

EPISODE 4: Free Nelson Mandela – The British Anti-Apartheid Movement

Andrew Muir 1:06:45

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.

In 1980s Britain, the anti-apartheid movement drew nationwide support. Its mission was to end South Africa's racist apartheid system, and as reports from that country showed, increasing violence. Support for anti-apartheid grew. It was a welcome shift for veteran campaigners Christabel Gurney and Nadia Joseph.

Nadia Joseph 1:07:20

With the media coverage. We could look at, oh, my goodness, this system is actually attacking children. It's shooting children.

Andrew Muir 1:07:30

I'm Andrew Muir and this is activism in the eighties where we chart the protests and culture wars that changed lives in Britain, Ireland and beyond.

In this episode, Nadia and Christabel remember the boycotts and rallies that helped end apartheid? With fellow campaigner Lela Kogbara

The conversation starts with Nadia talking about how she became part of the anti-apartheid movement.

Nadia Joseph 1:08:02

Well, it wasn't a conscious decision. It was something that I was born into because my parents left South Africa as political exiles, although at the time my mother didn't know she was going into political exile. She had left in 1965 with my disabled brother thinking that she could return. But my father, who'd been very active in the struggle against South Africa apartheid, he had been imprisoned and tortured and his comrades thought he may be under pressure to turn state witness. And he didn't. He had no intention of. But they weren't to know that. And so word got out to my mum that she shouldn't try to come back. And so my sisters were smuggled out the country and my father fled. And I was born the following year in London. So it's all I knew really from apartheid and its impact from a very early age.

Lela Kogbara 1:08:51

Christabel youth anti-apartheid movement for a long time. But it really took off in the mid-eighties. How did that happen?

Christabel Gurney 1:08:59

I was first involved in the process against the cricket and rugby tours in 1969, but really for a long time the anti-apartheid movement was just run by a small group of very determined people, some of them South African exiles. And it was only really in the eighties that it took off in a big way among masses of people here in Britain. And I think it was largely in response to what was going on in South Africa, because for a long time the apartheid government had been very successful in shutting down anti-apartheid protests in South Africa. They were the 1976 Soweto students uprisings. But in the early and mid-eighties there was an eruption in the townships because more and more people were coming to work in the townships and there wasn't decent housing, wages were very, very breadline. And so every night in 1985 on British telly, there were pictures of the South African troops going into the townships and opening fire on people. So that was a terrific encouragement to British people to do something about it. And the anti-apartheid movement was there organized, ready to take advantage of that. There was also the question of Margaret Thatcher. Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister, was implacably opposed to sanctions and everything the anti-apartheid movement stood for. Although she won three elections in a row, she was a hugely divisive figure and the anti-apartheid movement became the international wing of the anti Thatcher protest. And so there was a huge spread of people who were involved in other issues like the miners strike, who also started supporting the anti-apartheid movement.

Lela Kogbara 1:10:35

That's interesting, because I joined the anti-apartheid movement in the mid-eighties about 1986, 87, and I didn't necessarily know how I had become activated. I was aware of apartheid. I had gone to university in Nigeria, where we had South African students and Zimbabwe students exiled with us in university, some of whom I was really good friends with. And I'd been conscious that apartheid was something that was unacceptable. It was viscerally a problem for me. And so I joined the anti-apartheid movement. But with all the things that were happening in the world, what was it that actually made the anti-apartheid movement take off in the way that it did?

Nadia Joseph 1:11:18

I think there was a kind of evolution. And when Mandela and his comrades went into jail for life in the early sixties, quite a lot of the liberation movement had either been incarcerated themselves, they'd gone into exile or they'd been killed. And then the period of time that Christabel's talking about the seventies to the eighties got a resurgence of activism, followed through the whole black consciousness movement. Steve Biko, The Soweto Uprising. But in terms of

what the campaign outside could do and galvanise public opinion to change things, I think with the media coverage that Christopher was referring to, those were the ways that we could look at, Oh my goodness, this system is actually attacking children, it's shooting children. We already had Sharpeville and the early sixties, but people hadn't seen that as widely. All those things you're talking about, whether it was against the bomb, against Thatcher and or her policies that were really impacting education here, the rights of children, the rights of women that found a focus because South Africa represented all of those sorts of oppressions. It offered an opportunity for different groups to come together, and especially within the trade union movement, in support of people in the South Africa's regime.

Christabel Gurney 1:12:35

The anti-apartheid movement was also very good on its marketing. It produced what we call merchandise, which was badges, T-shirts and then music. There was a huge eruption of anti-apartheid songs and music. This culminated in 1988 in the concerts asking for the freedom of Nelson Mandela, but had been going on for a long time. And so that creates it. A new mass audience.

Lela Kogbara 1:13:07

I remember I was a local anti-apartheid activist in Suffolk and I was co-chair of the Southern anti-Apartheid Group and I remember this arrangement whereby we took guidance from the central anti-apartheid movement across the country. So there were loads and loads of little anti-apartheid groups all over the place that were doing the same thing on different days, on the same issues. And with hindsight, that feels to me like a massive, systematic way of organizing ordinary grassroots people to give change. And I remember lots of innovative campaigns, which we did as a group. So I don't know whether Naja, you or Christabel, remember any of those organised and coordinated, but different local efforts.

Nadia Joseph 1:14:00

Definitely, Definitely. I was born in West London, so my parents, along with Christabel and other people in that area who were remained activists in all sorts of ways were very involved and the whole movement was very linked with all the struggles in that area. When they moved to North London, we were in the Bonn anti-apartheid group. And it's interesting what you say about people coming together, because within that group there were all sorts of people, people involved in churches, people in the Labour Party, teachers, all sorts of people and exiles. And their movement was saying to people, can you go and boycott Tesco's or wherever on a Saturday morning? Christabel was very involved with the anti-apartheid news editor. We would go out and sell that on the weekend. I'd go with my dad and my sisters and all the people

were doing it in their parts of the country. So it really did have a very organic but in some ways unified form of action because it was unique to the location, whether it was boycotting, picketing outside shell, people were organising those in quite a strategic way.

Lela Kogbara 1:15:03

Yes. And I remember, Christabel, you talked about the merchandise which can seem trivial, but actually we had the anti-apartheid news, which was serious, and we had our badges and mugs and T-shirts, shirts and so on to sell on our stalls. So while we were getting people to sign petitions and so on, we actually had stuff to engage the public with.

Christabel Gurney 1:15:28

Yes, I think the boycott was very important because it was something everybody could do. You could just not buy as South African paper and not say anything, but just do it. But also as a local group, you could go and stand outside your local Sainsbury's or Tesco every Saturday morning or once a month, as we did in Notting Hill. And also the campaign against Barclays Bank was the same because every high street had a Barclays bank and we turned up outside Barclays banks and the anti-apartheid movement had frequent Barclays days of action, and students boycotted Barclays and stopped Barclays operating at student Fresh Affairs. And Barclays wanted student accounts. So the anti-apartheid movement provided very straightforward things that everyone could do and that they could do either on their own or they could do in groups or other organisations could do. Camden Council, for example, withdrew its account from Barclays Bank. It was kind of focused in a very positive I'll come.

Lela Kogbara 1:16:30

Back to Barclays as a victory. Noddy You mentioned Shell, so we had a shell garage on Wall throw. It's still there actually, and we had this amazing colourful poster that mixed up the colours of shell plus the colours of anti-apartheid and so on. And it said shell fuels apartheid. I'd boycott Shell and we would stand outside that. So we had something every week. We'd sometimes stand outside the local supermarket, sometimes outside the shell garage, sometimes outside Barclays. It was quite a big part of our social life. The other thing I remember, and I don't know if either of you were involved with going to the Shell annual General meetings, because I remember I was bought one share to go to those AGM, eat the canapés and drink the champagne at the beginning, and then disrupt the whole meeting by asking questions, then standing up and chanting. And it was just sweetened by the fact of having eaten the kind of peas and drank the champagne. And we did that every year for quite a while. And I didn't know that the same had happened for Barclays. So I think it was a great thing

to do. One thing would be good to talk about then what were the successes in the eighties.

Christabel Gurney 1:17:47

When a lot of companies withdrew from South Africa in the eighties, partly because of what was going on in South Africa and the unrest and the state of the South African economy. But it was also the reputational damage, especially with Barclays. I think Barclays pulled out in 1986, so that was a huge victory. The other victory was the sports boycotts that dated from the early seventies. Every major sporting federation had expelled South Africa and there were occasional tours, rogue tours, like the Gatting tour in the late eighties, where the cricketers were being paid handsomely to go. That was a very unpopular thing to do, and the getting cricket tour was a disaster.

Nadia Joseph 1:18:29

I think it's interesting as well because people have been doing these things for a long time, calling for sports boycotts, boycotts, sporting goods, and it just over time became a bigger thing. And with Barclays, I think it was a particularly powerful boycott because students involved in the industry were getting involved in their campuses and they were becoming conscious. And often people would say, well, what can one person do? And those conversations were suddenly translating into results because enough students were boycotting people sort of thing on a really huge scale, the impact of individuals coming together collectively and that in itself was a victory just in terms of mobilisation and of encouragement to people, I think. Yes.

Lela Kogbara 1:19:13

And it was a collective action at a time when there was no technology. How on earth did we manage when there were no mobile phones, for example? There was no Internet to have a movement across the whole country with? No.

Nadia Joseph 1:19:29

I think it was simpler.

Christabel Gurney 1:19:31

Lela, don't you remember how we turned out outside tube stations on high streets with those thousands of leaflets? Sometimes like every tube station in London, we were supposed to be leafleting outside.

Lela Kogbara 1:19:46

Nadia What was your memory?

Nadia Joseph 1:19:48

Well, you talked about the limitations of not having the technology we have now. You would have to say, Will you be home at 6:00? I might phone you, I might drop some leaflets off, I'll meet you. But people were pretty motivated to get involved. It was an incredibly invigorating time in terms of activism, and it was from children right up to elders, and people could do what they felt comfortable with. I know in Bonn, anti-apartheid, the first sponsored walk I went on, I was seven, but there were people that were really quite elderly. They were doing what they could. It wasn't particularly strenuous, but it was something local. It got people talking. And then like with the huge demos in London, which involved a lot of planning and stewarding and all of those things. But what was wonderful is it was lots and lots of people in lots of branches across the country and then these really big moments where people would come together. It was just very inspiring, I think.

Lela Kogbara 1:20:41

Speaking of technology, we used to have these phone trees and I found it not that long ago, and it was this list of names and landline numbers. And if something happened in South Africa, which there was a call to action about, and that could be to stop an execution, calling for a particular law not to go through whatever it was and there'd be an urgent action. And somebody from our local group would be called by, say, the National Office of the anti-Apartheid Movement. And then we would cascade this information through the phone tree. For me, I would phone Christabel, Christabel with her, Nadia and so on. And if the person you were supposed to call wasn't there, you then found the next person along and so on, so that the tree would keep going. And I look at that now and I think Edith just had a WhatsApp group or something, but there we were, one phone call after another and it actually worked. So if we were doing that kind of action and triggered the tree, we would get loads of people out from across for us, something to turn up either in Trafalgar Square or somewhere locally or whatever. And I think in some ways it was made it stronger as activism. I think it's that kind of activism is much more involving than sending a tweet.

Nadia Joseph 1:22:01

Like, I agree totally, because we feel that we've got all these means of communication, which we do now. But the urgency and the the need to just cut through everything and get on with it and be out there and be committed. It was far simpler. And then with the merchandisers, all those things wearing badges, having the leaflets, wearing the T-shirts, you don't have any social media platforms. We were the social media, and we had to just go out there with banners, homemade placards, the rest of it, and just be really present, too.

Lela Kogbara 1:22:30

Sounds like there's something about the ideology, the mindset, the values that was cross-cutting. And I think, Nadia, you had mentioned a few examples of that kind of coming together.

Nadia Joseph 1:22:41

Yes. I mean, I think it's it's really good to remember that in South Africa itself, it was such a stratified society. There was such extreme inequality. And yet if you were to look at the famous photograph of the treason trial in 1956 in that group of 156, apart from the fact that obviously I have a personal link because my dad was there and many, many of the leaders of the Mandela, Sisulu, Albertina, there were all sorts of people involved. But what's really interesting is that the racial mix is incredible. There were primarily lots of black South Africans, but lots of whites and Indians. And what in South Africa were called coloured people. And I say to people when I meet them now, you know, there's such a divide. People say, Oh, we can't get together. We don't share the same views. If people can come together when it's at great risk and think, what is the purpose? What's our collective purpose? And that's a wonderful example. And certainly when we were involved in the March to Freedom, Mandela at 70 here, the amount of people that supported that campaign, that was people like Christabel, you were saying about the miners, they came and joined us up in Durham. They walked with us students, MPs, people involved in churches, huge amount, people in churches. They actually gave us a place to stay. It was incredible. So you had a great swathe of people from all sorts of places. I mean, we also met by the National Front. We also had difficulties. When I came back to London, the National Front had contacted the youth club where I worked and said, You've got a terrorist working for you. And I went through a whole process where I actually had to leave my job. There were repercussions from the action, but overall it was really positive. I remember being in North Yorkshire on that march and we went into a pub at half time and we were having a break and somebody was a lovely atmosphere. I'd never been there and somebody at the bar touched my cheek and said, Oh, it doesn't come off. And it was really quite horrific. But there was an interesting response to that because some of the marchers felt very angry and upset and wanted to challenge this. But another said, no, let's get together. Let's talk about how we're going to deal with this. So even those moments, whereas ordinarily we might have been on our own, I don't know experiences you had as a person growing up here when you were in that collective, it was really encouraging. And so those are all examples of these extremes. But people kind of coming together as students, as workers, as trade unionists, as teachers, so many different levels. And there were so many campaigns that brought us all together. So you'd see people with their badges and they'd have anti-apartheid and save the NHS and help the miners and anti-Nazi League and everything

that was all there against the bomb, all of that. So you had you kind of thought, oh, that's a like minded comrade, that there's a potential friend there. And I think that was a wonderful thing.

Lela Kogbara 1:25:38

I do think that the solidarity thing is so huge and there is something uncompetitive and communal about that coming together. And one of my memories of these cross-cutting intersectional themes was Mandela visiting the Lawrence family after Stephen Lawrence had been murdered and the police investigation was just poor. And one of the things we did as the Black Solidarity Committee of the anti-Apartheid movement was to push for and secure a breakfast meeting. Mandela had a full agenda and it was like, How are you going to squash a meeting with the Lawrence family, for goodness sake? But actually, he chose he chose to prioritize doing that. And it was fantastic. And Doreen Lawrence till today will talk about the impact that that had on her morale, but also on the change in attitudes with the police. So that sense of there's underpinning set of things that we all believe in and we might choose to focus on the justice for the miners or justice for Stephen Lawrence or whatever. But fundamentally there's something that connects us, and I think that was something quite interesting.

Nadia Joseph 1:26:55

And there's also that quote from Mandela about Palestine as well, which has definitely had currency recently with, you know, we're not free until Palestine through. There's been loads of campaigns that people that fought against apartheid were also really committed to globally. And so I think it actually raised consciousness and awareness. It was an education. By being active, you learn from others. I mean, I'm learning from you today about what you did in South London. You know, that I wasn't involved in different permutations of the same goal, really, And I think it did. You you met so many wonderful people. Yes. Really committed.

Lela Kogbara 1:27:31

Probably why we're still all friends still today, a lot of us, because there was something about believing in the world that needs to be different, that kind of united across these different issues and still does.

Christabel Gurney 1:27:44

And people remember now, especially trade unionists, who being a trade unionist now is tough, but they still remember that that was the most committed and inspiring thing they did because there were a lot of trade unions. Definitely in the anti-apartheid movement. It's very noticeable.

Nadia Joseph 1:28:01

And especially as you say now Christabel, with this whole atmosphere about trade unions and the ability to mobilise and the issues that we're facing again about inequality here in this country, it's really interesting how they themselves have got some resurgence here. I think that's really yeah.

Lela Kogbara 1:28:19

And what one of the things I think Naji, when you were talking about the solidarity across different ethnic groups and communities in South Africa, one of the things I noticed, which I hadn't picked up until fairly recently in the last like five or ten years, was how many Jewish South Africans were anti-apartheid. And in fact, the number of prominent senior legal people that were involved at the time. I thought that was quite interesting. I noticed I hadn't been aware of that being anything amongst.

Nadia Joseph 1:28:51

The left wing, amongst.

Lela Kogbara 1:28:52

The left.

Christabel Gurney 1:28:52

Is absolutely true, and it has a huge history which we probably can't go into because they came from Eastern Europe and Lithuania in particular, where the Bund, which was the left, not at all Zionist organisation came from, and they had been involved in left wing politics and their parents had been involved in left wing politics back in Eastern Europe.

Lela Kogbara 1:29:12

Yep, there was this fascinating look into the trends and things that you pick up.

Nadia Joseph 1:29:16

So I thought, Oh.

Lela Kogbara 1:29:17

I can notice. Wow, I've noticed that before. There's a significant Jewish contingent, South African contingent that have been prominent in the struggle against apartheid.

Nadia Joseph 1:29:26

And that was one of the ironies really, but also one of the beauties of being a child of exiles, because then we were fighting this kind of racism world in South Africa and here and yet meetings that we went to, there were all sorts of

people that we had Jewish friends, we had black South African friends, Caribbeans. It was just a melting pot, literally a melting pot of so many different communities. And yet we're fighting against this kind of very divided world. So yeah, it was incredible.

Lela Kogbara 1:29:54

And I think that that coming together made a lie of what the apartheid regime is trying to do, the separateness, separate development. It was like, no, that's not who we are. And I think that was a clear and key message. Then the other thing I wonder about is with the momentum towards change in South Africa. Cristobal, you were editing at the time anti-Apartheid news. Were you expecting the change that came?

Christabel Gurney 1:30:27

Oh, I don't think we were. I think for a lot of us, anti apartheid became a way of life. It was just something you went on doing. And actually when Mandela was released, there was great joy and it did seem like the beginning of the end. But it was a problem for the anti-apartheid movement because a lot of people thought it was all over. And the anti-apartheid movement very much didn't think it was all over. We thought there would be some sort of compromise brokered by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan that would be very much short of a genuine democratic country run by the majority of its people. And so it was a kind of double edged situation.

Nadia Joseph 1:31:07

What was your. Yeah, it's an interesting question later because on the one hand, the figurehead of Mandela was really important and became increasingly so with his release. People didn't really think about what has been lost and what has been gained in this process. The economic ties that still very much South Africa was dependent upon and the deals that were being struck and degrees of compromise, it was very, very difficult. So on the one hand, it was fantastic to have Mandela free and his comrades, but there was a sense of, okay, well, how will this all translate on the ground in South Africa?

Lela Kogbara 1:31:43

Those are interesting points that you both make, Nigeria and Cristobal. But I wonder whether that was something that everyday people were conscious of. I recall just feeling elation. It was like the best thing that could ever have happened. And it was quite a while later that I realised that the release of Mandela was the beginning and not the end. For me, some of that realization was about the condition of black people, not just in South Africa but across the world, and realising that there's a lot of stuff that has not changed for the

ordinary, everyday black person. So I don't know whether from your circle was what the reactions were for people who were less involved, perhaps.

Christabel Gurney 1:32:29

I think Layla, the problem was the people who were less involved thought that it was all over. And also that was partly because Mandela had been so built up as the one as a central figure. And so it was very hard. The anti-apartheid movement couldn't raise money after 1990 to carry on.

Nadia Joseph 1:32:49

Certainly at school and college and on the streets. London was still a very racist place as well. We were in pockets of security to even be amongst our comrades. But certainly in my experience on the streets in London, racism is still rife and there was still a lot of ignorance. And I think some of the people got involved because they were excited about something happening. So there were lots of campaigns and lots of issues that were about political structural inequalities, and sometimes people jumped on the bandwagon, but not necessarily really getting underneath. And so there were still a lot of work to do that.

Lela Kogbara 1:33:26

There's always an issue with singling out a person to represent a struggle or movement because they just represent a part of something and they're not the whole thing. And there were lots of struggles that were ongoing that didn't succeed. anti-Apartheid movement did in terms of its core aims. Its aims were to release Mandela and other political prisoners to end apartheid as a legal structure. And it did that. So in that sense, it was successful. What were your feelings, Christabel, at that time and potentially subsequently?

Christabel Gurney 1:34:08

My initial personal feeling was, Oh, now I can go and campaign on something else. I wanted to go and campaign on eco issues, and particularly at the time the big news item was the Newberry bypass and I thought I will become an eco campaigner, I will campaign against Rhodes. And I went on a demo to Newberry, which was great. We walked through the woods, but then I realised that the nitty gritty of campaign against Rhodes, Do you remember Swampy? Later on the idea Swampy told it to run into the ground where the Newberry bypass was going to be built and wouldn't come out and other people were in the trees. And I thought actually, whatever, however strongly I feel about this, this is not for me, it's quite work out. And then the anti-apartheid movements, the core people who are still involved, didn't want to give up and formed a new organisation, Action for Southern Africa, to try to support the new South Africa and the other newly liberated countries of southern Africa in overcoming the

huge legacy of apartheid. We did realise that one person, one vote wasn't all there was to it. There was a huge economic and socio economic legacy, a racist legacy of racism.

Lela Kogbara 1:35:23

In.

Christabel Gurney 1:35:23

Southern Africa. I wanted to change that.

Lela Kogbara 1:35:25

Yes, absolutely. And I think certainly for me that was why I was got involved and stayed involved so long was that thing of actually the underlying structural issues have not shifted significantly. Nadia What were your thoughts about the victory and the wider the victory?

Nadia Joseph 1:35:46

When I was young, all we ever heard was my parents, would they be able to go home so finally they could go home and be there with their family and comrades and never expected to be here. This long. They came here as relatively young people, so that was a wonderful thing and we were all thrilled. And many really, after two people start to think what price was paid for that victory, I think there had been lots of concerns about how things would develop after, and there were lots of things that were

complex. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the development of the country universal franchise. They were complexities to how people would be able to become active citizens and raise fairness and distribution across the country where there were issues that concerned everybody. And it was a big thing. We were so keen to kind of get apartheid to an end. But that child development, the long term development and the complexities of that was another matter altogether. But that kind of came later, certainly in the instance of his release, it was absolute joy. I mean, we just couldn't believe it.

Lela Kogbara 1:36:54

You've both talked, Nadia and Christabel, about different responses and thoughts about the time. And looking back now, I realize that the anti-apartheid movement actually changed my life in quite a fundamental way and has shaped what I've done, even what I do now in terms of being a director of Black Thrive in the UK. The victory created a belief and a knowledge and body knowledge in me that change is possible and that's what I feel has changed my life. So regardless of what the issues and challenges have been, the fact that there was a fight for something that we won and that it wasn't an accident,

it was heart fought, led by South African, African and Asian South Africans who we took the lead from. So the model of taking the lead from the people, ordinary people of the country who were fighting for their freedom, supporting them in a very structured and organised way in a way that was fun as well, to be honest, because I don't think I did. I'm not sure at my age then early twenties that would have stuck with if it hadn't been fun actually to take that and to follow it through and be disciplined in landing something, it just changed the whole way. I think about what's possible. So even till today, people talk about racism in Britain, which is still present. But what I know is it doesn't have to be that way. And I know that from the bottom of my heart, because of the anti-apartheid movement, that knowledge changes how I behave and what I aspire to do. That knowledge that changes possible.

Andrew Muir 1:38:48

Lela Kogbara, Nadia Joseph and Christabel Gurney, speaking there about their decades long campaign to bring a measure of justice to a divided world. Many thanks to all three of them for sharing their experiences. Next time On Activism. In the eighties, we meet three female theatre professionals who faced a glass ceiling made of stone.

Sue Dunderdale 1:39:10

It was very, very blatant. Women were over 50% of the audience. More women were going to the theatre than men. And yet all the establishment theatres were run by men at that time.

Andrew Muir 1:39:23

The next episode of Activism in the eighties is available right now. Wherever you get your podcasts.

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