

EDITORIAL

Mandela, Miss Daisy & that chauffeur

by Kwame Dawes

On Tuesday night I took an evening off to see *Driving Miss Daisy*, a well crafted and movingly acted film that seamlessly knits together the themes of ageing, friendship and inter-racial relationships in the Southern States of America. The film is a powerful piece of drama that gently but effectively dealt with an issue that has become topical today. In one of the many scenes depicting the tall black chauffeur driving around an old, sweetly cranky Southern Jewish woman, the black man describes with painful detail the tragic lynching of the father of his good friend by some white "crackers". The retelling is marked by a bitterness which never explodes but seethes. The black man knows that his account is disturbing the white woman yet he still tells the story. They continue driving in silence. In that short scene we understand that the black man is aware of his history and it is a history that could lead to an aggression rooted in the desire for revenge. Yet, the film shows that these two people can live together, grow to love and respect each other and in the process transcend the bitterness of a history filled with animosity and strife. The potential for such reconciliation is captured in a speech by Martin Luther King Jr which is used in the film. In the speech he admonishes the inactive: those who remain apathetic to the injustices of society; those who silently watch while others suffer and struggle; not the cruel or the aggressive but the passive; he admonishes them to take a stand. He declares that if change does not come it is they who will ultimately be responsible.

I watched the film and contemplated its statement in the light of the recent developments in South Africa. Indeed, the release of Mandela has revived attention on South African politics, but this time, with the liberation of the black population seeming more imminent many are speculating as to how the blacks will treat the whites when freedom does come. The fear is that the blacks will be so bitter after all their suffering that they will respond in a violent manner. It is a real fear, but is it a valid one?

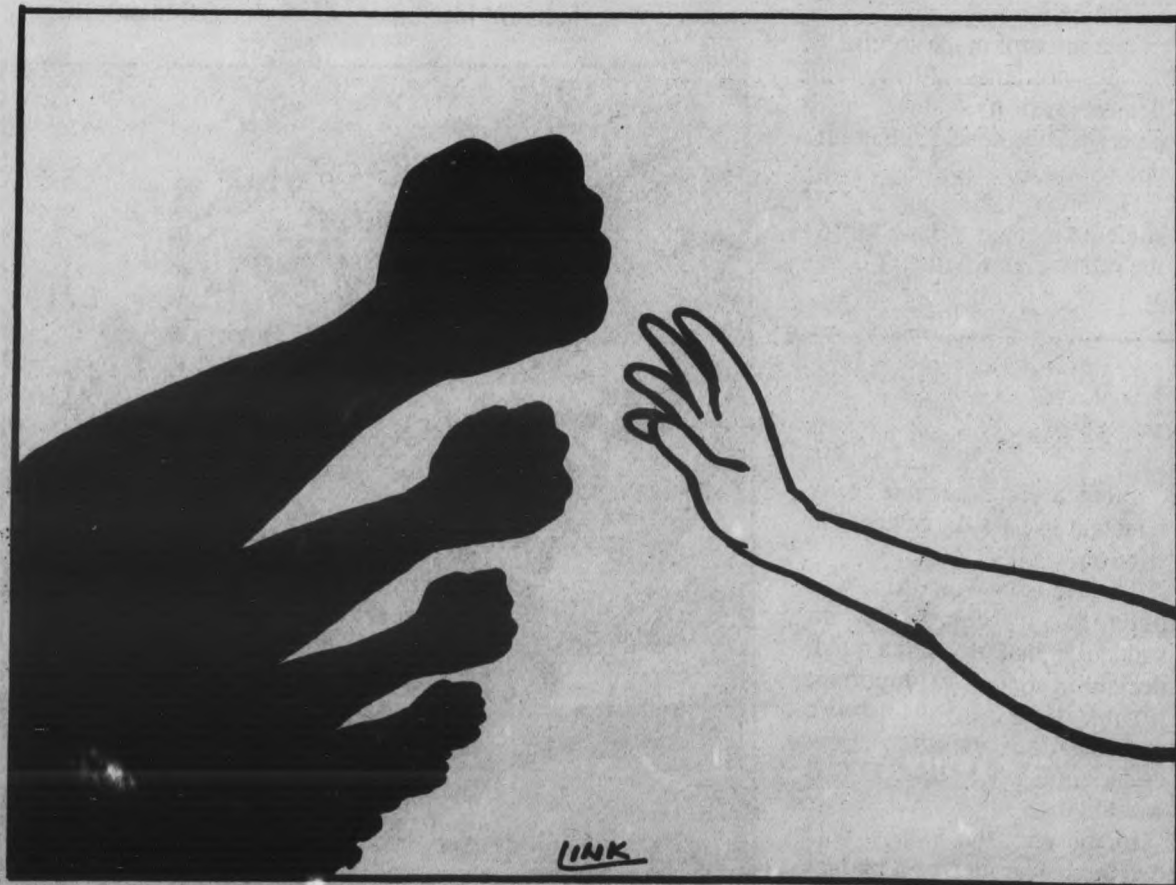
Mandela's 27 years in prison were not easy years. In his mind he was jailed unjustly. He spent 27 years incarcerated because he sought to uphold the principle of equality in his society. He should be bitter, shouldn't he? Yet his remarks since the release have not reflected this. He has been dignified, responsible and void of a vindictive or bitter edge. This does not mean that he has forgotten the pain he endured. What it means is that he has understood the source of the injustice and has committed his energies to challenging the system that has caused such injustice. It is a supremely prudent act that has given dignity to Mandela's stature while introducing the possibility of reconciliation in South Africa.

Mandela like the chauffeur will never forget the lynchings, the bombings, the beatings, the tarring and feathering, the abuse, the enslavement, the brutality that they have seen inflicted on their people. But the memories do not spawn impatience and bloodthirst, but patience and a steadfast commitment to seeing change. The passive whites who now tremble with fear at the prospect of an anti-Boer holocaust, must instead head King's challenge and join those who are seeking change through just and honest means. By trying to understand their neighbours and by being open to the possibility of forgiveness they may be doing more for their country than they could imagine.

Here in Fredericton, we have learnt of a new Anti-Apartheid coalition being formed. The initiative has come as a result of a forum organized by the African Student Union at UNB in which speakers from the South African Democratic Student Association and the African National Congress addressed the issue of grass-root Canadian support for the Anti-Apartheid movement. The response was extremely positive and I understand that a loose steering committee has been struck to lead the way in the formation of the coalition.

If we were to all take stock of the implications of inertia and apathy; if, that is, we were to acknowledge that apathy is an aggressively negative quantity in any struggle for change, perhaps we would see a world that is far more just.

In a local film "A Darker Side" directed by Errol Williams, this dilemma of apathy is given full attention. It adds yet another to the list of those moved into meaningful action by direct confrontation with the cancer called Apartheid. These are all sign posts for me, shibboleths to the tradition of hope in the face of hardship and opposition. I have chosen to allow them to challenge me into action and to hope for change in our world.



The Brunswickan

Canada's oldest official student publication

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The Brunswickan, in its 124th year of publication, is Canada's oldest official student publication. The Brunswickan's offices are located in Rm 35 of the University of New Brunswick's Student Union Building, P.O. Box 4400, College Hill, Fredericton N.B., E3B 5A3. Tel. 453-4983.

The Brunswickan is published by Brunswickan Publishing Inc. and printed with flair by Global Printing & Binding Inc., Fredericton, N.B.

Subscription is \$25 per year. Second class mail is in effect - #8120.

Local Advertising rates are available from The Brunswickan, (506) 453-4983. National advertising rates are available from Youthstream Canada Ltd., 1541 Avenue Road, Suite 203, Toronto, Ont. M5M 3X4, Tel: (416) 787-4911.

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