

# Newspaperman Deon du Plessis's legacy finds a lasting place under the Sun

KEVIN RITCHIE

DEON du Plessis, who died at the weekend, was a larger than life figure. He was also a paradox.

A giant former body builder with an appetite for good company fuelled by copious amounts of liquor, he was also a private and shy person.

He had a coarse turn of phrase, yet chose his quips with the care of a Winston Churchill, of whom he was a great admirer.

Du Plessis will be remembered for creating South Africa's highest ever selling daily newspaper, the Daily Sun, nine years ago. He had initially conceptualised such a tabloid while he was the inaugural managing director of Independent Newspapers Gauteng, a subsidiary of Independent News and Media

SA. During this tenure he oversaw the launch of the Sunday Independent and Business Report.

Du Plessis left Independent and, after being admitted to hospital for a triple bypass, went to Media 24, who partnered with him in the launch of the Daily Sun.

Known at Media Park, News 24's Auckland Park head office, as "the man in the blue overalls", the Daily Sun's success set teeth on edge, especially among people in academic and intellectual circles.

Du Plessis was undeterred by the criticism and noted that many of its readers had not previously read newspapers and pointed out the good the paper had done in sorting out readers' problems.

His launch of Nova in 2005 was an abject failure. Aimed at convert-

ing Joburg's "high-income, non-newspaper reading metro people to a regular newspaper-reading habit", Media 24 closed it less than five months after its launch.

His launch of the Sunday Sun was far more successful.

Du Plessis had a successful career at Argus Newspapers, working in the group's offices in Durban, Cape Town, Joburg and Pretoria.

He joined The Star as an 18-year-old cub reporter fresh from national service. He won the Ollemans Trophy for the best cadet on the Argus course of that year, but it was as an Africa correspondent in the group's erstwhile Argus Africa News Service (AANS) that he made his name.

He reported on the independence and subsequent wars in Angola and Mozambique and on the transition

to democracy in Zimbabwe, where he was the group's bureau chief.

On his return to South Africa, Du Plessis narrowly avoided being jailed under the Official Secrets Act for a manuscript he had written on South Africa's illegal arms supplies to the then Rhodesia. He was detained and then prosecuted in a secret trial.

Du Plessis emerged to become deputy editor of AANS, before accepting a position in Durban as assistant editor on the Sunday Tribune. A series of increasingly senior editorial positions followed: assistant editor of the Pretoria News and deputy editor of the Argus in Cape Town, before he returned to Joburg to become managing editor at Sowetan.

After a two-year spell there, he was offered the editorship of the

Pretoria News, long a springboard to editing one of the top three titles in the group.

About three years later a controlling interest in the Argus company was sold to Irishman Tony O'Reilly. He took a shine to Du Plessis, promoting him over more senior colleagues to become one of three regional managing directors, a consequence of which was the resignation of The Star's editor-in-chief, Richard Steyn.

Du Plessis went on to create an operating unit that stretched from Pretoria to Kimberley.

Du Plessis would often open the bar and hold court in his Sauer Street office before moving the impromptu party to dinner at his Houghton home. Guests were once treated to him singing *Eky bly n'Blou*

to the accompaniment of Steve Hofmeyr's CD as he impaled a bread roll on a cavalry sword, while his bodyguard brought in the main course with his pistol peeking from beneath his apron.

His parties were the stuff of legend, as was his love for military history and martial verse.

He once recited Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade* to a Pretoria News team on their way to Holland to see a new editorial publishing system.

On another occasion he flew the company's clients to Magersfontein, the site of one of the British Army's worst defeats during the Anglo-Boer War, for a function.

He never lost that love of military history. On Friday he wrote a blog about

his three-month sabbatical from Media 24. He said he would go to Portugal to sharpen up his Portuguese he had learnt in Angola and Mozambique and follow in the footsteps of the "Duke of Wellington as he kicked the French out of Portugal in the early 1800s.

"That, I prophesy, will lead me to the bigger battlefields of the same Peninsula campaign in Spain... Then I will probably go to Cadiz because it sounds romantic and I want to hear the Atlantic crashing on the sea-walls..."

Instead, he died at home on Sunday of acute bronchitis.

Du Plessis is survived by his wife Vanessa, daughter Danielle, son-in-law Neels and two grandchildren.

● Kevin Ritchie is the managing editor of the Saturday Star.

# Giving back is not black and white

What South Africa needs is the fostering of a culture of building communities for the good of all, writes Solly Moeng

I HAVE followed with much interest and, often, trepidation the reaction to Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu's suggestion of a special tax on white South Africans for their having benefited from apartheid. I do not agree with many of the reasons advanced for rejecting this proposal, especially those from people who love the man when he castigates the ANC and the government, but who suddenly find the racist in him when he attempts to address matters that they would rather were kept hidden under the dirty, smelly carpet of our history.

But I, too, disagree with the archbishop's suggestion. My reasons are different. Selecting white people who benefited directly from the undesired, artificial cushion that apartheid placed around white people in general – often at the expense of black people in general – will not be easy. Will there be a special clause protecting white people such as Ronnie Kasrils, who went into exile, or others who left the country for England, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and other places, only to return after the unbanning of anti-apartheid movements and the release of former political prisoners? Or would this be a blanket tax levied on people simply because they happen to be white? What about white people who immigrated to this country after the fall of apartheid and have taken up South African citizenship?

It would be very hard to monitor. And I do not think that making this "reparation drive" seem punitive so many years after 1994 is the right way to go.

There are thousands of white South Africans who are quietly and privately going about the business of "giving back" in this country. We seldom, if ever, read about them in newspapers and their names never get taken forward for the plethora of community builder awards.

They adopt – often not formally but through their deeds and regular



WHEEL TURNS: The Hout Bay Imizamo Yethu Cycle Club represents just one example of the many white South Africans quietly giving back to this country, argues the writer (back row right).

contributions – children in difficult conditions, pay their school fees, introduce them to sports, the arts and travel, give them sponsored membership to libraries, and so on, without making a lot of noise about it. Should they also be made to pay? Who would be the judge of what constitutes sufficient reparation?

A few months ago I accepted a long-standing invitation to join an old friend – a white South African – and his fellow cyclists from the Hout Bay Cycle Club (soon to be known as Hout Bay Imizamo Yethu Cycle Club) on a Saturday morning ride. Almost four months after I went on that first ride, my Saturday mornings have changed; they are now

reserved for cycling with this group.

I have been deeply touched by the acts of my friend and his other friends, all white South Africans. An Englishman and a Swiss man and his young son, also residents of Hout Bay, have since joined the "development club" and are happy to contribute in whatever way they can. All these people are happily married with families; they have no reason to escape their families late on Tuesday afternoons and Saturday mornings. Between them, with a little help from private donors, they have bought bicycles and other cycling gear, and have found a shed in which to keep them safely. A Dutch company with interests in

South Africa donates the cycling attire for the boys.

So, twice a week they take out a group of up to 20 boys aged between 12 and 18 on rides around the peninsula. The faster of these boys, Group A, often take longer and harder routes, leaving the young ones, Group B, to be chaperoned by us. Some also took part in the annual Cape Argus Pick n Pay Cycle Tour for the first time last year, and take part in other road bike events, including the most recent Tour de Worcester in the Boland.

Again, these are white South Africans who, without being pushed to do so, have gone out of their way to use personal time, energy and

resources to give back to those who have less or, in many cases, nothing. They give selflessly without asking for anything in return. There is no doubt in my mind that there are many other such people around the country. While these South Africans come from all backgrounds, many of them are white, the same white people we find easier to generalise about and to put down as doing nothing to help rebuild this country.

This piece is not meant to make a naive claim in defence of all white people. I am a frequent witness to the existence of many white South Africans who still refuse to acknowledge that apartheid was wrong or that it did lasting damage to all of

us. Many such white people are of the view that "apartheid ended in 1994 and black people need to move on because they're now in power". This piece is not about that group.

I have, over the past number of years, been invited to sit on trusts, committees and boards of non-profit organisations founded by enthusiastic individuals who are driven to help others get out of all forms of hopeless situations. From the Zip Zap Circus School, the Old Mutual Two Oceans Marathon charities, Bob Skinstad's Bob for Good organisation that donates much-needed new school shoes to children in poor communities, to the erstwhile Kids with HIV Foundation and, a few

months ago, a group of local motorbike clubs that get together every year to collect stationery for schools and crèches in places like Kensington. These are mostly coloured bikers and were supported by Mzoli Ngawuzela, owner of the famous Mzoli's eatery in Gugulethu. I have met ordinary people doing extraordinary things, people who are little celebrated in the opinion pages of our dailies. Perhaps it is safe to say that South African white people are like moving targets: for every one of them who is negative about everything in the new order, there's another who is a community builder because it's the right thing to do.

There is no doubt that it is still helpful and necessary to continue unpacking and addressing the root causes of the things that continue to divide us, but it is also important to stop from time to time to remind ourselves that not all is black or white or yellow in our confused maze of social issues. There are many *nouveau riche* black people who do not give a cent to charity and there are many white people who give to support the less fortunate.

What South Africa needs is the fostering of a voluntary culture of building communities for the good of all of us. Those who have more, irrespective of their background, must be encouraged, perhaps incentivised, to share willingly, not under the threat of a whip in the form of punitive taxes.

Let us stop a bit more often to acknowledge the many silent builders of bridges between our communities for a better Cape Town and South Africa. There are hundreds of them among us, perhaps even wondering if we, regular contributors to the opinion pages of newspapers and radio talk shows, live in the same world as they do. Many of us argue while they get on with the job.

● Solly Moeng is a brand management consultant and social commentator in Cape Town.

I OFTEN have the feeling I'm missing something vital when I read newspaper stories. I was puzzled, for example, to read that the teachers' union had objected to exam markers having to pass a competency test.

If they want exam papers to be marked only by incompetent people, they must have a sound reason, I guess. I just wonder what it is.

But what I do object to is the idea that they'd even consider refusing to mark this year's matric exam papers.

Their argument appears to be with the education department, not the pupils. So why should they want to punish the pupils?

As I say, I'm sure I've missed part of the story somewhere along the line, but as I read it, this comes pretty close to hostage taking.

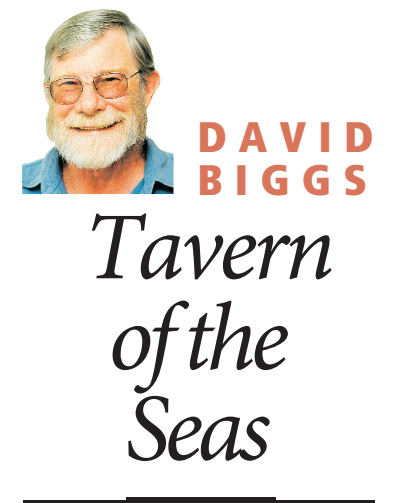
They're holding a gun to the pupils' heads and saying to the authorities: "Unless you agree to our terms we're going to blow away a year of these kids' lives."

By not marking matric papers, the teachers will prevent many school leavers from applying for places at universities and other tertiary education institutions.

What have the pupils done to deserve that? It's hard enough to get a job, even with qualifications. Deny them the chance to qualify and they're destined to end up begging in car parks. Is that what teachers really want?

## Stepping up

Talking of begging in car parks, I've recently heard two success stories about immigrants who have managed to pull themselves up from the



DAVID BIGGS  
*Tavern of the Seas*

car guard brigade into useful employment.

In a local produce market I met a man who was selling container plants. He made attractive wooden boxes, varnished them and filled them with herbs and flowers.

Originally from Malawi, he spends his days making the boxes, growing seedling plants and making rich compost for them from kitchen waste.

Once a week he displays them at a market and makes a reasonable living from sales.

Without demanding a "job" or asking for hand-outs, he's managed to establish himself as an independent businessman.

Another man, this time from Congo, was working as a car guard in the northern suburbs. Unlike the other car guards, he seemed to want to do more than wave a languid arm and hold out a hand for cash. He offered to carry bags, opened car doors and made himself useful. He

became popular with local shopkeepers.

A customer asked him where he came from and what he had done before.

It turned out he was a qualified electrician back in Congo, but couldn't find a position here because his qualifications were not recognised in South Africa, so he was doing the best he could in the car park. Pretty soon he was snapped up by a local builder who is sending him to Tech to get his papers in order.

In both cases the underlying factor was a willingness to work hard, rather than wait for hand-outs.

I wish we saw more cases like these. My guess is there's a whole treasure trove of imported skills out there waiting to be grabbed.

## Last laugh

Joe was recovering from day surgery when a nurse asked him how he was feeling.

"I'm okay," he said, "but I really didn't like the four-letter word the doctor used during my surgery," he answered.

"What did he say," asked the nurse.

"He said: 'Oops!'"

*The Wanderer*

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# Legal victory will have deadly implications

FOR ALL the right reasons we ended up with a horribly wrong outcome in Cape Town on Friday.

Judge Nathan Erasmus's judgment in what has become known as the Dräger case has made our roads less safe in the short term. That much is undeniable, in spite of Transport MEC Robin Carlisle's almost desperate optimism to the contrary.

I sensed a white back that we were finally starting to win the battle against drunk driving in our city.

Police roadblocks were more prominent, friends passed on horror stories of nights in jail, "designated drivers" became commonplace and company functions started to offer taxis. We had a long way to go but at least we were travelling in the right direction.

Now this. The key breathalyser tool is not legally valid as currently applied and all pending Dräger-based cases must be dropped. Some guilty people are going to get off scot-free.

Some are hailing this as a victory for due process, individual justice, the rule of law, holding the state to account for the validity of its actions and other worthy causes, but the practical implications, in the very real world of the Cape's roads, are catastrophic.

The cops will be disheartened and some idiots will once again be emboldened to hit the road when they shouldn't. It is probable that people will die in accidents because



MIKE WILLS  
*Open Mike*

of this ruling. Not that the judge is in any way to blame for that. He must rule only in accordance with the law and the facts of the case presented to him in court, and he found accordingly. He was clearly aware of the potentially damaging consequences of his judgment – he ruled that the Dräger device was constitutional and gave the state clear guidance on how to ensure that the machine could be used in future – but felt compelled to chuck out the case before him.

So who can we find fault with in all of this? The high-powered pro bono lawyers who took on the test case of Clifford Hendricks? Sometimes I do worry about clever legal eagles running rings around underpaid and outclassed prosecutors, but in this instance the vastly experienced Billy Downer was the man

in the ring for the state.

I also fret about unrealistic expectations on the cops as Johnnie Cochran wannabes demand 100 percent certainty in evidence and completely faultless process at every crime scene. These bullying lawyers specialise in putting the witnesses on trial rather than the accused. They're not establishing their client's innocence (often because they have none), they're demolishing the State's case with that playground shout of "prove it, prove it".

But, once again, this was not one of those instances. Judge Erasmus's ruling wasn't based on a single technicality or one flawed procedure. He found a disturbingly long shopping list of irregularities. There was simply too much going wrong with our breathalyser tests for it to be overlooked in the obvious greater good of safer roads.

So where to now?

Even with a fast-track process it's going to take a while to get the breathalysers back into action, not least because the cops will require very specific training to ensure proper use of the equipment.

That leaves blood tests and, as forensic expert David Klatzow will tell you at length if you give him half a gap, the laboratories aren't capable of handling their current load efficiently, let alone an extra burden on top. Eighteen months to get a result, if you're lucky, does not compare to the instant outcome of the Dräger.

Paul Hoffman, the prominent senior counsel who regularly fulminates in print against the inadequacies of the state, was among Hendricks's lawyers and said, after the result, that the state must ensure that the laboratories are "jacked up".

That's easier said than done and, once again, is no quick fix. National and provincial government lines get crossed here and, maybe Hoffman hasn't noticed, there are plenty of other areas within the state screaming for money and urgent action.

So that leaves us with a nasty interregnum while Carlisle and the DPP try to implement Judge Erasmus's recommendations in a way that will prove legally robust enough for the next challenge.

It's imperative that they do get it right, and fast.

One of the more insidious e-mails I receive each year around Christmas is an anonymous round robin providing detailed guidance on what to do if you are pulled over for drunk driving. It's a comprehensive guide on how to cheat the system by stalling and challenging every procedure and undermining any evidence right from the start.

The amoral people responsible for it will feel vindicated by the outcome of the Hendricks case. I expect a "we told you so" e-mail any day now.

I deeply want their triumph to be short-lived.