

DUMILE, article in The Classic, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1968 written by Barney Simon:

## DUMILE

The vibrance and uniqueness of Dumile, erratic visionary, artist in transit, extraordinary human being, are very, very difficult to communicate on paper. This is the closest I could come. A factual history (on which Dumile insists) and then, quite simply, things that Dumile has said to me and other friends. I have tried to recapture them, not verbatim, but as best I can.

BARNEY SIMON

MHLABA Zwelidumile Mxgasi (to quote Dumile's full name) was born on May Day, 1942, in Worcester, Cape. He moved to Cape Town with his family in 1946. A year later, his mother died, and his father, who had been a policeman, became a trader and evangelist. Dumile travelled with his father all over the country.

Throughout his childhood he was obsessed with drawing. He drew on every available surface. He began to play truant from school not only to be free to draw, but to avoid punishment for the defacement of his school books. He would slip off with his cousins, and while they played on the swings or went to see Tarzan and cowboy movies, he would sit and draw. When he was about eleven years old, Dumile came to live with an uncle in Johannesburg. In 1959, which was the year his father died, he took a job in a pottery, painting the standard "native scenes" (aloes, huts, hillsides, blanketed figures), doing "his own" work all the time. In 1963, Dumile began to know what he "really wanted to do", carving soft-stone and soap-stone and modelling in clay.

In 1963, too, he became ill with tuberculosis and was sent to Baragwanath Sanatorium for three months. There he began to paint pots again. The matron noticed him at work and asked him to paint some murals in the Sanatorium. Ephraim Ngatane was also a patient. They painted the murals together.

When Dumile left the Sanatorium, he visited an exhibition of Boboreki's sculpture, one of the first exhibitions he had ever seen. He tried to meet Boboreki and went to the Gallery 101 to find him. Madame Haengi of the 101 saw some of Dumile's small sculptures and put him under a contract, which has since ended.

In a relatively short period Dumile has had three one-man exhibitions, represented South Africa with five works at the Sao Paulo Biennale of 1967, and participated in several group exhibitions. These included the Transvaal Academy (1965 and 1966), the Republican Arts Festival in 1966, Fame and Promise Exhibition for 1966, and the S.A. Brewery Competition 1966, where Dumile was awarded a prize. To a very recent exhibition in Pretoria, of portraits in sculpture, he contributed a highly praised portrait of the late Chief Luthuli.

Because he was born in the Cape, Dumile has been ordered by the authorities to leave Johannesburg and return to his home reserve by early 1968.

"I work hard. I draw, I sculpt, I do my best. Sometimes it's good and sometimes it's not so good. Other people can worry about that. I must work."

"One day when I was very small, I was walking in the street and I found a guitar. A real, new guitar just lying there! I picked it up and took it home. Hey, I was so happy! But my Father was evangelist and he wouldn't let me play it. So it just sat there. And then one day I pulled off one string and another day I pulled off another string. It wasn't being used. Then I began to pull it apart and one day we used it for firewood."

"There was a father in the Township who bought his son a coat. He wasn't a good father. He'd never shown any love for the boy. He was drunk from Monday to Monday. He never saw his children. Then as the first sign of love, he bought this coat and it was only a blazer. He gave it to the boy.

'Thank you Father,' said the boy and the father said, 'It's okay.' And the next morning when the boy saw the father again, he said 'Thank you Father,' and the father said, 'What for?' and the son said, 'For the coat.'

'It's okay,' said the father. And in the evening again, when the boy saw the father, he said, 'Thank you Father for the coat.'

The father said, 'What's the matter with you? You don't have to keep saying thank you Father for the coat!' And the next day again when the son saw the father he said, 'Thank you Father for the coat.' So the father slapped him and hit him and threw him out of the house. And yet when the son saw him again he said it again, 'Thank you Father.' And he never took the coat off. He wore it everywhere, even in bed he wore it. This father's gift had made the boy mad. I don't know if the story is true; I heard it from Ephraim.

You can't pray every day. Sometimes the words don't come. It's no use forcing it. If God is there He doesn't want you to pray every day. It would drive Him crazy, He would slap you out of the house. Why does the church pray every day?"

"They say Christ was like a lamb — gentle like a lamb. No, it can't be. If what is written in the Bible is true, then Christ was no lamb. He goes into the Temple and grabs these people who are making money there and he throws them out.

No, I tell you, he must have been a gangster, a real ruffian. He must have been a fighter with quite a reputation. Heavyweight. You can't just walk into a Temple and throw people out, not even one. These people liked the money, they needed it. They wouldn't leave it easily. Just try it in a church today. Try to throw one person out, never mind a thousand. I tell you they would come and grab you, not a thousand, just two of them and throw you out and call the cops and lock you up. No, Jesus was no lamb."

"Reading the Bible makes me scared. It's always like this: if I meet a man who is honest or something that is written and it is the truth, then I get frightened."

"Art historians are like preachers. They say this happened then and that happened then and this is what these people say and that is what those people say. And then you go along after church and you say, 'What do you, yourself think?' And he says, 'Get out of here you ruffian!' and he would like to have you locked away, but really it is he who should be locked away. They can't tell you the truth — art historians or preachers. The artist knows more because he is working, trying to do the same things."

"Here, if the police take away a man, most people think straight away that he is wrong, bad. Even if they know nothing about him, they care nothing for him."

"If say, you are with a girl you like a lot and a big strong guy comes and takes her away and does something terrible like stab her with a knife or rape her, and you can't do anything — you just stand. Then she suffers a lot and you suffer a lot because you couldn't do anything and you love her. Then if you paint it, what do you paint? The girl screaming? The man crying? The knife stabbing? No. What happened is part of what the girl means to me. I would paint what the girl means to me."

"One day I was in the Township with this driver and we went past a line of men who were all handcuffed. I don't know what for, maybe for having no pass or something. Anyway the driver said, 'Why don't you ever draw things like that?' I didn't know what to say. Then just when I was still thinking, a funeral for a child came past. A funeral on a Monday morning. You know, all the people in black on a lorry. And as the funeral went past those men in handcuffs, those men watched it go past, and those with hats took off their hats. I said to the guy I was with, 'That's what I want to draw!'"

"The Government has given me six months to stay in Johannesburg. Then they say I must go back to where I was born. To the reserve in the Cape. I want to stay in Johannesburg because here is where my friends are and art. I am trying to get a passport for overseas. I want to see America and Europe. Then I want to live in Swaziland. Why do I want to live in Swaziland? Well, because it isn't my home. So when bad things happen to me there, it won't hurt me so much."