

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

MALCOM PURKEY

Interviewed by: Dan Whitman

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[Note: This interview was not edited by Mr. Purkey.]

Q: Mr. Purkey, former actor...

PURKEY: Very briefly an actor, then I was in a theater company. I spent 20 years as an academic at Witwatersrand [Wits] University starting in 1983, teaching until 2004. Now I have been a director back in theater for the last five years.

Q: I just spoke with David Coplan and he talked about the Shae.

PURKEY: I did five years of special projects, and I decided not to write any more plays or stories about South Africa. I chose to do Shakespeare in a sense of present tense that could make you want to hear the story and laugh throughout the story.

Q: How did you do that?

PURKEY: In part, by looking at Barton, the great theorists. By looking carefully at how Iambic Pentameter works. By telling my students until they were blue in the face on how to make the sonnets work so other people who never knew them could hear them, a very hard exercise. Mostly black and white students with the work being done in English.

Q: What plays did you do?

PURKEY: Romeo and Juliet, 12th Light, the Tempest.

Q: Where do you come from?

PURKEY: My grandfather came from the middle of Poland, and until I knew that I couldn't stand Polish people. So Eastern European Jewish, I was born in South Africa in 1961. I am a patriotic South African, which is odd because I have a complicated relationship with Britain, a deep relationship with secular Jewish ideals and I think you have to earn your right to say you're an African. I engaged in the fight for freedom in this country whether it was through film, or in my own way. I went to primary school, all white, girls and boys. I went to a high school, all white males. It was a complicated class, I was in the middle somewhere. I witnessed gang warfare all around me. I had one or two

great teachers, and I think, because it was a private school, I've always taken great pleasure in the side gaps. I hate over regulated societies, Britain for example.

Q: Gaps?

PURKEY: Areas where you could exercise personal understanding of action. It was possible during gritty times in my schooling. In the early 70's they were arresting people throughout the streets.

Q: Tell me what got you to the streets.

PURKEY: I guess what got me to the streets were my parents, they were from Britain which meant they were liberal, of course now I would consider it liberal conservative. They gave me enough space to find myself at odds with some other kids from schools. I remember in 1961 when Jon Harris was hung and I saw the students at my school cheering and celebrating.

Q: What was it that got you into a different intellectual direction?

PURKEY: My parents were committed to democracy, they were committed to freedom but felt the state was going to come and get them.

Q: When did your brain itself kick in?

PURKEY: In 1960, my father lost his job. So we were returning to Britain and I just didn't integrate well, I was of different origin and different culture and different dialect.

Q: There was a suspicion of white South Africans in Europe at this point.

PURKEY: Of course, but even if there wasn't, they would have marked you straight away.

Q: Was there already, at that time, an ethical political approval of South Africa?

PURKEY: Yes, many people who traveled as often as I did would act like they were from somewhere else, Australia for example, but I never did. I'm a South African and I was trying to do something about it in my head.

Q: When did you come back?

PURKEY: I only left for a year, dropped out of university in Britain and then came back.

Q: Your parents were where at that time?

PURKEY: They were living in South Africa. When I went to Britain and found out how marked I was, I came back freaked out and then decided to go back. My mentor at the

time was neither African nor European, so we had the both and the none. I learned that this experience of going to university was a time to invent yourself. I was trying to create my own identity. When I went back, I met many people who became comrades in artist's arms. We realized that art was important to the struggle, so we started making anti-apartheid plays. We wanted to make them funny, we wanted to make them moving and keep the message simple. I wrote a play about what happens when you finally reach your goal. You find out that the journey is all and the end delivers nothing. Sort of a T. S. Eliot idea. The fulfillment of status is a strange kind of activeness. At university I became more directly active, what happens next is I get a chance to build the Box Theater on campus with architects.

Q: So these were actual physical spaces on campus?

PURKEY: Yes, transformed spaces. I wrote some plays that came to the attention of professors so we started groups, then got more people interested in the theater. By 1976, we established a company and are getting ready to show our first play. We had the hold left wing outside protesting, the cops were shooting us with tear gas. The cops invaded campus, whether it be that night or within the next the year, they were always there. We were always faced in culture with the quest in, if we make art and culture, is that enough or should we take it to the streets? I was never sure of the answer so I came to the conclusion that we'll write the plays because we like to, and the rest we'll let history decide. History will be the judge. Were the plays useful? Of course they were, they add to the history, they created new traditions, and they even showed a way in which to create a separate identity.

Q: The plays were not only fun but they were an instrument for social change.

PURKEY: Yes, but Barney Simon and I thought it wasn't that we were changing people's way. We just needed to light the fire that was inside people's heart. Of course there was a debate about what debate you should appeal to or how you should do but we always got along.

Q: You were not a founder?

PURKEY: I was with my own company I built as a student in the senior year. I was too busy doing other things to worrying about my school work. I was close with Barney and Manny Madam, both of them taught me everything I know about arts administration. Barney taught me about the mysterious notions of storytelling, so between the two of them I had all the aspect covered. Of course there was another company called "Workshop 71" that had a completely different ideology on how to communicate to the masses. I tend to love theater first and then struggle second, some thought it was the other way around. I don't know what to do but I have the passion to do so, we'll find out if it's worth something.

In the mid-70's I managed to get my degree and I had a few plays that caused a stir. They made a mark and I got regarded as a director with passion. I wanted to do tragedies, I

studied Lenin, Oscar Wild, and James Joyce, and so by accident I knew about most of the characters. I also knew a little about philosophy so I did it upstairs in the small theater and it was the first sellout.

In 1978, while I was winning an award for that play, I had my Fulbright.

Q: How did you get involved with Fulbright?

PURKEY: I always saw American advertisements for it and for people to go to America. I had people knocking on my door asking me to go because they anticipated that I was going to become something important. Well not important enough as I wasn't awarded a full Fulbright, I was what they called a placement. I needed to find a school to give me a stipend. One option was Texas, and the other was upstate New York. I chose New York to be closer to the city. I stayed through 1979 and directed at the New York Playhouse a few times.

Q: How did the theater department strike you?

PURKEY: It wasn't the kind of place people choose to go first. I would have loved to be in NYU in the middle of the city and of course Yale was nice. But, I was meant to do seven courses, I did 11. They allowed me to direct, so we did 21 different plays. I was lead role in multiple plays.

Q: What did the Binghamton experience do for you?

PURKEY: I never had formal training in theater, I always taught myself. So it was nice to learn some of those fundamentals of the theater industry. I love New York, I've been back and forth many times, I have a nice relationship with NYU now, and we created a school back in South Africa.

Q: What is the value of having NYU students come to South Africa for the human race?

PURKEY: I think South Africans have always suffered from a colonial cringe, we under value what we are, who we are, what we've done. So to have these students, has been so beneficial to both the NYU students and the underprivileged South African students. Americans come here and it's sometimes complicated, I do a short course because they hear it and don't have to worry about the grades as much while visiting educational sites and tourist's sites alike. I think American students position themselves in the world as clients, they pay a fortune, and they expect to get what they want. They are very demanding, some anxieties play out through the stomach. It's just an observation, maybe a bit of generalizing. Part of my teaching is exposing students to a very diverse experience, so this trip to South Africa can bring nothing but a great educational experience.

Q: Something brought you back to NYU in 1983?

PURKEY: Yes, I was working in film before hand and I hated it. The conditions of work were terrible. My place should have been as a director or writer, but then I got a chance to teach so I took that. I preferred to be in an academic environment.

Q: But you either sustained or went back to an American context.

PURKEY: In 1988, we toured America, we played in Oakland, St. Paul, Chicago, and Long Island. We had a nice extensive tour of the United States. I think I went back in 1991 for a conference and I'm sure I went back off and on visiting friends or whatever. In 2000, the Dean of NYU, Mary Campbell was going to come to Cape Town for a visit, and I said you better come to Johannesburg as well. They came and I showed them around to better our relationship. We all had a great time and I was able to convey a great message about South Africa.

Q: The role of arts and theater in general, you said history.

PURKEY: History played a small but useful part. How were people in those huge numbers in the street? They saw plays through the 60s, 70s, and 80s that showed the need for change.

Q: The distinction between human expression and social change is blurred?

PURKEY: The reason we had it is because the oppression was so obvious. Part of that struggle was culture, not in theater but in every garage, town hall, school building, etc.

Q: What were your peers able to provide to you personally?

PURKEY: Being in America gives you a sense of the diversity of culture expression that's possible. The sense of the form can be a challenge. Our theater was designed to break a colonial mold. We were trying to advance the notion that change can be accomplished without the help of the United States and Britain. Making your own work about your own identity is an act of anti-colonial struggle.

End of interview