

The UKZN Griot Of Parrots and Perches



But UKZN is a bit like Monty Python's Flying Circus – or is it Fawlty Towers? – no matter.

WORDS: KEYAN G TOMASELLI

It's been a momentous year. Bin Laden was killed. Superman renounced his US citizenship and Julius Malema was articulate under cross-examination in the "Kill the Boer" song hearing.

The fired columnist, David Bullard, who claims that his earlier resignation was not accepted, sued *The Sunday Times* and trashed university journalism programmes. The DA significantly increased its voter share and the NFP started fragmenting within a week of the local elections. The SABC managed to make headlines with its own mismanagement. Graham Smith went AWOL after the Cricket World Cup and the Sharks were annihilated by the Crusaders. Obed Mlaba is no longer mayor, even Greg Ardé's *Sunday Tribune* columns have had to refocus now that Mlaba has gone. And, most sensibly, striking DUT students wanted free, scented, branded condoms.

Against these momentous events, reconfiguration at UKZN pales into insignificance.

But enough of these silly national issues. Unlike last year I am not, like the international TV news services, going to rehash the events of the past 12 months. I am not tempted to complain about the continued chaos at the main entrance to Howard College, or the screaming, scheming and

smoking that makes the MTB coffee shop hazardous to one's health. Neither will I mention the auditing blanket that has now totally instrumentalised our profession.

Instead, I want to tell my readers that I am nobody's parrot. Anybody who knows me knows that. The June *UKZNdaba* carried a disclaimer stating that the views expressed in this column are mine, mine alone. True. That's the deal I negotiated when first asked to write it. I also asked for protection from management retaliation. Like any good publisher, Corporate Relations has delivered.

On inquiry, I was told by Corporate Relations that the disclaimer was added as one or two readers had objected to me singling them out. Academics, I presume? Well, now, that is interesting as not once have I mentioned anyone negatively by name. Individual's names are mentioned as my argument requires, and always positively. Since I don't know who the complainers are I don't even know if I know them or whether they know me. Some of us do know that we don't know.

So what is happening here? In challenging everyone – including myself – to improve our institutional and interpersonal and professional behaviour,

some readers assumed that I was speaking to them directly. Well, that's what I call directed communication. Always write with a specific readership in mind I tell my students. Theses, for example, are written for examiners, not for students' parents, God, themselves or anyone else. If the cap fits, wear it, or ask the editor for space to respond, or write to me – after all, I'm on Groupwise.

When I worked as a magazine and newspaper columnist in the 1970s I was told to write for the woman with a Standard 8 education going home on the Turfontein bus. Now, I write for my colleagues whom I assume are much better educated, sprinkling explanatory theory through my satirical auto-ethnographic method. While some who do not write to me object and claim that I am being fed the stories by Corporate Relations, others actually do feed me stories, some of which I follow through. There are no conspiracies at work.

Just think of my pissing buddy, Harold-the anti-Fordist, Illeana, the anti-SAPSE warrior, and my pen pal, Andrew-the-engineer. Then, of course, there is Blessing, Moorthy, Eric and others, who prop me up from column-to-column. Without their interventions my columns would be boring. I am still accosted

in corridors by all and sundry telling me of their appreciation that someone has found the space to speak out.

But unlike Bullard, I have yet to receive free cases of whisky, well paid invitations to speak at end of the year school and faculty functions, or be given a Lamborghini to drive for a day. That's the price I pay for being an academic – not much opportunity for graft! My unerringly supportive and wonderful students do, however, organise birthday parties for me and everyone in the Centre, and some slip me the odd packet of nick knacks and sodas when we are traveling through the Kalahari when I sometimes forget to eat and drink. We have, in CCMS, created our own pocket of extraordinary collegiality. Paradise is not lost to us.

My favourite TV skit is, of course, John Cleese and his dead parrot for which he wants a refund from the pet shop. The parrot is nailed to its perch. I guess that I'm a bit like Cleese. That's what my family tell me. But UKZN is then a bit like Monty Python's Flying Circus – or is it Fawlty Towers? – no matter. If we're all living within someone else's surreal and/or satirical script, then at least we can try to write our own characters, fictional or otherwise. Corporate Relations

has now publicly permitted me this autonomy with the disclaimer but it has never nailed me to the perch. We once argued for 20 seconds over the use of an adjective in one of my early columns. That was it.

More seriously, the fact that a detractor can even think that I get my script from Corporate Relations is bizarre. My editors are professionals all, sincerely wanting to restore the micro public sphere, and they have put the parrots out to retirement. Some might say that now that four CCMS graduates are working in this division that I have put my own parrots there. Not so, these staffers were employed on merit, and they have brought an energy to the division that is remarkable. Like Superman, they're here, there and everywhere, writing, reporting, supporting, along with the rest of Corporate Relations. And, no, this is not its script.

Keyan G Tomaselli is Director, The Centre for Communication, Media and Society. He has never owned any parrots and is not a birdwatcher. He does sometimes interact with a talking parrot at Molopo Lodge where he and his students base themselves when working in the Kalahari.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.

Sudoku

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