

**Chris Mansell**

## **BREYTONBACH**

How many poets are incarcerated these days for their views? Do we know of them? Do many poets actually have anything to say at all, so that it is not any wonder that they keep quiet. It is the sensible thing to do. I sit here at the tale, with a computer terminal to type up the inevitable, interminable correspondence. White and black. There is no way that I can jump over the gap. If I write of a black man then the black people will accuse me of trying to jump onto their wagon, to take their culture in just the same way that white people have done for many years. They will see me like some little girl in the playground who always wants to get into the games but who is excluded because she is a dill and drops the ball all the time. I understand. I do not want to steal anyone's culture. I am trying to find my own culture. And it seems impossible that this whiteness is sufficient. I am offended when black leaders tell me that they don't want my Queen and my Commonwealth. I do not want my Queen either. She is not mine, and I am not hers. She is just a nice lady with an interest in landscape gardening, quite pleasant manners and some hundreds of millions of pounds. Nothing to do with me. I have more in common with a flannel flower than with aristocracy. I am sorry. How does Breyton Breytonbach feel about this topic. He is a celebrated South African, white South African. Do black people who don't know that he's a nice black with an interest in . . . , think he too is taking over? Is this a new form of colonialism?

The truth of the matter, if there is a truth of the matter, is that there is no truth of the matter. One does not know one's heritage and cannot know with any degree of surety one's genetic background. One's imaginative background is, of course, another matter. One can account for that, over and over, with pauses and elaborations, and retellings which might or might not bear any relation to the original story. One can take any position on the bus and observe any number of the other people, who all must be connected to you somehow because of the bus if nothing else.

Once upon a time on the bus there was a young woman who suddenly decided that I was a famous photographic model. Bear in mind that I am not a very photogenic person, and the least model-like of anyone I could imagine. The young woman's clothes hardly stayed on her body. In fact, a fellow who was standing behind her on the bus

tried to do her a favour by doing up the zip in the back of her dress which was gaping open to her waist. She was highly offended. She confided to me, sitting down some feet away, that she thought it was very rude behaviour.

She began a long conversation about my modelling career. Asking other passengers for corroboration of her view that I was simply being modest and that I actually had my picture on the walls of all the best model agencies in the city. She said she knew because she had gone around to all of them before her accident which had made her unable to raise her left arm more than about six inches or so. Thus the zip I suppose. She sat beside me when the seat became available and insisted about this big city model stuff. When I continued to deny she continued to insist and eventually she concluded that they (the agencies) must be using my photo without my permission and that I should go and talk to them about it and if I hadn't got any money for it I'd better get it straight away. I could sue them.

I began to think that she was some sort of agent herself. Someone on a psychology experiment. Someone who would go home and document the effect on plain women of insistent assertions in public places that she was a top photographic model. The effect of embarrassment. The parameters of rudeness. The reactions that were evinced from other passengers. Were they in on this elaborate joke?

I saw for the first time how the mad old ladies start out. And next time I meet one I will be more polite, in the hope of other compliments.