goodbye to big on bronze

When the Sunday Times turned 100 last year, it decided not only to celebrate, but to ‘give back’ by getting into the heritage business.

On Thursday 9th of March last year a life-size bronze statue of Brenda Fassie was unveiled outside the Bassline Club in Newtown, Joburg. Well, Brenda wasn’t a big man, and she’s not on a horse. Still, there’s no getting away from it: she is a figurative statue and she’s cast in bronze. Inspired by Jose Soberon Villa’s bronzes of John Lennon on a park bench and Ernest Hemingway propping up a bar – both in Havana – Brenda’s creator Angus Taylor has made an unconventional memorial that is every bit as inviting and playful.

At the time of her death on 9 May 2004, Fassie was this country’s top selling local artist. She may not have been everyone’s idea of a role model, but then, The Sunday Times Heritage Project is not about role models. Brenda Fassie was a stellar newsmaker. Her work is part of this country’s musical and social history, and two years after her death, both her life and her music continue to excite emotion and curiosity.

This is why we chose her as our “poster girl” to launch the Sunday Times centenary heritage project.

The Sunday Times turned 100 on 4 February 2006. As part of our centenary celebrations and under the baton of the paper’s editor, Mondli Makhanya, we set out on an ambitious journey across what – for us – was virgin tundra.

My brief was to, in some way, mark the spot where some of the significant news events of “our” century (from 1906) happened while also recognising the remarkable newsmakers who stood at the heart of these actions.

The Schoneberg project, by Renate Stih and Frieder Schnock, consists of 80 small signs. Each sign has an image on one side and text on the other, usually quotations from Nazi laws that limited the freedoms of Jews in the period between 1933 and 1945.

It is only when the viewer reads the images – blonde braids; a clock’s hands set at 7pm – together with the text – eugenics; curfew – that the meaning of these stylised, even pretty, images, becomes clear.

This memorial making was neither grimly explicit

By Charlotte Bauer

The Olive Schreiner memorial by Barbara Wildenboer

The Sunday Times’ decision to commemorate Olive Schreiner’s contribution to the women’s suffrage movement required a different approach to the “event-linked-to-a-location” yardstick that we set for ourselves in choosing most of our other sites and stories. We believed that while Schreiner’s contribution as one of South Africa’s finest writers is widely acknowledged, far less well known was her participation in the movement to give women the vote. Her book Woman and Labour, published in 1911, was acclaimed internationally and regarded as a bible of the women’s suffrage movement. Schreiner argued that the vote was “a weapon by which the weak may be able to defend themselves against the strong, the poor against the rich”. In the light of this, it is not surprising that she objected to the decision of the Cape Women’s Enfranchisement League (of which she was a member for several years) to campaign for the right of only white women to vote.

What led us to the Main Road, Kalk Bay location was our discovery that a meeting of the Women’s Enfranchisement League was held at the English Church Schoolroom in March 1913 which used to stand opposite the Anglican Church in Kalk Bay. There is nothing to mark the demise of this old stone building which is now a parking lot. In the photograph artist Barbara Wildenboer puts finishing touches to the memorial.
men horses

The Brenda Fassie statue by Angus Taylor
outside the Bassline in Newtown, Johannesburg.
The Teboho Tsietsi Mashinini memorial by Johannes Phokela

opposite Morris Isaacson High School in Mputhi Street, central western Jabavu, Soweto.
Enoch Mgijima and the Bulhoek Massacre memorial by Mgcineni Sobopha

between the N6 and the R392 at Queenstown, Eastern Cape, was unveiled on 22 April 2007.

The Mannenberg memorial by Francois Venter and Mark O'Donovan

The memorial whose chief “protagonists” is a song. Or more aptly, the marabi-meets-cape-jazz composition that became a beloved anthem of hope and resistance, called Mannenberg. Composed by Abdullah Ibrahim, Mannenberg was recorded here, at the UCA studios, by Mgcineni Sobopha. Composed by Abdullah Ibrahim, Mannenberg was recorded here, at the UCA studios, by Mgcineni Sobopha.

Finding Philip Kgosana, however, was – is – not the end of the story. At the time of writing, we are still battling to get permission from all parties (in this case, political and personal) to set a memorial in Langa.

Of all the sources – original and archival – consulted in pursuit of fleshing out our research, the one source we hardly used at all was The Sunday Times. So, we have the story plaques, on or alongside the site with the company contracted to commission the artists for the memorial sites. On approaching Langa circle our researcher decided that, seeing as she was so obviously not from the area, the best thing to do was to admit her total ignorance and ask the first elderly people she could see sitting at the shops that surround the circle whether they knew anyone who remembered the march in 1960.

The grey-haired man she approached responded enthusiastically. He had been there and he confirmed that the marchers had gathered for the march into the city at that site. Mr Mngqibisa, as he introduced himself, also told us that the former leader of the PAC, Clarence Masewu, (Mmlami Masewu as he prefers to be known) had been actively involved in the politics of the day and offered to set up a meeting with him.

Another early PAC activist joined our conversation, and we discovered that Mr Sakauli had spent years on Robben Island for his part in the Pogo (an armed offshoot of the PAC) uprising in Mbkweni near Paarl in 1962.

During our interview with Masewu at his home in Fis Hoek, we realised that he himself had not been part of the march because he had been detained by police during the protests that brought Cape Town to a standstill in the week after the Sharpeville shooting on 21 March leading up to the 30 March Langa march. He also could offer us no information about reaching Philip Kgosana.

In looking for further information about oral history sources at the UCT African Studies Library, our researcher discovered a student video which proved that Kgosana had returned to South Africa and had been interviewed about the march in recent years.

While watching the credits regarding which students had made the video, our researcher recognised a name – a friend of her partner’s. A phone call to him confirmed that Kgosana was indeed alive and well and living in Pretoria and we eventually were given a phone number for him.

And so one warm winter’s afternoon last July, Valentine and I finally caught up with Philip Kgosana. We met him in the lounge of a Pretoria hotel and drank tea while he told us the story of that day – and of what happened next – in his words. It was mesmerising.

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For instance, in 1947 – around the time one of our story characters, the painter George Pemba, was coming to terms with the loss of his friend and mentor Gerard Sekoto, who had fled to Paris, The Sunday Times’ art critic du jour HE Winder wrote: “There is a disturbing new trend to take black art seriously.”

So, we have the story plaques, on or alongside each artwork which briefly describes the action; the plaque text is as short, sharp and adjective-free as a newspaper story is to hook the viewer by making the historic news event one source we hardly used at all was The Sunday Times. Since 1906 The Sunday Times has called itself “the paper for the people”, but this catchy slogan rather depended on who “the people” were at the time.

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being that their artworks be made as time-proof, weather proof and people proof as possible.

The sites themselves are obviously a big part of the story. Across four provinces, they include a railway station (Raymond Mhlaba), a mosque (Mohandas Gandhi), several schools (Bessie Head, Alan Paton), courts (Duma Nokwe, Nontetha Nkwenkwe), a boxing stadium (Happy Boy Mxgaji) and two beachfronts (Ingrid Jonker; Eastern Beach).

The great thing about the sites is that they are all freely accessible and visible to the public. It would be antithetical to the spirit of this project to close off the memorials to free public view. Indeed many of the artworks invite the viewer to touch them or sit on them (Cissie Gool; Race Classification). They are meant to look approachable.

The not-so-great thing is that we have had several cases of vandalism. The Gandhi memorial outside the Hamidia Mosque in Fordsburg was vandalised twice. Our memorial to Enoch Mgijima and the Bulhoek Massacre was vandalised shortly after its unveiling, though in this case the church community which has taken ownership of this piece found the vandals within days and handed them over to the police. We are currently repairing this memorial.

As journalists it is our democratic right to publish what we like under law in our newspaper each Sunday. But it is our privilege to build memorials on the streets of South Africa.

It probably goes without saying that getting the necessary permission, buy-in and blessings to erect 40 public memorials across the country is a massive yet delicate undertaking.

Temperamentally, journalists tend to have low boredom thresholds. Our jobs require us to work accurately, yet as quickly as possible. Final decisions are made by one person – the editor. Deadlines are sacred. Pressure is our friend.

Government departments and committees tend to have high pain thresholds. Their jobs require them to work accurately, even when that means quite slowly. Final decisions are seldom made by one person. Reaching consensus can be like waiting for Godot, but consensus is the oft-stated aim. Due process is their friend.

I believe the mutual learning curves and resultant chemistry between these two personality types have served the project very well.

Of course we started blind, with no idea about the reach, complexity and number of roads and relationships we would need to travel, the caravans of consultation, negotiation, form-filling, pitching and pleading that would be required to put up even one memorial. Actually, we don’t plead: there are-
literally hundreds of stakeholders on this project in progress and their blessings – be they of the rubber-stamp kind, the political kind or the personal kind – are essential to the successful installation of any and all of our memorials. For the most part the officials we’ve met have liked the project and have taken great pains to help us make it happen in their neck of the woods.

Ethically speaking we decided that without the support of this project’s first ring of custodians – the families, and some of our chief characters (Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Bruce Fordyce, Abdullah Ibrahim) who are still living – we would not proceed.

We do not change or censor the angles of our narrative memorials to accommodate the agendas of particular interest groups, but we have walked away from a couple. And one was a close call. There may be more in future.

After protracted though polite discussions with members of the Rand Club in Johannesburg, they voted against allowing us to install a mosaic-ed “painting” on their Commissioner Street side façade about the mining magnate Lionel Phillips.

We also walked away from a story we were developing about James Mpanza who, depending on one’s point of view, was a Godfather-like thug and/or a champion of the poor and landless in early Soweto. In 1944 Mpanza, a convicted murderer with a bit of a Messiah complex, seized a tract of vacant municipal ground and settled thousands of landless people there. A keen horseman, Mpanza and his men helped Soweto’s first squatters to erect temporary shelters – then galloped round charging them rent. To this day he is seen by some as the Father of Soweto and by others as a dodgy figure whose “disciples” later formed the Sofasonke Party which was seen as a stooge of the apartheid government.

Many people still ask us why we’ve left Mpanza out of our project. Simply put, we were informed by local ward councilors after meetings with the stakeholder community that anything we put up was liable to be dismantled. More than 60 years later, the most straightforward account of Mpanza’s historic actions remains “too hot for dialogue”.

But our most politically and technically challenging site to date remains our ongoing attempt to erect a memorial marking the deaths in detention which occurred at John Vorster Square police station in downtown Joburg. Between the early 70s and 1996, seven men died there while in the custody of the security police on the 10th floor of the building. Some were tortured, others “jumped” or “fell” out of the window of the interrogation room. Today the station has been transformed into Johannesburg Central Police Station and the bust of then prime minister John Vorster has been removed to the police museum.

Hundreds of ordinary men and women work here now. Many of them were children or not yet born when apartheid made the law unto itself. A building that was once a symbol of fear for many law-abiding citizens now pledges to serve and protect those same people’s rights.

How might we mark the terrible things that once happened within the station’s precincts without offending and upsetting those who work there now by association? How to do it without sanitising the facts? It gave us – and the artist – sleepless nights.

The artist on this story, Kagiso Pat Mautloa, came up with a powerful first concept – four huge metal cut-outs of the human body that would “fall” down the outside wall of the police station. It was rejected by all stakeholders – including the Sunday Times – though with varying degrees of reluctance. Mautloa’s second concept was considered by us to be too sentimental – though I don’t blame him for overcompensating this time.

Six months after Mautloa submitted his third concept, it has been approved by the South African Police Service’s national office and other vital city stakeholders. It is a 10-ton rock, sourced in Mpumalanga, which will be mounted on a concrete plinth and bound with wire. It variously suggests resilience, confinement and strength. The story on the plaque will remain as it was.

After all that, we were told we still needed to comply with the Johannesburg Roads’ Agency’s Wayleave rules for anything that requires drilling beneath street level to a depth of more than 50cm. This involved seeking individual permission from each of the following service providers whose pipes run beneath our site: Telkom, Eskom, Rand Water Board, Sasol, City Power, Egoli Gas and City Parks.

As I write this – in July 2007 – this memorial is in the process of being installed outside Johannesburg Central Police Station.

In choosing 40 memorials to show and tell we are of course inviting criticism, especially concerning the many, many significant events and amazing people we have left out.

The Sunday Times heritage project makes no claim to be definitive. The stories and people we have chosen to commemorate are not the only ones; our way is not the only way. But we have made a start. This is our contribution to “storytelling” our heritage, one we’ll document through our website (www.sundaytimes.co.za/heritage) and through the memorials still to go up.

Race Classification Board memorial by Roderick Sauls

Remembering the effects of the Race Classification Board outside the High Court Annex in Queen Victoria Street, Cape Town.