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Please, Mr. Judge Man

Resisting Apartheid With Song and Dance

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“We are coming.” The voice on the phone was Zulu, accented and clandestine. “We will meet you outside your apartment in five minutes.”



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IT WAS 2:15 A.M. ON SUNDAY WHEN my girlfriend Shelley Kjonstad and I found ourselves in the back seat of a taxi accompanied by two rough-looking Zulu men. Ten minutes later, through dark and winding streets we were at the Beatrice Street YMCA somewhere in the industrial bowels of Durban, South Africa to judge the weekly Isicathamiya song and dance competition. The Traditional Music Association of Durban sponsored the competition and required an independent judge to forestall any chance of cheating or preferential treatment.

It was May 1992 and I was in Durban to work with the Kwasa Group, a Zulu company sponsored by the state-funded Natal Performing Arts Council. The last of the segregationist Apartheid laws were melting into history and it was two years before South Africa's first non-racial election would bring Nelson Mandela to power. Apartheid means "apartness" in Afrikaans, and this philosophy brutally enabled the white minority of 12% of the population to control and exploit the rest. The 44 years of government-enforced racism had made an indelible mark on the consciousness of South Africa's blacks, Indians, and mixed race "coloureds," leaving a legacy that will live on for generations to come. A decade-long international anti-Apartheid boycott had isolated South Africa, making it an international pariah. The boycott's recent end was a cause of celebration and relief; it also charged the atmosphere with anxiety and

uncertainty. I had worked extensively in the area of indigenous performance and was brought in to train actors and develop a performance that referenced traditional Zulu rather than Western expressions. My presence was a minor media event covered by the press and symbolic of South Africa's willingness to grow and change, and, significantly embrace its newfound acceptance by the world.

Paulus, the director of The Traditional Music Association of Durban, had read the news accounts about my work and sought me out. In the posh lobby of the theater he excitedly told me about the contest and that he preferred white judges—especially foreigners who did not know Zulus—because it limited the likelihood of favoritism for any of the dance groups. The short, tough-looking Paulus, with a sideways boxer's nose, wore a natty three-piece suit and broke into a broad victorious smile when I told him I had never seen Isicathamiya performed.

"You don't know any of the groups?"

"No."

"Very good, because we take our competition very seriously. It is important you are honest and very fair. Very fair is important. And you are an American, the people here love Americans for how you helped the black man in South Africa."

The taxi made its way to the YMCA located in an Indian commercial trading area near downtown Durban. It was a district seldom frequented by whites, and straight out of



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film noir. Dimly lit litter-strewn streets led to warehouses, wholesale depots, light industrial shops, outdoor markets, and large open-air bars where Zulu workers, mostly men, sat at rough-hewn tables drinking large quantities of Ijuba, the preferred and affordable porridge-like beer.

The night brought little comfort from the heat of the day. Even the generally cooling Indian Ocean breeze was a wave of warmth. The dimly lit streets were full of shadows with sweat-glistened drunken workers swaying and staggering through the night's sticky humid haze. Some sang as they walked arm-in-arm, while others stumbled and slumped. The night seemed out of focus, blurry and confused. For most, Saturday night was their only night of release after a week of ten- and twelve-hour days of physical labor. Workers who lived outside of town would catch a "black taxi"—a small van usually packed with up to 23 people—back to their township. Many were from rural areas and lived in nearby workers' dormitories with hundreds of other Zulu men. Far away from their women and families, they were restless, horny, and homesick.

The taxi rolled up to the illuminated façade of the YMCA, where dozens of men and women dressed in their Saturday night finest milled around, chatting and smoking. An oasis of relative civility as insects swarmed through long shadows cast by the entrance lights.

Members of the singing groups were easy to spot because of their matching

and stylishly trimmed purple, red, or white jackets and slacks. Several were outside getting some air, languidly socializing and smoking, their jackets open, shirt collars undone. Some had two-tone shoes, others had groomed their hair with oil; the scent of cheap aftershave tickled the air. Rehearsing men moved in and out of the shadows of the building; concentrated, rhythmic, animated, stylish. Bodies in flashy red jackets, white pants, and yellow shoes worked out dance routines, their arms extended minstrel-like, then hands held together as in prayer, a call from their leader, and they spun around.

Paulus opened the taxi door and greeted Shelley and me with a slight bow. With a grand wave of his hand, the burly man who accompanied us in the taxi adopted a serious "don't mess with me" face as he grabbed each of us by the arm. Those on the sidewalk paused. Conversations stopped and people turned, some moving towards us for a closer look. They knew we were the judges. Paulus in the lead, the crowd parted and we were quickly led in; I felt like a rock star or politician or criminal. Paulus escorted us into the empty first-floor auditorium where a few men were setting up the last of several hundred wooden folding chairs.

"The judging will start soon," Paulus said as he rushed off, leaving us in the hollow, echoing auditorium.

From another part of the building Isicathamiya singing could be heard, followed by applause, clapping, foot stomping and occasional shouts of exaltation. It sounded like a cross between a tent revival and a wild party. The evening's activities had begun hours before our arrival. Saturday nights at 10 p.m. the groups gathered and performed for the public. As judges we were not allowed to participate in these earlier presentations, which were more relaxed community events-cum-religious celebrations with audience participation.

Isicathamiya has its origins in the 1920s when it evolved from a special type of Zulu wedding song that men sang to women. The male-only style of a cappella Isicathamiya singing, rooted in the Zulu love song tradition, was re-shaped by the gospel singing style introduced by white missionaries. The term "cathamiya" is derived from the Zulu verb to "walk softly" or "tread carefully." Lyrics expressing love for a woman were recast to express love of God and Jesus. When rural Zulus migrated to the townships on the outskirts of South Africa's major urban areas of Johannesburg and Durban to seek employment, they brought the nascent tradition with them. With the advent of apartheid in 1948 and the imposition of limits on public assembly, Isicathamiya incorporated several traditional Zulu dance steps, a subversive act of defiance in the face of oppression.

Isicathamiya dance steps and arm movements incorporate traditional Zulu warrior dances. However, in Isicathamiya the sharp, aggressive warrior-like movements were given a softer form. With the incorporation of traditional Zulu dance movements, Isicathamiya became a political religious expression, and became an act of political and cultural resistance occurring right under the noses of the white oppressors during the apartheid era. The all-male Isicathamiya

was an act of disobedience stating in effect, "We Zulu are here, alive, fighting, hoping, dancing, singing."

While in South Africa I had witnessed several street demonstrations in protest to job cuts, the speed of change, and any number of abiding grievances. Nothing was as stirring or frightening than thousands of Zulu men moving through downtown Durban their chanting voices echoing a traditional warrior's call and response. With 'knobkerrie' clubs (their traditional weapon) aloft, the martial and proud Zulu moved in unison using the same, aggressively stylized march steps of Isicathamiya.

Another influence on Isicathamiya was Motown. In the 1960s and 70s American black music, specifically that of James Brown and the Temptations, worked on the imagination of African music, transforming Isicathamiya's dance steps and harmonies even further. Isicathamiya was a porous and malleable form, meeting at a place somewhere between Zulu traditional love songs, Zulu warrior dances, Christian gospel, and Motown.

Paulus rushed in and placed school notebooks and pens on the judges' table. He informed us that we would be judging nineteen groups. There were originally fifteen, but four other groups showed up unexpectedly. "Such things happen," he apologized.

"Each group will have ten minutes to perform. I will keep the clock. If they go over their time they will be stopped!"

Paulus, who had been in charge of the competition for years, had two assistants: one accompanied us in the taxi, and the other was equally large and mean looking. Both wore business suits and would keep things moving smoothly.

Each dance group and the audience knew the competition's strict guidelines—disqualifications and audience expulsion for unruly behavior were not uncommon. I was

happy for Paulus' assurances of a timetable, fearing that with so many groups to judge, along with the tendency of "African time," we would be judging well into Sunday afternoon.

After his procedural talk Paulus turned briskly and left Shelley and me alone in the empty auditorium. Our long judging table, ten feet in front of the elevated proscenium stage, was covered with a bright white-and-orange-striped tablecloth. The elevated stage was empty and on its back wall was a brightly colored mural depicting an idyllic tropical scene with grass huts and palm trees waving in an island wind. A gulf of 25 feet separated us from the first row of audience behind us. We felt awkward and lonely as we waited on our little island in the echoing auditorium, listening to the hand clapping and cheering revels happening elsewhere in the building.

Unlike the noisy celebration happening in the distance, the competition would not permit audience interaction of any kind, not even applause, as to avoid influencing the judges. During the competition each group was given a number so even their names, which often included where groups hailed from, would not influence our judging.

The Isicathamiya competition in Durban was institutionalized in the 1960s and had grown and was taken very seriously. Groups such as Ladysmith Black Mambazo had launched their career on that very YMCA stage. Others had launched careers and gone on to fame and fortune as solo performers or with groups such as Johnny Clegg & Savuka. Paul Simon and scouts for local and international recording companies were increasingly attending competitions. The coming of the New South Africa was creating a sense of possibility that was palpable. Every South African—black, white, and brown—sensed change was in the air. For the blacks, long underdogs on their own ancestral land, it could only mean change for the better. The competition was a glimmer of hope and gave a reason to dream again.

The auditorium filled with family, friends, and general public, all dressed in their finest. An air of importance filled the room. Camera flashes and stifled cheers kept the tension taut. Paulus' bouncers, carrying sticks, patrolled the auditorium to keep a solemn order in the room. The competition was also a matter of pride, which the Zulu had in abundance. It was about the Zulu community putting on its best face, showing and reaffirming itself and its own mettle.

Each Isicathamiya group was serious, committed and self-supporting. Groups had seven to nineteen members and participation required long rehearsals to master the complicated a cappella singing, dance, and movement steps. In the townships, where there were few social activities besides drinking and sports, and until the early 1990s, gatherings of men were politically suspect. Belonging to an Isicathamiya group was one of the few ways to socialize after a long day of labor.

Beginning or getting into an Isicathamiya group was competitive and no easy task. Being in a group required not only time and money, but a certain amount of Christian devotion. Their fancy suits, shoes, and gloves, as well as transportation, were provided by an individual's own funds.

Each group had to come up with thirty Rand (about \$40) as an entrance fee; the fees augmented the winner's pool, which was generously sponsored by local banks and beverage companies. The top three groups would receive money, while the others walked away with nothing. The association would, in addition, award a weekly round robin-style 300-Rand prize as an encouragement for the "most deserving group." The group prize money was sponsored by the association and was meant as start-up money or to assist groups in the purchase of their stylish costumes and to provide transport and meals.

The competition the night of my judging was of special interest because the top three winners would also win a bank-sponsored



Photos by Shelley Kjonstad. Negatives scanned by John Lehman.

regional township tour and a spot performing at a local music festival. The competition was not only a matter of money and career; at its heart it was a manifestation of culturally ingrained Zulu warrior rivalry of challenges and competition.

The auditorium was filled quickly and quietly with several hundred people who entered and sat as if in a church. Some set up video cameras near the front of the seating area.

Paulus came to our table, looked over the crowd with self-importance and leaned into us. Speaking in a low, confidential tone he underlined the criteria for competition judgment: "Movement is very important, very important! How well they dance. How much variety, inventiveness and imagination are very important, very! The skill they have in their dancing is what you must look for.

But just as important, you must not forget, is the music. Harmonies and quality of singing, balance, originality, and feeling! Even if you do not understand Zulu, listen to the music, there must be feeling of the music! Please!"

"But how do I know what is good?"

"It is all right for the judge not knowing anything of the Zulu language or tradition, that is what the groups want. Otherwise they don't know if they have appeal to other people in other places in the world. Understand now? Lastly, you must respond to the overall impression, the costumes, presentation, and the impact of their presentation. You must be honest at all cost! The groups want the judges to be honest. They, we cry for honesty! The people, look at them..."

With that Paulus insisted we turn and look at the audience sitting behind us. "Do you see?



Yes, these people are wanting you to be honest!”

The first group was the “Aero Plane Singers.” We knew their name because they wore a sash emblazoned with it—so much for objective judging and group anonymity. When they began I couldn’t help but feeling heat on the back of my neck; everyone seemed to be watching our every action. My gestures seemed magnified; Shelley and I were on stage as well, isolated on an island between the audience of nearly three hundred who sat eerily silent behind us, and the stage in front of us.

As the night wore on into morning, I dared not lose interest or become dozy, for fear of offending the groups or the audience. Between groups, when either Shelley or I wanted a soda, we would signal one of the assistants who would scurry over. We would whisper our request, and the entire event paused until our Fanta or Coke came on a tray, was grandly

wiped of moisture and poured into a glass.

At one point I needed to go to the toilet and of course there was a special judge’s toilet. Everything stopped when I crossed the stage to the backstage men’s room. I felt very white, very colonial, and very uncomfortable knowing everyone was waiting for me to urinate.

Shelley was bemused and enamored by the heartfelt generosity of the contestants. She, like other white South Africans, knew of the competition but had never seen one. A professional photographer, Shelley shot video and still photos, judging the event through her viewfinder. Because she grew up in rural Natal speaking Zulu, she provided me indispensable insights and an occasional translation. More than once she chuckled in reaction to some odd Zulu expression presented on stage, whispering into my ear

a group's "greeting to the judge", which was always addressed to me, the man.

"Do you know what he just said? 'Mr. Judge Man and your beautiful wife, please be kind to us, because we will pray for your many children.' They're really laying it on."

Each of the groups shuffled-stepped solemnly, in profile onto the stage with heads bowed, their left hand on their heart, their right hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them. Once in position they turned, heads bowed to the audience, shifting into their opening tableau. The leader hurriedly arranged and adjusted their positions, straightening ties or jackets and giving some words of encouragement—then they were ready to begin.

Each group had a leader who was identified by his actions and differently colored jacket, which ranged in color from red to black to gray to white to lavender. Most of the groups wore either white or black cotton gloves and had spit polished shoes. The group's soloist, a tenor, was easily distinguishable from the rest by their hand-sewn sashes, which only they and the group leaders wore. One sash identified the group's name; the other was either religious, such as "Jesus Our Lord" or "Pray to Heaven," or an appeal to the judge, such as some of my favorites: "Jesus, bless the Judge," "For the Excellent Judge," and "Please Mr. Judge Man."

Many of the group members looked uncomfortable and self-conscious as they lined up; for some it was their first time in front of an audience and they were wide-eyed with stage fright. Some singers stared at Shelley and I as if we were their executioners; others kept their eyes closed to disengage from the situation. A few waved 'hello' with big smiles, which provoked Paulus into fit of admonishing sharp words and snapping fingers.

The group's ten minutes would begin with a nod from Paulus. The lead singer would glance at his watch and nod in agreement. The presentation would begin with an elaborate greeting directed at the

judges. The group's leader would offer welcoming words accompanied by obsequious bowing, smiling, and a little prayer for their victory.

Once the group began singing, as if comforted by their song, all signs of nervousness evaporated. The leader would conduct the presentation with arm and dance movements and in a way become one with the song. The group's tenors would introduce another musical motif to create a delicate overlay. Then, as with most songs, the soloist would join, hovering, contrasting, and interweaving sweetly to create a complexity of feeling that never failed to move and uplift me. Many of the groups had a limited repertoire; some knew only three to five songs, which followed the well-established Isicathamiya song structure.

The talent on stage was remarkable. However, their talent had its limits, which became apparent after the first hour of judging. With rare exception, many songs were similar in style, progression, and use of harmonies. Those groups that innovated with songs and presentation were standouts. However, the generosity and meticulous care, detail, and hard work expressed by each group never failed to impress. The singing and performance talent varied widely and as the judging progressed it was easy to identify levels of comparative quality and depth of feeling.

Paulus was a disciplinarian and the event was kept on a strict schedule. One of Paulus' two big, bouncer-like assistants used a meter-long rule to line up each group single file at the stage's stairs, making sure each singer was equally spaced. The sound of the next group warming up in the hallway was a constant distraction and Paulus would bark orders to the back of the auditorium to shut the doors. As the night wore on he increasingly admonished the audience to quiet down, threatening to expel anyone if they drank, spoke, applauded, or smoked.

Paulus enforced his rules by patrolling the audience and pointing at people to behave. During the course of the evening his assistants threw out several people for various infractions. At one point a man, a friend of a group presenting, came enthusiastically around to the front of our table. He smiled pleasantly, humbly taking our hands and thanking us warmly, touching his heart and bowing. In a matter of moments he was grabbed by one of the bouncers who lifted the small, thin man off the ground. Shelley and I stood to protest and they put him down. As they led him away Paulus scolded the man who seemed indifferent to his plight. Once at the doors, apparently to teach the fan a lesson, one of the bouncers grabbed the man around the neck and shook him violently.

Shelley and I yelled, "Let him go!" Then Shelley berated them in idiomatic Zulu, which really got their attention and put things back in order. Up until that point no one knew she was fluent in Zulu. Paulus and the dance group on stage went still—then came their wide-eyed grins of amazement. Shelley was a tall blond fair skinned white woman, a fourth generation South African of Norwegian-English ancestry. Her family employed several hundred Zulu and Xhosa laborers, owned orchards, cattle and farmed thousands of acres of sugar cane along the coast. She could speak like a Zulu girl from the rural areas because she was nursed and raised by a Zulu nanny, a woman she loved as her mother.

The strict adherence to a ten-minute time limit allowed for two long, or three short songs. Their song topics included love or marriage, and the belief in God or salvation through Jesus. On the rare occasion, a song topic involved a historical event significant to the Zulu.

Better groups would begin slowly and build, using smooth, illustrative gestures to accompany their songs. Their gestures

would synchronize with their songs, creating elaborate soft-shoe dances mashing Motown and Zulu war dance steps. Movements were in unison and most were rounded, restrained, and almost gentle. However, an occasional sharp, angular movement or stamping would offer a quick glimpse into Zulu ferocity.

The better groups had choreography worthy of James Brown. With a rhythmic shuffle, arms bent at the elbow and moving back and forth, the singers would split and interweave around one another, rearranging themselves into a series of tableaux.

These groups' elaborate movements on the small stage were something to behold. With mercurial fluidity they split lines, forming crosses and 'V' shapes with their collective movements. A line of stamping legs—one element of a Zulu war dance—would appear and disappear amidst prayer and Motown-inspired gestures. Sometimes the harmony of dance and song would combine perfectly and carry us away—it was then that being a judge was most delightful.

Ever mindful of disqualification for exceeding the time limit, each group leader would often consult his watch during the course of his presentation. When a dance took longer than anticipated the leader would stop abruptly and bow, the group waving and singing as they quickly swayed and shuffle-danced off stage.

Besides their matching jackets, slacks, ties, shoes, and gloves, many groups had little gimmicks to set them apart from the others. Style was everything, and each group not only tried to outdo the others in song and dance, but also with accessories like little silver chains on their vest pockets. One group had little flashlights tucked in their vest pockets, which they used during the climactic moment of their final dance. Several groups had monogrammed jackets; one had black and white striped gloves; one group wore glittering nametags; another, dark sunglasses. The slickest group



had color-coordinated turquoise shoes, socks and matching shirts.

Even a group's name attempted to set them apart. Names, written with sequins or glitter on sashes proclaimed: the "Zulu Messengers," "N.B.A. Champions," "Nongoma Master Voices," "Durban New Mountains," "Zulu Home Soldiers," "Pietermaritzburg Lucky Boys," and the "Jama King Boys."

After we had judged for hours, the morning light pierced through the auditorium's tattered window shades. The audience had thinned out to a sleepy-eyed few dozen. Several people slumped, sleeping in their chairs. Paulus brought us coffee and informed us that the time of deciding was upon us. One of the bouncers rolled out a blackboard and with that action, the groups and their well-wishers who were waiting outside, entered quickly to fill the hall.

Groggy from lack of sleep and fatigued by the intensity of concentration, I went carefully over my scores. After seeing so many groups, their qualitative differences were obvious. The excitement and anticipation in the hall gave me a second wind. Paulus made no attempt to keep people quiet, nor could he if he wanted to. Voices and the sound of wooden folding chairs against a wooden floor echoed off the high ceiling—the smell of sweat, the rising heat of day, and exhaustion closed in. I was worn out, swimming through reality, my eyes and thinking strained. It was nearly 9:30 a.m.

The room went still as I wrote the names of the top three groups on the blackboard.

When we turned the freestanding blackboard around, the room exploded into pandemonium. Some singers stood stunned and staring, chairs were knocked over, grumbling blended with cries of delight.

The all-male Isicathamiya was an act of disobedience stating in effect, “We Zulu are here, alive, fighting, hoping, dancing, singing.”

The members of the three winning groups went crazy, shouting, jumping, embracing one another, and running crazily around the auditorium unable to contain their excitement. Paulus told us that after several years of performing it was the first time either the “Natal Love Singers” or the “Zulu Home Soldiers” had placed in the competition.

Paulus congratulated us, patting us on the back saying we had picked well.

“Usually white people pick groups that sing many English songs and that is why certain groups sing their songs in English, to please the whites. You picked the best groups. I think the people agree.”

Both the first and second place winners insisted on performing a “thank you” song. Group members, some with their jackets off, or shirts unbuttoned, jumped onto the stage and sang these two joyful, exuberant songs that woke me like no coffee could.

Paulus and his assistants escorted us out of the hall, pushing their way through the crowd and into the steamy tropical morning. A taxi would take us back to my apartment.

Paulus’ last words, however, were worrisome, “Thank you. Don’t worry, you will be safe, the driver is a friend.”

“What?”

Outside, several hard faced, disappointed people were packed around us jostling, making the opening of the taxi door difficult. The competition was taken more seriously than I thought. I was suddenly alert, the morning and scene quickly becoming tense. Where were the bouncers? I grabbed Shelley’s arm and feared for the worst.

One man shouted something at Shelley in Zulu knowing she understood, accusing her of influencing my judging. Another shouted, “You should not have been a judge!” Both men were from losing groups. Another man confronted me wanting to know why his group lost and how could they improve.

A tall man with coal black skin angrily grabbed my arm. He was from the group that had won several times previously but had not placed in our judging. Several others from his group surrounded the taxi; all were still wearing their bright red coats trimmed with black piping. Hard faces, tensed jaws, sweaty skin, and drilling eyes surrounded us.

Suddenly the bouncers appeared, shoving the men away, pulling truncheons from their pockets in threat. There were shouts and heated words, which ignited into a scuffle. Members of the winning group poured from the building; their expressions of jubilation snapped to consternation as they sized up the situation and joined the fray in our defense.

We were shoved into the taxi and told to lock the doors; hands banged on the glass and hood before it sent us speeding into traffic. The sun was high, its angle excruciatingly sharp and the inside of the taxi like an oven.

“Well, that was exciting,” Shelley said drolly, checking her camera bag to make sure nothing was missing.

The street bustled with the setup of another market day. I slumped into the headrest and closed my stinging eyes. All I could see were Zulus dancing. **A**