

Umkhonto

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Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) means 'Spear of the Nation'. MK was the armed wing of the African National Congress. It launched its first guerrilla attacks against government installations on 16 December 1961. It was subsequently classified as a terrorist organisation by the South African government and the United States, and banned.

It's early 1985, I'm standing in a heatsoaked football stadium in Soweto in a crowd of fifty thousand waiting to hear Mandela's response to the government's offer to release him immediately if he will promise to eschew violence in what Botha calls 'your so-called struggle for freedom'. The gathering here in South West Township is part festival, part conference, part party, part congregation: singers, dancers, speakers, actors. So: Winnie Mandela and daughters Zenani and Zindzishwa ('princesses of the blood') bringing personal meanings from recent Robben Island meetings with the Man himself; Desmond Tutu brings his own words: 'Apartheid has been cracked. Soon it will shatter and fall.'

Faced with a sudden sharp increase in oppositional actions – rent boycotts, labour strikes, school stayaways, attacks on prisons, police stations, electricity substations, not to mention the rapid growth of a worldwide anti-apartheid movement – the government has met 1985 head on with the introduction of a state of emergency. Hence the heavy security presence within and outside the stadium. The world's press are straggling across the world to get here. Even Hollywood is trying to get its act together: I'm in the country to research a film I've been contracted to write on the South African struggle.

The heat thuds down in fat blankets, luminaries tread the beaten paths to microphones and stages around the field and back again, eventually the glittering younger daughter Zindzi Mandela arrives – a black limo drives her to the stage like an Indian film star – bearing her father's

foregone conclusion of an answer; namely, freedom fighters will put away their arms when the enemies of freedom and justice put away theirs and agree to share South Africa ...

Somewhere along the way, while all this is happening, two mic-ed actors waving Methuen paperbacks of *Woza Albert* and calling *Morena is coming! Morena is back!* arrive on the walkway stage and the crowd goes barmy. *Morena* is the Saviour, the two men are the fabled originals Percy Mtwa and Mbongemi Ngema, *Woza Albert* is the play they wrote with the great Barney Simon which is still triumphantly telling its story worldwide of the day Christ came to Johannesburg. In seconds, it seems, *Morena* becomes Mandela. *Mandela Morena. Morena Mandela.* The actors pick it up, run with it: *Mandela is coming!* Crowd: *Mandela is coming!* The actors press the matter, back to script: Percy: *How is he coming?, how is he coming?* Mbongemi: *By South African Airways jumbo jet and everybody will be waiting...* People get excited, maybe Mandela will come in person to give his answer. The actors point up at the sky, people turn their heads to look as if expecting a plane. Suddenly from behind one of the covered stands forming parts of the perimeter, a warning whistle, a slithering chug of wheels and engine, herald the arrival of a three-coach commuter train trickling along the thin hill to the north. The crowds and the actors erupt at the stunning conjunction, of course the Saviour will come as they themselves would come and possibly did come that morning; and of course this is how Mandela will come, the common way, back home to his house in Soweto, even on a clapped-out train, even if necessary on a donkey.

I don't think mine was the only heart that stopped at that moment. The train chugged on. As did the part festival, part conference, part party. But I was never in any doubt from that day that apartheid had indeed been cracked and would indeed shatter and fall. Long live theatre. I called the film I wrote *Acts of Love*. It wasn't made.