vuk’uzinzele!
Stand up and do something!

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