

# Aliquod novi:

## A psychiatric voyage to the 'new' South Africa

This summer's World Cup finals showed how far South Africa has come since its darkest days. On his recent return home, expatriate and psychiatrist **Dr Robert M Kaplan** found that some things haven't changed

**W**elcome to the New South Africa," reads the sign at Johannesburg's Oliver Tambo Airport. It reminds me of Scipio Africanus, the Roman general who laid waste to Carthage: *ex Africa semper aliquod novi* ("out of Africa, always something new") – a deeply ironic, if not pessimistic, statement. I am back in the tribal homeland on a trip offering all sorts of experiences, commencing with a pan-African congress in clinical hypnosis and psychosomatic medicine at the fabled Lost City.

During the long decades of apartheid, white South Africans were restrained from such hedonistic pursuits as gambling, pornography and inter-racial

sex by their primly moralistic leaders, otherwise busy with social engineering on a scale favoured by Dr Goebbels. Sol Kerzner, the Sammy Glick of hotel development, set up resort hotels in the so-called Bantustans where white South Africans could gamble, watch pornography and have sex with black women before returning to their regulated and separate lives in South Africa.

To keep the roulette wheels turning, Kerzner erected the Lost City Palace Hotel in Bophuthatswana, or "Bop", a postage stamp-sized territory whose only *raison d'être* was the geographic accident of being perched above the equivalent of an inverted mountain of pure platinum.

Facing a wait for the shuttle bus, I slump in the arrivals lounge. A few seats along, I notice a black boy. I judge his age to be scarcely more than 12. His clothes are rough. Surely he is not a flight passenger, I wonder. He stares around, then at the floor, his gaze blank, his head nods a few times and he sleeps. He is, I realise, a street kid who sneaked past the security guards to get some warmth and, if lucky, food from the bins. I'm considering what to do when I'm called to the bus and leave him, his head lolling, the seat a warm cocoon for a few precious hours until he is picked up by security and heaved outside.

After a three-hour ride, we arrive at the giant ziggurat that constitutes the





Above left: the Palace of the Lost City hotel, which plays its part in Sun City's fantasy myth as the resurrected royal palace of an ancient African civilization. Sun City is a luxury casino and resort developed in Bophuthatswana by the hotel magnate Sol Kerzner in the 1970s. Bophuthatswana was classified as an independent state by South Africa's apartheid regime and therefore Sun City could provide entertainment such as gambling and topless revue shows. It became the subject of considerable controversy in 1985 when E Street Band guitarist Steven Van Zandt made it the focus of his music-industry activist group, Artists United Against Apartheid. Forty-nine top recording artists collaborated on a song called 'Sun City', in which they pledged they would never perform at the resort

Lost City Hotel. The edifice is modelled on the Mormon Tabernacle, the Zimbabwe ruins, the Parthenon, the Great Pyramid and Neverland. The Valley of the Ancients is entered by a corridor of elephants, trunks alifted, a cavern issuing volcanic rumbles and an artificial sea with surfing waves. The result is akin to a *son et lumière* show directed by Rider Haggard and Antonio Gaudi after a long night on acid.

White South Africa is at the Lost City in force; the parking lot resembles a Mercedes Benz and BMW rally. Waiting for the lift, I ask a patron why he bothers to come here now that gambling is legal in every city, town or village.

"Too many of *them* in Jo'burg now, even Sandton," he grunts.

*Ja*, they still knew what it was all about.

The rest of the place is, well, less than spectacular. Imagine several hundred bug-eyed, catatonic, occasionally drooling gamblers glued to poker machines, surround them with ranks of shoebox-like bedrooms and you get the idea. From the balconies one is hit by the rising peal of electronic ringing from the poker machines, punctured by shrieks

from the winners and the grunts of the losers. I wonder whether any of the ubiquitous condom-vending machines provide the fretful with Prozac.

Here the apartheid era icons live forever. Frank Sinatra, the man who defied the world cultural boycott to sing there, is still spoken of in hushed tones. If gambling palls, you can always do a quick 18 holes on the Gary Player golf course, three sets on the Cliff Drysdale tennis court or 24 hours on the rack in the John Vorster torture chamber.

I stagger to my room, fling the bags in the corner and crash. Tormented by uneasy dreams of Spiro Agnew, I sleep late, arriving just in time to scamper into the back of a packed conference hall for the keynote address, delivered by an expatriate South African.

On the stage a wizened homunculus is waving oddly simian arms in rhythm with rolling sonorous platitudes, like a ham actor teaching Shakespeare to autistic savants. The talk is replete with generic feel-good stuff that ineluctably links the genius of Milton Erickson with the New South Africa, a connection that had previously escaped my notice, if not that of the rest of the

world, in addition to anecdotes of wondrous therapeutic triumphs and exhortations to treat the whole patient (I'd like to see a therapist commence a session with "today, I only intend to counsel your left testicle").

The homunculus finishes his talk and, like a Shakespearian actor, bows forward till his head touches his knees, the simian arms protruding up like wings, remaining prone while the audience applauds with the frantic sincerity of an Amway cheer-squad. Baffled, I remain mute and inglorious.

At the tea break, I beat the surging mob to the coffee dispenser to snatch a cup, only to be trapped in the corner by Otto, an holistic dentist from East London; Mrs Otto, a psychologist, regarding me as an *üntermenschen*, merely sniffs when introduced.

Otto, in the ecstatic tones of an acolyte struck by lightning, has "come to explore the broader dimension opened up to personkind by hypnotherapy. Milton Erickson has Important Things to Say to the World."

I've never met an holistic dentist, I tell Otto. Does he use organic mercury fillings and bamboo drill tips? Otto,

who clearly was never asked to perform in the Dental Students Review, explains that his training requires integrating the head with the body, something I had suspected to be essential when extracting teeth.

I am then trapped by Pamela, a psychologist from the wealthy suburbs of Johannesburg specialising in Eastern philosophies. She is oblivious to a glare that would melt the hammer and sickle off a Soviet T-34 tank. "You're that writer guy, aren't you? This is a good meeting to understand people's inner alienation from wholeness. We get a lot of traumatic stress, you know. People just can't cope with the changes, especially the crime."

I note Pamela's use of the present tense: life in South Africa is more traumatic for some than others, it seems. That the vast majority of the population were treated like shit for decades does not seem to have occurred to her. When I ask why the present spate of car-jacking should be more difficult for the white middle class to deal with than, say, the bulldozing of houses, imprisonment and torture, or assassination by security forces over the last 40 years, she carries on without missing a beat, as if I had played a note her ears were not able to hear.

Daringly, Pamela admits that Jung – Nazi enthusiasm notwithstanding – has his good points. "It is the only way to reach across spiritual boundaries. People need to get in touch with themselves." However, she doesn't do behavioural. "It's coming in but people aren't laboratory rats. I've said it before, I'm sorry, I'm only interested in the whole person, not symptoms."

Lest this make her appear to be out of touch, she points out that EMDR – eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing – could be "an important breakthrough in teaching the patient to achieve personhood".

When I tell her that EMDR is another West Coast fad with no benefit, imported like a cargo cult to the rest of the world, her discourse stops abruptly, she looks at me with glassy eyes, turns on flat heels, and walks away.

Otto had told me not to miss the medical hypnoanalysis workshop, billed as the conference highlight. "The man is a giant of therapy. We are very lucky he



Top: Scipio Africanus. Above: The Moses Mabhida Stadium in Durban, a symbol of the 'new' South Africa

has given us his time, I'm surprised the Americans let him go."

With such a glowing endorsement, I fear my life will be forever cheapened if I miss the event. We file into a lecture room, flyers thrust into our hands as we come in. A man is leaning forward on the lectern. He is wearing a Seer-sucker suit – at least that is what I think it is, never having seen an outfit before (or since) that seems to shriek the word "conman".

Reprising Otto, the speaker is introduced as "my mentor, one of the world's great therapists" by the chairman. His mentor, it turns out, loathes psychiatrists, psychotropic drugs, the DSM, and a few more things that make him feel at home in South Africa – not the current state, but the one elected in 1948.

The mentor lurches forward, fixing us with an angry exophthalmic gaze. "Biological psychiatry," he commences, rolling the words around his tongue. "Biological psychiatry. When I hear these words, I feel *angry*. Because there's no place for the spirit, the soul – and that's what I'm here to tell you about."

By the time he reaches the end of the

sentence, he is spitting out the words. The chairman, dandruff clouds now assuming cumulo-nimbus proportions, and the audience, including Otto, Mrs Otto and the tumescent Pamela, are up on their feet, applauding wildly. Feeling that he has his audience by the psychological short and curlies, the mentor segues into a sing-song count-down, rhythmically waving his right arm. He is, I realise, trying to hypnotise us. Despite their adoration, the claue squad seem impervious to his rodomontade and, to my disappointment, no one slumps, folds, gibbers or goes into an induced coma.

The mentor stops counting, moving undeterred to new territory. Feeling he is on safe (e.g. white) ground, he explains that he can't understand why black people in Africa are poor "when they can just grow things to eat".

In case we are unaware, the Pope, a raging and dangerous liberal, sanctions the rhythm method.

Furthermore, "all that Milton Erickson stuff is actually a crock," but please not to let the people outside know because they paid his airfare and he has had some difficulties when sponsors seem to misunderstand what he says and become unreasonable.

Zoned out by the Savonarola-like tirade, my eye lights upon the flyers, the mentor's practice proformas. The detailed questionnaire, *inter alia*, inquires how often you have sex with your partner, with someone of the same sex, or with animals – and whether you swallow when you perform fellatio on your partner or your adulterous lover, animals or same-sex partners not excluded.

The Mentor, it seems, is just another emotionally constipated, sexually repressed, voyeuristic bigot clad in the (Seersuckered) guise of a medical hypnotist. Realising I have stumbled into a world I did not really want to know, I leave the workshop, being sure to tramp on Otto's foot on my way out, head for the poker machines and lose heavily, but make it up with the favourable exchange rate. After all, as Freud said, sometimes a good cigar is just a good cigar.

At a cocktail party that night I notice the morning homunculus being mobbed by several drunken female

psychologists. Truly this is the New South Africa. By now the Lost City is a little rich for my blood and it is with no great regret that I head off to the airport the next morning. I am heading to Cape Town where Mother is waiting.

### Out of the frying pan

From the Lost City to Cape Town, Tavern of the Seas. The Oedipal bonds are renewed, I feel like Odysseus returned. I phone Beryl, an old friend. For 20 years, she has worked for the Society of Friends, aka the Quakers. In the bad days of apartheid, the job had not been without its risks, Vorster's headkickers having few qualms about including some Friends among the Enemies of the State. Now, she is fighting a new kind of enemy, but an old one just the same: massive poverty, apathy, social dislocation, a society in transition.

"Heads," Beryl yells, "Where have you been all my life? Why are you wasting your time shrinking tiny Australian brains when we need you here? This is the New South Africa and Nelson is my captain now! Those Nationalist *poephols* are now in their *moer*" (an expression best left untranslated). Having not seen Beryl for a decade, her greeting is sufficient to assure me of a warm welcome. A heartrending saga follows of families incarcerated in flaming tin shacks, incest, knifings, rape and tragedy.

"Rob, they try so hard some of these people, but it just breaks your heart to see what they have to put up with out on the Flats. It's all very well having a free conscience now about being a white South African, but they still suffer and die out there regardless.

"You must come to a *braai* on Saturday night to see all these hopeless arseholes that have just been waiting for your help. And the Graham wants to talk to you about going fishing." The hopeless arseholes, it turns out, are most of her friends and family, her husband the Graham an honourable exception.

On Saturday evening, I arrive at Rondebosch, the sun setting behind Table Mountain, a scene so ravishing I could watch it forever. Greeted like a long-lost relative, I am simultaneously abused for staying away so long.

South Africans like a good *braai*, regarding it as a test of manhood. The Graham is bent over a bed of glowing



Table Mountain, Cape Town

coals made from old vine stumps, the sizzling aroma of meatfat tintured with coriander permeating the night air. We sit around a huge yellow-wood table. The evening slowly seeps into drink-sodden conviviality. Stories get rehearsed, exchanged, extolled. The broken marriages; the hopeless drunks; the Dagga crazies; the three brothers raddled with combat stress after the Angolan war, two of whom committed suicide.

A palefaced woman sitting at the table with a bucolic neurosurgeon is singled out by the table drunk. Shortly after they moved from inland to live in Cape Town, her husband was murdered at home in a random act of appalling violence by several intruders, stabbed 30 to 40 times.

"So, what happened in court, what did they do to the black bastards?" the drunk stirs.

"Well, they caught one guy, the other one is hiding somewhere in Limpopo province, perhaps even Zim. They say they're looking for him, but I don't believe them. The one they caught, he thought he was going to get off because he belonged to the ANC but he didn't, he got 32 years. He still thinks the ANC is going to let him out.

"It was quite strange in a way. My kids, they're really liberals, not me, but they wanted him to hang. Still do. I told

them you've got to leave punishment to the law, we can't do it ourselves. That makes us just like them."

Her features composed but sombre, she talks about living a shattered life in a new city. His family tried to be supportive but she had never got on with them, they had never been close. Her voice at times seems rehearsed, detached; she's not really with us, there is no connection.

Later, after the table has broken up, everyone caught in a screeching match between Cheryl and the table drunk about the ANC's abolition of the death penalty, she talks to me in a soft voice.

Close up, she is not so pale. Her face flushes and she allows herself to cry a little. "I don't think anyone can understand. You don't ever get any sleep. You dream of him and see the stab wounds. I keep getting flashbacks of going to the morgue to identify him. You drag yourself through the day, no feeling, your body doesn't belong to you any more, you just put food into it."

She cries again. "Sorry, I know Richard brought me here to cheer me up, to mix with people, but he just needs a bridge partner since his wife ran off with the dermatologist. I don't usually do this, sorry."

"Sorry." White South Africans say sorry a lot, using it as a conversation piece, a form of politeness, or just for lack of anything better to add. She, however, means it.

"Sorry, I don't cry much now... should I? I don't know you, why am I telling you anyway?" She really misses him. For years, it was raising the kids, but she tells me how they married against his family's wishes. They never forgave her. Now she doesn't know what to do.

I don't know what to say. She trails off and holds my hand for a while. Then I think of the song:

*Sometimes in love,  
your heart's like a wheel;  
when you bend it,  
you can't mend it;  
And it's only love,  
It's only love...\**

It's only love but this is the New South Africa. Time for me to go. 🇿🇦

\*©Kate and Anna McGarrigle: *Heart like a wheel*.