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1

The Saturday Night Show

BEFORE an artist can paint a picture, he needs a canvas on which to paint. And then he needs a palette of colours; mixing a little of this and some of that to give us something entirely different, something we've never seen before. And it's the same with stories. Before I can tell you the individual little cameos, I need to give you the large, background canvas on which the smaller details will leave their imprint.

And so, for starters, I proudly present – complete with glitz and glamour – the Saturday Night Show, brought to you by the colourful citizens of Johannesburg! Every week I have watched them walking, stumbling and being dragged into casualty. This is the longest-running real, live show in the city. There are always more than enough players for the lead and supporting roles, and plenty of aspiring stars waiting in the wings.

The roles are many and varied and most original; just when I think I've seen it all, another little cherub does something spectacular. Like the security guard who came into casualty with a deep, horizontal gash across his forehead, caused by his forgetting a minor detail – that his hand was still cuffed to the money box when he threw it into the back of the van with all the enthusiasm of an Olympic shot-put athlete.

The Comedy Award invariably goes to one of a number of characters who are fuelled by booze, stupidity, or both – those who think: “It will never happen to me; I won't get caught.” This includes the semi-bald men with their compensatory ponytails, who cannot hold their drink, but drip titanium jewellery and generally suffer from a serious case of arrested adolescence as they perch on oversized Harleys, surveying the world beyond their protuberant stomachs. And so too the young men armed with raging hormones and elephant-sized egos, strutting their stuff around swimming pools, their trademark the inevitable badly cut jeans. They always arrive in massive 4x4s, ramping pavements.

Surprisingly, other members of the ‘stupid, booze-fuelled team’ include well-dressed women driving expensive cars, flaunting Jenna Clifford jewellery, their brains soaked in Chivas Regal. And, of course, students on the last day of exams, letting rip, burning their books, and their boats.

Not to be outdone, there are also the Friday Night Actors (the ones who get paid weekly), who never let us down. When you have worked as a paramedic as long as I have, you know the routine. Friday nights start out relatively quietly. By 11 pm when the weekly pay has

all gone to the *shebeen*¹ around the corner, the fun starts. Radios in response cars, ambulances and police vehicles scream into life in and around Johannesburg, and all the major cities of our rainbow nation.

“Juliet 28, make your way to Jeppe and Loveday for a pedestrian. Romeo 01, I have an assault for you in Bertrams,” and the daily expectation, “Make your way to Hillbrow for a shooting.”

Like clockwork the crews eat early, grabbing a bite at the local garage where the best Wild Bean coffee is served; then we await the Friday Night Show, precursor to the Saturday Night Show. Let’s take a look at the nominees, shall we? The Stupidity Awards are hotly contested between those who think they can drive while under the influence, sometimes with an accessory, such as a gun or an equally drunk wife, and those who think they are on the set of a James Bond movie.

Following closely on their heels are those who are victims of, or participants in, our very popular sport – Senseless Violence. Violence in our country is led by the champion team in Hillbrow, but not far behind are the southern-suburbs with their quasi-trailer-trash Weekend Warriors. No one beats them for originality, and the use of new weapons and staying power when it comes to killing or dying. They have the big boys on their team – the Nigerian drug lords, Lebanese gangs and even bigger gangs indigenous to that region, like the Portuguese boys and their protégés.

Violence is part of our everyday lives. It is constantly being thrust on us in various forms – in art, advertising, bestsellers and on television. It’s unconsciously promoted, even in innocuous channels like news, satellite, reality shows and good old family entertainment,

1 An unlicensed drinking establishment



2

Becoming qualified

YOU might be wondering how one becomes a paramedic. In South Africa at present we have three levels of medics: basic, intermediate and advanced. The basic and intermediate levels are being phased out by the government and will be replaced by a new two-year course that will combine both levels. The Health Professions Council of South Africa will only allow you to call yourself a paramedic if you hold the ALS (Advanced Life Support) qualification, which is the highest level obtainable.

There are two paths to becoming a paramedic. If you are fortunate enough to have the funds to pay for four years at a Technikon, you will graduate with a B.Tech degree. During this course you will cover subjects such as Emergency Medicine, Anatomy, Physiology,

Pharmacology, and Rescue Techniques. There is a lot of theory and much of it is done in great depth.

If you choose the other option, as I did, you join the public service as a civil servant in the Emergency Services³. Within the first six months you have to pass your Basic Ambulance Attendants Course (BAC). This is a four-week course, during which the candidate learns how to deal with all medical and trauma cases on a basic level – meaning nothing invasive is done to the patient. Ambulance attendants are recognized by the qualification badge they wear on their uniform. If, having achieved the BAC, a student decides to go to the next level, they are required to complete 1 000 hours on the road, working in an ambulance, not in a hospital – and they must be able to prove that they’ve done those hours.

The next step is to write an entrance exam and, if accepted, attend the course on the next level – the Intermediate Life Support (ILS) course. This is a two-month course at the end of which the graduate will be allowed to dispense five different drugs, and will be competent enough to place an intravenous line on a patient.

If the student chooses to go ahead and do the Advanced Life Support course, they are required to have at least 2 000 hours working with the ambulance crew. But be warned – this job is not for sissies! The entrance exam is tough and the average pass rate is 16%. This might sound harsh, but in South Africa we don’t have enough doctors – certainly not enough to have them out on the road. The ALS paramedic is the backup for any crew needing assistance. We don’t need a doctor with us, as there is not much more any doctor could do

3 As mentioned earlier, this option is set to fall away or may already have done so by the time of this book’s publication.

never forget that gasp as I removed the sweet and the child started to breathe, taking great big gulps of air. I remember physically shaking, and in my head all I could hear was myself saying thank you to the angel on my shoulder.

Of course, there is always the lighter side to arriving at a scene not knowing what the nature of the injury is or how it came about. I was dispatched one morning to the abattoir in City Deep knowing only that my patient had sustained an injury. What I did not know was that he had fallen sideways into one of the bloody furrows and twisted his ankle. When he tried to get up, he slipped again and by now was covered in blood from head to toe.

I arrived on the scene and asked where the patient was, only to see this apparition limping towards me. Every inch of his body was covered in blood. My heart skipped a few hectic beats; I could feel all reasoning going out the window. I must have missed this lecture – where in heaven’s name does one start? He must be leaking blood from all over, he must be like a sieve, I don’t think I have enough bandages ... all these thoughts went racing through my mind as I stared in utter stupefaction.

But not only was he dripping loads of blood – he was talking normally to another employee, only limping as he walked. He then proceeded to stop and take a phone call on his cell. I was rooted to the spot. I saw a man covered in blood, only his teeth were visible, speaking on the phone and clearly in no hurry to get himself treated. I felt the stirrings of hyperventilation about to run rampant in my own chest. With that amount of lost blood, surely he should be doing something like a death crawl, or one of those dying swan acts like in the old John Wayne movies? But no, completely unperturbed, smiling even, he continued chatting merrily ...

* * *



3

The enigma of the bystanders

I AM convinced that the public watches too much television, and that there are way too many so-called medical programmes. In the same way as ‘a little knowledge is a dangerous thing’, so is that smattering of information, normally reserved for medical personnel, dangerous when bandied about by the general public. This excludes people suffering from Munchausen’s Disease or Munchausen’s-by-proxy – we will excuse them knowing, as we do, that they make it their life-time mission to learn the secret language of medicine.

These TV programmes are responsible for the general public at a scene arguing with a paramedic on the prognosis and diagnosis of a patient.

A fracture is a fracture – it’s not an aneurism, or a thrombus, or any other Latin word the bystander has heard on Grey’s Anatomy. Given

the bystanders' paucity of grey matter, it gets especially interesting when they charge into the resuscitation bay, push past security and start telling the resuscitation team: "That man needs lidocaine". Does the sweet little gift from God even know what lidocaine is? What it's used for? How it's administered – do we give it intraocularly or intravenously? Who the lucky person is that should get it? What the contra indications are?

There is one group of bystanders who never let me down, who always bring a big smile to my face. They belong to that strange phenomenon in which individuals materialize out of the pavement cracks at the scene of an accident; in fact, they seem to ooze out of solid brick walls. I can be dispatched in the dead of night on a lonely road, far from civilization. It can be as quiet as an abandoned church, and yet within minutes of my arrival, they appear. Like the walking dead they slowly approach.

I once walked in a dense fog, torch in hand along a railway track, looking for a patient who was thrown out of a train. Not a single soul besides the train personnel walked next to me ... but, sure enough, when I found my patient and began treatment, they materialized, these incredible things – the Bystanders. When did they begin to follow me? Is there a password? Or does the sound of a human body thudding to the ground set off a chain of events?

It begins with just a few arriving at the scene. But it's not long before they start to phone friends and colleagues to invite them to come and see. More cars pull up. More people. If it was day time this would surely be a great place for a food stand and a jumping castle.

But it doesn't stop there; no, it's not enough to keep them happy just identifying lost fingers in the long grass. They insist on actively interfering. Do you remember when you were at school? Every class



5

People are living there

WORKING twelve-hour shifts, most of them being in a car, one needs to be very comfortable in that small space. My response car became so much a second home to me that I would savour the familiar smells and the welcoming feel of my special cushion. The cushion has always been a joke amongst my colleagues when we're on shifts. I'm not exactly the world's tallest woman – being a proud five footer. I get a better perspective on the world sitting on a cushion or a folded blanket, and when I was a station officer at Central fire station, there would always be a blanket set aside especially for my short arse, if you'll excuse the expression.

Hour upon hour in my car has changed me. I can fall asleep bent like a pretzel while listening to the radio; I've learnt to drive at high speeds while eating, talking on the radio and looking up a street in

a map book all at the same time. And did I forget to mention also changing the radio station when a Dolly Parton number comes on?

As an incurable insomniac I prefer working the night shifts. There is something very magical about watching the sun rise on a city that you have spent the last twelve hours courting – moving deep inside her, getting to know her secret little roads and broken fences; the not-so-secret places where the ladies of the night take their steamers; the entrances to elegant buildings where the street children sleep; the park benches under the beautiful trees in Joubert Park where the down-and-outs lay their heads for the night; the top all-night establishments that serve the best coffee.

There are probably very few jobs that have the kaleidoscopic intermingling of humanity that mine has. One moment I'll be on call in Sandton and the next I'll be witness to the dregs of humanity housed in buildings so derelict one can't believe anyone would want to occupy them. Shades of Athol Fugard's *People Are Living There*. One can acknowledge the triumph of suburbs that have been brought back to life by young money and new initiative; while cheek-by-jowl with them are suburbs so run down, so overrun by drug lords, that the rot is indistinguishable from the occupants.

One gets to know the city smells and her humours. Like the families who insist on having their couches on the front lawn and see no reason to put them back inside. There are also those 'aesthetically pleasing' suburbs where all the inhabitants have cars on the pavement in various stages of being dismantled or stolen, whichever way you want to look at it.

On the positive side, there are the churches in the city centre that offer refuge to the many vagrants who have given up hope; people who once had families but have been forgotten except by the parish.

Or the familiar, abandoned building entrances that offer shelter to those who have a mattress to lie down on for the night. The street children sleep bundled up in newspapers and plastic sheeting in the doorways and entrances of the filthy buildings that once stood grand and proud against the city skyline.

The Hillbrow skyline is to Joburgers what Table Mountain is to the Capetonians and what the Colosseum was to the Romans.

There is currently a big movement afoot to revive and revamp the city centre. There are amazing edifices like the Franklin, which wouldn't look out of place next to the Trump Towers. But they are surrounded by buildings that are run down and not safe to occupy; it makes for such a dichotomy and is so fascinating.

In its day, Hillbrow was a melting pot of different cultures, mostly European. It was a very 'happening' place – the bars, discos and all-night coffee bars where memories were made, interesting people were introduced to one another and much learning about other cultures was done in a non-threatening way.

I used to live in Hillbrow many years ago, twenty years back. I, like so many of my generation, either lived in a commune, shared a flat or, if you had a really good job, rented your own flat. One could walk alone late at night to the Look & Listen record shop where the records flowed out onto the pavement and the people working there always knew where to find anything you requested. You could stop and have an ice cream at the Norgenvas right next to the Wurstbudder where they made the world's best coffee; this is where I first tasted filter coffee and evaporated milk.

Treading lightly down memory lane, I am a child again and I vividly recall the lights and beautiful Christmas decorations in Joubert Park; it was traditional to be taken by one's parents to the city centre

* * *

Tucked away in odd corners are places that we drive past every day without ever realizing that real flesh-and-blood people actually live there. They are usually the places that one would rather forget; places that are so deceptive in their appearance that it would never enter your mind that people could live and breathe and have their being there.

I've tried to describe a good call, but the true definition is difficult to verbalise. Anyone who has ever been high on drugs would recognize the feeling, except that with a good call there are only good after-effects – and they last longer. A good call is real and raw; it lingers in the labyrinths of your mind to be replayed when you get nostalgic or need to call on resources to answer questions. Or you just let the aftermath sit inside you, occupying a special place, restoring your faith in humanity and giving you a new perspective on life ...

A very humbling call I clearly remember happened on a Sunday many years ago just before lunch. I had had a few calls earlier, but now it was getting quiet as it always does before the midday meal.

I had parked my car under a tree opposite the cheetah enclosure at the Johannesburg Zoo, one of my favourite places. I enjoyed the absolute contrast between the wild creature I was watching and some of the wild creatures I have to treat.

Then I receive the call – it is a collapse.

I start the car and scream off to the destination. I am familiar with the area; I have been driving these roads for more than eleven years. It is in an industrial area, bleak, grey, steel and concrete everywhere like grey grass growing. I arrive at the address but all I see is a long

wall that spans two blocks and houses a scrapyard. I radio back and ask to confirm the address and proceed to do a u-turn – I still don't see anything. I'm not sure if it's the Italian in me, or just my impatient nature, but I start to get irritated.

The control centre radios back that they are having problems phoning back as the call came from a public call box. I drive around the block and toot my siren again. More than twelve minutes have been wasted waiting; I am about to drive away when I glance in my rear view mirror and see an old man walking very slowly and purposefully toward me. He is poorly dressed, thin and gesticulating wildly. The image of a human windmill comes to mind. A range of emotions floods me, first relief that I have found him, which is replaced by anger as he has clearly not collapsed. Next comes the trepidation that he is not the patient. All these emotions play themselves along my neurons in a matter of split seconds. I lean out and ask him if he called for the ambulance. He confirms this in broken English.

I place my jump bag on my back, feeling much like a tortoise, grab the cardiac monitor and the oxygen cylinder and follow him. As we walk I try to get a patient history but this is not exactly successful as we have a serious language barrier, to put it mildly.

We continue walking through the scrapyard towards the back of the premises. We pass rows of old, broken cars; some neatly stacked, others thrown carelessly on top of one another. It's reminiscent of those horrible documentaries about the Second World War – how they tossed dead prisoners onto a pile waiting to be buried.

The smell of rusted metal assails my nostrils and there are puddles of water everywhere because it rained the day before. I notice a few thin and neglected feral cats and wonder how they survive here. My

equipment is getting heavy and I don't see any life other than the two of us and the mangy-looking cats. At the back of the yard against a wall are four run-down double-decker buses; they have no wheels, and all the windows have been boarded up with make-shift material.

Ironically, on the side of one is an advert about a wonderful product, which, if you imbibe it, will ensure that you can conquer the world. As often as I say nothing surprises me any more, this situation clearly does. There are people living here! This is their home. This is where they come to rest at night, where they invite their friends, where they feel safe. This is where they seek refuge, and this is where I see pictures of their soccer heroes on the 'wall' inside. This place that people drive past every day, completely oblivious to the fact that there is life here right alongside huge metal piles of cars.

It's a secret place where no post will ever be delivered, no phone will ring, no electricity supplied to make life more comfortable. I notice that there are little objects that define the people who live here; photos on the wall, of family members with big smiles, taken right here at the scrapyard. An odd assortment of crockery is used as it is, stained, chipped and skew, but it's their crockery, it tells a story of its own. I wonder about all those meagre meals, prepared nonetheless by willing hands, bearing testimony to human dignity.

I examine the patient, an old woman who is very weak, barely conscious. I take her vitals, place her on an intravenous drip and administer some dextrose. A few minutes go by. While I wait for the dextrose to enter her bloodstream, I busy myself with putting equipment away. She slowly becomes conscious and aware; the relief on the watching faces is almost palpable. The old man in his broken English thanks me, he asks God to bless me, his handshake is enough to loosen my dental fillings. He thinks I am wonderful but I

the little girl and Barbie. And granddad – who was already nicely on his ear – was so happy that he needed no further excuse to down another brandy and coke, thank you very much.

* * *

Ellis Park is – or was in its heyday – a beautiful area, with gorgeous houses built in that wonderful South African style I love so much. They were kind of colonial, with wooden floors, lead windows, brass knobs, sash windows and those stoeps that wrap themselves halfway around the house. It's a very different picture nowadays.

We received a call from that area; the caller said a young child was in trouble, had stopped breathing. We flew there and were greeted by a beautiful German Shepherd, an unusual dog for the area. I also took in the well-kept lawn, nice car, and a little boy standing at the entrance, with a worried look on his face.

I was confronted by a frantic mother. Another child was lying on the floor, already turning a bluish colour and completely naked except for a pair of socks on her feet. I immediately attended to her air passage. Once that was sorted out she started to breathe shallowly and her colour began to come back.

While my crew were doing other things, I asked the mother how old the little girl was. She told me she was seven. When I looked at the child closely, she seemed very small for a seven-year-old. (I discovered later that the much larger boy was her twin brother.)

I questioned the mom further, asking if she had a medical condition because she was very thin and malnourished. I then began to see other things – and there was the distinct smell of rotten flesh. It became obvious that this child was not sick – she had been deliberately