Feeling the African beat

Photographer’s black and white record of the evolution of Drum magazine and the 1950s hury-bury

By NAIDE DREYER

J U R G E N Schadeberg’s photographs are as familiar as they are iconic: Nelson Mandela gracing through the bars of his prison cell on Robben Island; a young Miriam Makeba smiling and dancing; Hugh Masakela as a schoolboy receiving a trumpet from Louis Armstrong; Henry ‘Mr Drey’ Nxumalo; the Women’s March of 1938; the Sophiatown renewal, the funeral of the Sharpeville massacre victims.

Schadeberg was the man behind the camera literally revealing in black and white history as it unfolded in apartheid South Africa.

But his personal story, told in his recently released book The Way I See It, is no less extraordinary.

Schadeberg grew up in Berlin during World War 2. His mother had an elastic interpretation of parental responsibilities, to say the least. While the mould-destined filled in one romantic intrigue to the next, young Jurgen was left to navigate the horrors of war on his own.

It’s tempting to conclude that the quick-witted instincts a youth requires to dodge brutal Nazi, murderous Russian, terrifying bombings and looming starvation were excellent training for the dystopian world of apartheid SA.

Whatever the truth, after a stint as a roving photographer in Hamburg, Schadeberg fell down the rabbit hole and into an adventure that would see him document some of the most important moments in SA history — and the characters who shaped it.

In 1960 with only a little experience as a news photographer mostly in sport — he arrived at Apartheid Garden on a cold winter’s morning. He had a piece of paper with Mr Crisp’s address on it, all his worldly possessions in a small, cheap suitcase, and his Leica camera, always around his neck.

About a year later he heard that a magazine called Drum was looking for a photographer.

“It was told they had no money and that it would be an unsatisfactory position for me because the magazine was ‘about native’,” he writes.

“Everyone told me it would be disastrous for my career. It was totally unacceptable for a European to be working with natives. Well, I disagreed, in fact, I thought ‘working with the natives’ was an excellent idea so I went to the Apartheid Garden and offered my services.

Former editor-in-chief Bob Crisp was the proprietor and magazine editor, and employed him at a rate of shillings per picture used.

And so it was that Schadeberg joined Drum with its staff of three— Crisp, Henry Nxumalo — the chief journalist who went on to become the pioneer of investigative journalism in South Africa, and the “most gallant lady who was the secretary and spoke perfect English”.

Schadeberg became not only the chief photographer, but picture editor and art director; and in doing so he played a double role — evoking the dynamic black culture of the times and proclaiming the iconic brand.

In his dry, understated style Schadeberg reveals the anecdotes behind some of his iconic photographs. Working closely with Nxumalo, their most famous exposé was the notorious potato farms in Bethulie where workers were treated like slaves.

The background to this assignment was the murder of a farm labourer in 1949. A farmer had been found guilty of hanging the man by his feet from a tree and flogging him to death. More than 20 decades later nothing had changed.

Nxumalo went undercover as a labourer and Schadeberg had to track him down to German accent was a handy weapon against suspicious Afrikaners.

Eventually he traced Nxumalo to the potato fields on Sommelius farm in the Bethulie district. There the “beau boy” was cackling his whip while weakly workers stopped to gather the crop.

Schadeberg surreptitiously snapped photographs with his telephoto lens until Nxumalo dropped his basket and ran to the car.

Schadeberg covered many political moments. At the Apartheid Convention in 1960 he encountered Nelson Mandela, a young charismatic leader tipped for great things.

In 1964 he hired a small plane to cover the funeral of the victims of the Sharpeville massacre.

On a lighter note there’s the day he got arrested with Dolly Rathebe on a dance floor.

After looking for a Johannesburg backpack that would resemble a book, the black-and-white homburg failed, he posed for him on top of a drum.

After finishing the shots they were arrested by four cops advising them of entrenching the notorious Immorality Act.

“Are you gay, ewenie? What are you doing here, boyker?” a sergeant demanded.

He then turned to Rathebe: “Eh will you break even? I want to see your parents.”

After hiring her dress to show that she was not, wearing panties, Rathebe was thrown in the back of a pick up van. Schadeberg was pushed into a police car.

At the police station a cop bared to him: “We don’t mix with these people. You should know, as a German, you are different.”

Jim Bailey, Drum’s financier and proprietor after Crisp ran into difficulties, was pathologically lecherous and could be cruel. Despite being one of the wealthiest men on the continent, Bailey was the son of Sandford Sir Abe Bailey and Lady Mary Bailey.

He’d leave his poorly paid subordinates to go out for a night’s binge drinking with township dandies and whores.

Editor Anthony Sampson was a Sikhyl and Hylke character — his Mr Hylke could be horribly crude (could be book).

The Drum world was full of characters who still form large today. Frierding with the magazine’s music editor Todd Mushikwa was a terrifying experience, writes Schadeberg, because Mushikwa was so short he almost disappeared behind the wheel of his Morris Minor.

The two of them hung out with Kipkoeki Musyoka in an underworld where “gangsters danced with guns and later and thought gambling, shooting and stabbing were normal”.

Abnormal times that produced both the best and the worst. Definitely worth a read.

Schadeberg left South Africa in 1964 to work and teach abroad. He resides in the UK and stayed for another 22 years.

Since he started in 1951 Schadeberg has been more than 50 years and incorporates a collection of some 200 000 negatives — a wealth of images, many of which have been exhibited — with photographic editing by Durin Bouchier

Jürgen Schadeberg’s The Big I See published by Jacana Media in 2013 and is available at good bookstores nationwide or online.