



What's in a beginning? I studied at Wits from the late 1960s. Despite the worst prognosis offered by a career psychologist on my potential, I am now a senior professor.

*By Keyan G Tomaselli*

The psychologist claimed that I was too stupid to go to varsity, I should be a soldier. He must have read my SADF file. While some exiled themselves to avoid conscription, my tactic was to play stupid doing my nine months' basic. While a Wits student, being among the "sick, lame and lazy", doing office work on Tuesday nights for my regiment, I was pleased to read that I had passed my module in "Pretending to be Stupid 101" with an A.

During these enforced nights at headquarters I would routinely scour the file of a Wits lecturer who was also drafted. I sanitized it of indications of his dissent, unauthorised absences from parades, non-regulation hair length, and the illegal wearing of underpants under the kilt. Ken Jubber, then a junior lecturer in Sociology, was a particular thorn in the side of Transvaal Scottish. He had wanted out of service because, he insisted, he was a communist, and therefore untrustworthy.

Ken told Transvaal Scottish that he had transferred to UCT. He was thus removed from the regimental register requiring his shiny boots and short hair at monthly parades. But one day he was arrested when addressing a Wits protest march on Jan Smuts Ave. The sergeant major's name was eerily spelled like that of a famous fossil skeleton found by Robert Broom at Sterkfontein Cave. He went ballistic when he saw Ken's pic in *The Star*, his sporran flapping about in his own wind. The sergeant major cut out the incriminating evidence and put it in Ken's file. I removed it, as I did all other incriminating evidence against Ken. They never did work out why Ken's file was always so scanty and why they could never nail him.

Ken responds, "That person is now a historical character, like the rest of the characters you refer to in this piece."

My Wits days were the best. Wits was relatively small, and many academics were real characters. A surveying professor, Gordon Lauf, was nicknamed Chalkie as he bore an uncanny resemblance to the Giles comic book character. The Classics professor always wore a flowing black academic gown, while the crusty old Geography professor, Stanley Jackson, riveted students with his animated descriptions about pockets hot of air "going up, going up" (into the atmosphere) – otherwise known as the adiabatic lapse rate. Geology professor TW Gevers, who if I remember correctly had lost a leg, an eye, and half an arm during his many explorations of wildest Africa, would have put present-day *Survivor* contestants to shame. No recovery crews, no medical help, just him and his bewildered students crashing through the forests, the deserts and the mountains. He always lost a few students en route, he told us. Geomorphologist Margaret Marker, who never lost anything, but whose car did hit a sheep, would have given Gevers a run for his money. No insurance or law suits to worry about then.

Man, those were the days of real professors and real students. Not for them the self-absorbed namby-pambies of today's reality TV or the over-taught cellphone-distracted preening sissies who want their lecturers to do their work for them. Student support and teaching aids were in their infancy; only the tough survived into second year; the rest simply voted themselves off the set and deregistered.

One lecturer who criticised a student at the back of the class for not taking notes drew forth the re-tort, "But sir, you are reading directly from page 195 of the textbook. Why do I need to take notes?" An Economics student was manhandled out of the classroom by the professor, who was incensed at his lack of attention. One or two new arrogant professors with very important imported PhDs sometimes used students as proverbial footballs. They'd brutally harangue and harass us students in graduate seminars while they were trying to score points against their colleagues. One professor would routinely drag underperforming students physically by the ear and chuck them out of the department.

Those were the days when professors were professors and could mete out necessary punishments without consequence and turn boys into men and girls into women. We grew up tough and toughed out such professors. Nowadays, now that we are the professors, we are all emasculated by human rights legislation and students who are easily offended. Softly softly we creep around now. Everyone has rights and no-one admits contingent obligations.

After working in the film industry, I returned to the new School of Dramatic Art as a lecturer, then in Lawson's Corner, the one with the revolving restaurant. An irascible historian would hold forth and the construction labourers who were refurbishing the building would recite Shakespeare as the lifts went up and down, up and down as the lifts often would not stop or doors open. "To be or not to be?" was their refrain, offered almost as a chorus. The call and response could be heard going up and down, up and down, whether one was in the lifts with the workers

or waiting on the landings for the lift to stop.

The School of Dramatic Art was exhilarating. I felt like a character in the TV series, *Fame*. The students were extraordinarily creative, even crazy, manic and delightfully unmanageable. They changed Johannesburg's world of performance art. The then principal, Prof DJ du Plessis, had hoped that the School would "have a civilizing influence on campus". Fat chance.

My father lectured in Architecture at Wits. I grew up in the John Moffat Building. This is how I met the irrepressible Franco Frescura, now at UKZN. Franco as a student had formed the Anti-Ugly League as a standing committee of the Council of Architectural Students in his efforts to rid the campus of some unsightly huge flower pots designed by Prof John Fassler and donated by departing Vice-Chancellor Ian McCrone. It is rumoured that McCrone's very popular successor, known affectionately as Boz (GR Bozzoli), was summoned by the Prime Minister to account for some of Franco's antics.

Those were the days when students really cared about the greater good. And many of them paid a price for their anti-apartheid activism. The rest got drunk at Rag and intervarsity rugby matches.

And so, all good reminiscences must come to an end. Going down.

Keyan G Tomaselli is a Wits graduate, having obtained all his degrees and a few bruises from this institution. He is employed at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

