

EPISODE 2: Life under Apartheid in South Africa — The Harsh Reality

Andrew Muir 0:00

Hi, I'm Andrew Muir, creative director at Ardent Theatre. If you enjoyed the show, please share, subscribe and leave us a five star review. Thanks for listening.

Under apartheid, all South Africans had a racial category white, Asian, coloured or native. One way to determine this was the pencil test. A pencil is pushed into your hair and if it pulls out your white, if not your native, if you can shake it out, you're coloured. Maybe. Different racial categories had to live apart so families could be separated based on how easily the pencil stuck. Journalist Thapelo Moloantoa and historian Wayne Dooling both grew up under this system.

Wayne Dooling 0:47

People were being forcibly removed. My schoolmates were being evicted from their houses.

Thapelo Moloantoa 0:54

They kicked you out this way, but your home is the other side. And you can't go towards that direction because military trucks shooting tear gas in that direction.

Andrew Muir 1:03

I'm Andrew Muir. And this is activism in the eighties where we shot the protests and culture wars that changed lives in Britain, Ireland and South Africa. In this episode, Wayne and Thapelo tell human rights campaigner Zita Holden about life under apartheid. When the pencil didn't fall out,

Here's Wayne Dooling.

Wayne Dooling 1:28

I was in Cape Town, which is where I was born and grew up, and the secondary school I attended was a school called Livingston. Livingston High School, which is an interesting school because it was in a neighbourhood of Cape Town that had been declared a white area. It is in terms of group, it is act, but the school survived for various reasons, mainly as a consequence of resistance by schoolteachers and the broader community. But the neighbourhood was interesting in that people were being forcibly removed. My schoolmates were being evicted from their houses during their secondary school years. So the school in a sense became an island in this particular neighbourhood.

Zita Holbourne 2:09

Education, then. It sounds very disruptive if you're having to go through evictions and move.

Wayne Dooling 2:16

For very many people. Yes, education was highly disrupted, but by then most people. So when I got to high school, this was the sort of tail end of forced removals and most people had already been removed. But for us at secondary school, the consequence was that most people like to travel a great distance to get to school. Some students still lived in the neighbourhood and were being served eviction orders, but the majority had already been evicted from their homes and like I said, had to come a great distance.

Zita Holbourne 2:45

And two pillars. So you were quite young given that you were just at primary school. What are your recollections of that period? Do you relate to the things that Wayne's saying in terms of the disruption and issues? Did the impact on you as a young child?

Thapelo Moloantoa 3:02

My memory of that era at the beginning of the eighties was witnessing the what I me call the repercussions of the riots of June 16 and after 1976. So we had buildings that were still burnt out as a result of the 76 riots. Beer halls, which were government sponsored places where the adult population was expected, not expected, but in a way, the government was using alcohol to take people with minds of liberation. So things became targets and at the time a lot of them were still burnt out. You know, my uncle was one of the people who was in the forefront of that movement now. And then there'd be news about a guerrilla attack by ANC and peace. It was only towards the middle of the eighties that the activity around resistance was really picked up a lot.

Zita Holbourne 4:06

When I had a specific question for you, because I know that you went to university, there was predominantly it's and I wanted to ask, how was that? What was your experience in that situation?

Wayne Dooling 4:18

So the university I went to was the University of Cape Town, which was and still is today one of South Africa's most prestigious universities.

And it was a university that was predominantly white. And those, of course, built and established to reproduce the white elite. When I went to an I, my first

state university was in 1985. It was at the tail end of a requirement that black students and by black I mean all students, not white, were only allowed into the university under special dispensation. So the state, South African state had established a number of black universities. And so in Cape Town, the alternative university for people of my ethnicity was the University of the Western Cape. And in order to not go to the University of the Western Cape, you had to make a special case for your particular chosen study path. But in terms of my experience, it was a very segregated university. Well over 70 or 80% of students were white and the staff component was even higher than that. A very, very few members of staff who were not white. So it meant that one was always in the minority. Of course, in a country where you weren't in the minority, but certainly at university, your experience was one of being in a minority. It was one of being quite alienated alien from the general environment. It also meant for most black students having to travel huge distances. I had to travel something like 30 kilometres to get to class at 815. I remember vividly it wasn't easy. And it also meant that my experience of being a student was very different to the experience of being a white student at many different levels. So we barely participated in the social life of the university and sports and things like that that are part of a student's life that are not directly related to academic study. Some of it was voluntary non-participation. We actively chose not to participate in the sporting life of the university as a mark of protest against apartheid education generally, but it also meant that one didn't live in residence. So that aspect of social life was greatly reduced. So in terms of everyday life, it was really one of going to university and going home.

Zita Holbourne 6:48
Focused on the study.

Wayne Dooling 6:50
And focused on the studying. Except for occasions as political resistance and rebellion really took off.

Zita Holbourne 6:57
So you're already leading into my next question, right?

Wayne Dooling 7:01
So so course, those were moments when one's engagement with University transcended study, but for the rest, it was really about studying and going home.

Zita Holbourne 7:14

Well, it must have been very tough. But you got there and you resisted and yeah, broke the system. So it's important you linked in to the next thing. I was going to ask you both. We know that opposition and unrest continued through the eighties. And then, as you've said, in the middle of the decade, around 1985, the South African government declared the state of emergency. And I wanted to ask you, what do you remember?

Thapelo Moloantoa 7:42

The state of emergency was quite a hectic time. From 83 onwards. You started seeing pamphlets, people talking, always hanging around. Older people you hear, or ANC, Lusaka, Tanzania, or somebody has left to join the liberation movement in exile and around 84, 85, that's when school disruptions really intensified. So we would generally be in school and comrades, older guys would come and essentially kick us out of school. Scary period, because for the first few times it was a new experience. And sometimes you face a situation where they kick you out this way, but your home is the other side and you can go towards that direction because this already people - hippo is Casspir military trucks shooting tear gas in that direction. So you forced not to go home. So sometimes you would run off to a friend's house and.

Zita Holbourne 8:47

Just have to wait till it was.

Thapelo Moloantoa 8:49

Late until things quieten down. But I remember sometimes we would run to a friend's house whose house was actually next to a high school. We should have been a lot more volatile and on the streets it was very volatile. I saw a lot of people shot for doing nothing, basically being provoked by these security forces because a lot of youth will be in the streets, which would then prompt these patrolling security forces to ignite trouble with them is when might you call the South African townships? A hippo would be driving down one street and shooting into every street wherever they see a group of people. At the time, the state of emergency said It is more than five of you. You are comrades.

Zita Holbourne 9:36

So if you have a Yeah, yeah.

Wayne Dooling 9:39

It is very easy for the state to cordon off areas because townships had been built certainly as a grid, but the main design language of townships was to control people. So townships, when they were laid out and constructed, they were constructed with elements of control in mind. So where I grew up for part

of my childhood was a medical Mitchells plain, just as big so-called coloured township. You only needed to see four or five roads to entrap an entire population. So it was very easy for the police to contain very large numbers of people with actually fairly limited resources. I mean, certainly these were years that were incredibly volatile. It's not that the country experience of all out rebellion all the time, but that rebellion was always present with varying rates of intensity in different parts of the country. Johannesburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London, all these cities didn't all move at the same kind of speed. Something was always happening somewhere, but not necessarily all at once, all the time.

Zita Holbourne 10:45

Were you involved in any of the resistance actions I know you've talked about? Be forced to leave school where you or your family is involved in any of the actions and resistance and alternative governance to the apartheid regime?

Thapelo Moloantoa 11:00

Yeah, I was not at the age that I could have actively took part, but otherwise my family was to certain degrees involved and my uncle was involved in the youth movement. A lot of his peers went to jail, exile. He was stopped from going to example by my grandfather after seeing him jumping into what we call a Kumbi minibus at my grandfather's house, and he pulled him out of there. Otherwise, there were people who would be wanted and my father would house them. Certain periods. My father was involved in the street committees of the mid-eighties, which are essentially part of self-governance within the townships. So people would not be taken to the justice system because it was seen as collaboration. So they were people's courts.

Whenever there would be a funeral, it would be preceded by a night vigil where all the youth would be almost they wouldn't have much of a choice but to go, especially the boys. So my brother would often be picked up late at night. Yeah, my mom, she was a little bit more involved later as a health advisor at the South African Bishops Conference towards the nineties and their offices were bombed by the security forces.

Zita Holbourne 12:28

So the family were really quite active. So even though you were a young child, you would have had the influence and impact of your family being involved?

Thapelo Moloantoa 12:38

Yeah, there were other families as well, a lot more involved. People went to Robben Island, people left for exile, families broken up. But at that time,

obviously the involvement was not much of a choice because yeah, the environment that you lived in.

Zita Holbourne 12:53

Yeah, exactly. In order to stand up for yourself. Yeah. Survive.

Thapelo Moloantoa 12:56

Exactly.

Zita Holbourne 12:57

Yeah. How about you when you talked a bit about university as well and was this.

Wayne Dooling 13:02

Yes. So I wasn't directly involved in political organisations, but I was very much in the milieu of resistance and the secondary school high school that I attended was highly politicised school and the teachers at the school that was the world in which I grew up, but then also lived in a completely different part of the city called Mitchells Plain, which is where the UAF, the United Democratic Front, was launched. And I very vividly remember attending the launch of that organisation at the Civic Centre where it was launched was only about ten or 15 minutes walk from where I lived at the time. In the second half of the 1980s at University, the political influences were more so varied. So a big concern at university in the second half of the 1980s was the academic boycott. But there were lots of rallies and political meetings throughout the 1980s and especially during the state of emergency. So the historically white universities were far more protected and didn't have the sort of police intrusion on campuses from time to time. Police came onto campus. And one I remember very vividly, one occasion police came onto campus right into the library where we were all studying and sort of shocked. You got into the library, but it was nothing like the kind of brutality that people at the University of the Western Cape, for example, and all other black universities experience in some.

Zita Holbourne 14:33

And that kind of connects to how I got involved in the anti-apartheid movement here in the UK, because the wider boycott campaign is how I got involved in as a student. And in the early eighties I visited South Africa. It was actually on my way to Lesotho where my father was living and had to go through apartheid in Johannesburg airports. And then I visited Bloemfontein while I was staying in the city, an experience and witnessed apartheid firsthand. And as somebody who's got a black mother and a father, it was difficult and I was only there for a short time. And obviously you also, in the apartheid era,

classified in different ways in terms of how you were both individually labelled as black and coloured. What were your communications like or what contact did you have with people that were classified in a different way to you, whether that was Indian coloured or black?

Wayne Dooling 15:39

The way apartheid work, of course, was very much to keep people with these different designation ethnic and racial labels to keep them apart. And if one just lived one's daily life without consciously seeking to break those boundaries, it would have been very easy and certainly possible to by and large, keep contact to a minimum. Now, of course, a lot of people came into contact with people of different racial categories in their everyday lives, simply through work and so forth. You know, domestic servants most famously went into white households every single day of their lives. But for myself, as a school student, that was extremely easy. Never, ever to come into contact with a student who was given another racial designation unless one actively sought to do that. And the school that I was at did on occasions seek to do that through sporting events, for example. So the short answer is it could happen, but you have to make it happen. It didn't just happen by itself.

Zita Holbourne 16:36

Yes. How about you to Berlin? Was your experience.

Thapelo Moloantoa 16:40

Equally so because the apartheid spatial planning development was such that each grouping had to be exclusively living within that area. So every town had a town for white people and a little bit outside the town, this black or African, as it was then described, coloured and an Indian locality. So there was not much of interaction except when we would go to my father's boss's house, the coloured township. We would often drive through, but not necessarily stop over at somebody's house. My father would know some people there and in the Indian community, so we might go with him, but you know, stay in the car while he goes for a reason.

Zita Holbourne 17:32

We wouldn't have a direct interaction.

Thapelo Moloantoa 17:35

Yeah. So there was not really much of a day to day until later towards the early nineties that things started opening up. But generally speaking, I remember seeing other races in football matches because football for some odd reason never really was as highly segregated as rugby and cricket. You got to know a lot of other races through football.

Zita Holbourne 17:58

So sport bringing people together.

Wayne Dooling 18:01

Sport certainly did bring people together, but at the same time there were very many organisations, I black organisations that argued very vehemently against normalising this kind of sporting interaction, particularly strong and kept on organisation called SACoS, the South African Council of Sport, And they had a motto that said no normal sport in an abnormal society. So in a sense you had a slightly contradictory position to take in the segregated sport if you followed that line and all these things had contradictions.

Zita Holbourne 18:32

Then the international boycott, campaign boycott in sporting activities was because of the segregation to stand up against the.

Wayne Dooling 18:41

Yeah, these organisation campaigned very strongly, for example, to continue to keep South Africa out of the Olympics and basically continue to make South African sport a kind of international pariah. And it did so very successfully. White South African players who wanted to participate in the Olympics had to embark on all kinds of dubious campaigns to get foreign citizenship.

Zita Holbourne 18:59

You're talking about sport and the part that sport played politically. But I had a question about sport and to taming leisure from a perspective of self-care. In the midst of all of this upheaval and horrendous human rights breaches and civil unrest and the apartheid regime upon you, was this space, was there time for you to have leisure, to do things, for self-care, to bring joy collectively in your communities and families? And, you know, if there was, what did you do? We'll start with Wayne.

Wayne Dooling 19:39

There certainly was opportunity for leisure For a lot of people. Sport would have been a big the single biggest expression or avenue for leisure football first and foremost. But for women netball. My mother played netball for example, and she got involved in girls school netball in the city. I kept on going to the beach was a very big part of social life during the summer months. And of course I have to add that it was highly segregated beaches in Cape Town, so there was the perverse experience of doing something really joyful, i.e. going to the beach, but at the same time experienced the humiliations that go with going to a segregated beach. And of course, it doesn't take a genius to

work out that the best beaches were not available to black people. One had one's experiences of being forcibly removed from beaches and picnic places, but yes, that was part of leisure. And so there was a there was a very real sense in which apartheid was highly successful in normalising everyday life. It's not like you questioned these things every day of your life. You just lived life and try to go to school, go to work, have days off within this perverse social system. A lot of people, of course, engaged in leisure that was highly destructive drinking, drugs and all kinds of other things. So that was a leisure pursuit as well. You know, smoking marijuana across the country was highly practised for all leisure of. So yeah, people did all kinds of things.

Zita Holbourne 21:16

And with trauma, you know.

Wayne Dooling 21:19

Most of them, I mean it comes like I said I did destructive and it came at a cost. But I'd say probably the non-destructive things would be sports first and foremost, and then picnics, activities, going to the beach.

Zita Holbourne 21:36

And to play about yourself.

Thapelo Moloantoa 21:38

It was quite an era full of contrasts, actually, because the state was trying to say to you that this is normal. So a lot of people fell into that, whereas there was another section of society that said, No, we cannot accept this type of lifestyle. So you had what would normally be considered everyday life activities like music, concerts, football, entertainment, generally, even though it was within confined spaces. And I recall times when the ADF instructed the townships to beautify the townships. It was during an era where there was a lot of graffiti around during the EFF people's power.

Zita Holbourne 22:27

They wanted to clear it all.

Thapelo Moloantoa 22:28

Up and not necessarily cover it up, but within these spaces the idea was to create green spaces, for instance, where there's a T-junction, that little space in the middle. Just I do recall a lot of people doing that and naming them after the leaders in exile.

Zita Holbourne 22:47

Okay.

Thapelo Moloantoa 22:48

Our one was called Tambo People's Park.

Zita Holbourne 22:52

The Green Spaces of Resistance.

Thapelo Moloantoa 22:54

Yeah. So there was that urge towards living life.

Wayne Dooling 22:58

Exactly. I think the main point is on the pyramid. This is these things are really very contradictory that, you know, you could enjoy. I mean, to be reminded me of music is a very big form of leisure in the in the way that it is for youth the world over and so in that sense, the leisure activities of black people in South Africa were not unique. But what was unique was that these activities were exercised in highly segregated spaces. So if you went to a night club, disco, jazz concert, whatever, they'd all be segregated. So if you went to a jazz club in the Cape Flats of Cape Town, it would be all coloured jazz club. But, you know, it didn't stop people from having a good time and also from musicians producing the most kind of amazing artistic pieces. And one could even say that these confines or people being restricted in the way that they were pushing them on to higher levels of artistic excellence.

Zita Holbourne 23:58

So as we get towards the end of the 1990s, we still got the state of emergency. But you've had this whole decade of resistance and people coming together to oppose the apartheid regime. And looking back, you could effectively look back historically and say it was inevitable that Nelson Mandela was going to be freed and the apartheid was going to come to an end soon. Given all of that resistance and campaign in the plus of the international, you know, boycott campaign to support black people in South Africa, do you think the fuel cells at the time living through that decade, that it was inevitable that was going to be the case? Two pillars that we view.

Thapelo Moloantoa 24:50

There were a lot of indications for the end of apartheid to happen because at that time the mass democratic movement had gained an upper hand on the streets. So whereas before any gatherings of more than five, ten, 15 people would be essentially regarded as a gathering of comrades towards the end of the eighties, there actually be marches in town, more t shirts being one ANC flag, being openly seen.

Zita Holbourne 25:28

So people were feeling very empowered and forward.

Thapelo Moloantoa 25:31

Yeah. So the leadership, you know, you're talking of a leadership from civic movements. The level of organisation at that time was very highly structured in almost every urban area, black, coloured and Indian. There'd be a local youth organisation, Aluko Women's Organisation, the Civic Association, the UDV, the local Teachers association. So you saw a lot of that activity hosting events. The funerals would not be shot at as much as they used to. I remember we often climbed on top of the because every house had a toilet was outside, so we'd climb up on the roof to see the processions, to visit the graveyard in bed. And in the midst of the 84, 85, 86, those would get shot up and more people died. But towards the end of the eighties, the processions would go on. Mandela's face were still burned. But I saw Mandela's face in school on the wall for the first time, and my father was travelling to Warsaw and I listened to a lot and he'd bring back music, you know, bend music. People would start playing it without I mean, it'll still bend, but you wouldn't have done that in the earlier parts of the eighties. So there was that General feeling that things were changing, even though they were not by law. And then when the Sisulu and the inquiry and trooping of the peace, he was released, that was a huge indicator that things are about to change. They came into power.

Zita Holbourne 27:16

Did you feel that way?

Wayne Dooling 27:18

I think I probably differ slightly from the

certainly everything the Village said is absolutely correct, but for me the emphasis would be on the overwhelming power that the state still had and didn't kind of hesitate to deploy my experiences of the late 1980s as that things just became much more intense. But certainly in my own mind, I didn't think that the end of apartheid wasn't on the corner either. I thought this could go on for many years and with hindsight it probably could have gone on for many years. I think the entire country was hugely surprised by the cleric's announcement when it came in February of 1990. I certainly was supportive and I don't think I was the only one. So I was not disagreeing with anything that Diplo said. I could certainly imagine the state that was prepared to continue this kind of repression for a long time.

Andrew Muir 28:09

Powerful memories there from Wayne Dooling and Thapelo Moalantoa, reliving experiences that many of us can barely imagine. Thanks to Thapelo and Wayne for their candid testimony and to Zita Holman for guiding us through the conversation in the next episode of *Activism in the Eighties*, we look back on a bruising decade for British trade unions.

Len McCluskey 28:36

The miners strike perhaps was the worst because I've never seen such a desperate wish from communities right throughout the land wanting the miners to win. The miners have a special place in the hearts of ordinary working people, and once they were defeated, it was really, really bleak.

Andrew Muir 28:58

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