

Zapiro (aka Jonathan Shapiro) interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

Cape Town, South Africa, 17 July 2006

This is a verbatim transcript of a recorded interview. It should be noted that when engaging in spoken conversation, people do not phrase their thoughts in grammatically correct sentences. These imperfections have been retained in this transcript.

Paul Sendziuk: This is an interview with Jonathan Shapiro in his home and studio in Cape Town on the 17th of July 2006. Jonathan, can you recall when you would've done your first AIDS cartoon, what year it might've been?

Jonathan Shapiro: I think it was probably around 1995; no, in fact, it was probably, I would actually think it was probably '94, the later part of '94, so in fact the very year of democracy.

And since then, what would be the issue that you've done the most cartoons about? Would it be about the ARVs or HIV denial?

Definitely the ARVs would be the greatest number, the lack of access to ARVs and government excuses – very much connected with the HIV denial. I mean, in many instances, the two issues would be in the same cartoon.

How difficult is it to play AIDS for laughs in a cartoon, or to evoke humour out of that kind of issue?

I haven't found it that hard on issues of the HIV denial, the links to denial of HIV causing AIDS – I've found that that's really easy to do as a funny thing. The denial of treatment varies, it varies; some of them are really funny cartoons and some I just find I can't make a funny cartoon out of it and I do something that's either really savage or really sad. Then there are other peripheral – there are other issues there, there seem to be a whole number of different issues about stigma and about targeting of people – well that's sort of connected with stigma – those I find difficult to do funny cartoons about but for me the main thing is to make some interesting connection, to make some point and then, yeah, those are not likely to be very funny cartoons.

When do you know that a cartoon's worked?

Sometimes I know just by looking at the cartoon and just laughing at it myself and knowing that I've got a winner. Sometimes I have to wait for the response and even cartoons that I didn't think were that good have elicited quite a big response and then I know they must've worked.

And what form does that response take? I mean, first of all, say with your readership, do you receive personal correspondence, do people write you letters, do they write them to the editor or do they ring up the newspaper or stop you in the street?

There's a very mixed bag of response methods I suppose. I get, first of all, response from people I know and some of them tell me, you know, "I laughed like a drain at that one" or "it really hit the mark" etc and the point about some of that is I am in contact with people in the Treatment Action Campaign and many other people doing activist work and I hear from them that there's certain cartoons that have really worked and work for their activists that they're training and they put them up on the noticeboard and it affirms people's commitment or makes an interesting point for them, so then I know that something has worked from a cartoon like that. Other people who are not connected with HIV/AIDS also sometimes tell me that they really loved a cartoon, it really worked for them. There are letters to the newspapers, there are calls to the radio stations, interestingly there are occasionally responses from the Health Department – I also then know that something has really hit the mark. The cartoon I did on Manto Tshabalala-Msimang which is probably my favourite AIDS cartoon that I've done which is "All these vegetables prevent the rollout of anti-retrovirals - true or false?" Then I had a whole bunch of vegetable and there including the head of Manto Tshabalala-Msimang herself drawn in the same sort of round shape as these vegetables, looking a bit like them and there was ABCD etc and at the end it says "False: a lemon is not vegetable." There was a real kind of cutting [moment] when I looked at the cartoon myself and I realised, wait a minute, a lemon is not a vegetable. Now that cartoon, she replied via a spokesperson to the *Sunday Times* and she was furious about it so I realised that that one really had hit the mark.



Do you think your cartoons have been able to change a mindset, maybe if not in the political realm but maybe in the mindset of the people? Is there any indication from what the TAC is saying or even what other people have said that made you think, "Oh gee, because of my cartoons people have..." – they're now thinking about that issue for the first time or they've changed their mind or its given them a kind of hope that this stonewalling can be, you know, defeated?

I have to answer that one quite cagily and say that it varies from issue to issue. There are only a very few cartoons that I can cite as having really had some influence that I find tangible and I can't actually think of any of the HIV/AIDS cartoons that single-handedly has made a tangible change on something. I can think of some other issues where I can actually say that cartoon helped to sink a particular proposal or helped to highlight a particular thing; with HIV/AIDS it's been a different thing. I have worked really hard to keep myself informed on the issues so I suppose it comes as a sort of fairly harsh, strongly satirical kind of comment but based on something that I think people can see when they look at it that there's some commitment and some knowledge behind some of the stuff, so probably it becomes part of a strain of criticism which just gives people a bit of affirmation when they're wavering on certain things. I think that's more it. You'll find that there'll be particular commentators, particular editors, maybe particular cartoonists etc who can in a sense become part of a counter-thrust to what the government propaganda and spin is putting out.

I found that in flicking through your cartoons in isolation you're actually evoking a kind of despair: the stonewalling of government, its inaction in the face of scientific literature, the mounting death toll and things like that. But in viewing them together, and particularly one after the other, I actually think they do evoke a sense of hope that someone is able to, very succinctly in the space of a few brush strokes or a few words, cut straight past that bull-shit and, you know, expose the ignorance, expose the inaction and things like that.

I think you're phrasing it in a slightly different way from what I said but I completely agree with that and that's the intention as well.

And for someone working at Treatment Action Campaign or for those who are struggling to get access to drugs and things like that, I can imagine that they're getting a great sense of hope and it will propel them along, thinking 'maybe there's an end in sight if more people are thinking in this way', so I think that's really important.

What kind of response have you got from your editors and from the newspapers and, in fact, first of all, for the purposes of the recording, where do these cartoons appear – because you're not just contracted to the one newspaper here, are you?

From 1994 to 1998 the cartoons were appearing in the *Sowetan* and in the *Mail and Guardian*; *Mail and Guardian* being a quality weekly which had been a newspaper called the *Weekly Mail* and it was very, very strongly anti the apartheid government and they maintained a very independent and critical voice through into the democratic order. And the *Sowetan* being, at the time I started in those four years, certainly the largest daily in the country at that time mainly serving Johannesburg, Soweto, Alexandra but also reaching other parts of the country, and being fairly influential in its own way. And then from 1998 I added the *Sunday Times* to my list of papers and the *Sunday Times* is the biggest weekly, very influential, very powerful and then during '96 and '97 the cartoons were also appearing in the *Cape Argus* – the cartoons that were in the *Sowetan* were also in the *Cape Argus* – there's quite a lot of different papers. Now, since last year, since 2005, after 11 years at the *Sowetan* I ended that and for the daily cartoons I now

work for the Independent Group so the cartoons appear in four cities – the ones I do on a daily basis – I do three per week, appear in four cities around the country in the *Star* in Johannesburg, *Cape Times* in Cape Town, the *Mercury* in Durban, and the *Pretoria News* in Pretoria. Plus I still do the *Mail and Guardian* and the *Sunday Times*. So I've been very lucky to have an enormous spread of readers for, you know, 12 years.

Could you summarise politically where each of those papers sort of lie, the *Mail and Guardian* being more sort of left-wing or liberal, I imagine?

Yeah. The *Mail and Guardian*, as I said, from the old *Weekly Mail* was very strongly anti-apartheid, very – quite small and very high quality journalism and they maintained that independent stance to the point now where they are again, kind of, a lot of the time shunned by government because they are seen to be too critical – it's quite interesting, they were too critical of the old government, too critical of the new government. The *Sowetan* was a more populist kind of paper; also from the old days it was a – it had evolved from a newspaper called the *World* which was banned by the apartheid government and so the *Sowetan* was also strongly anti-apartheid, clearly I mean the readership was, you know, kind of 98% black and it was a good strong anti-apartheid paper. They've been through a lot of wobbles in the last little while so that they tried to go a little bit up-market and ended up publishing vast tracts of unedited government speeches and things, instead of good strong interviews and the readers just didn't buy it. That's in the new order, I'm talking about, you know, just a few years ago. The readers didn't buy it and the *Sowetan* lost a heck of a lot of readership because that whole idea of government spin was something that the readers were going to pick up on, they were not going to be happy with it, and I thought it was pretty obvious that they shouldn't go that route. Then they tried the other thing: they tried to compete with the new tabloids and they went really down-market and they lost readers again because that wasn't their core thing either. Now they're trying to find their feet but they've lost masses of readers to the tabloids and also the *Star* newspaper, which used to be a much more 'white' paper, has become much more a 'black' paper as well, black readers, so the *Sowetan* is battling a bit.

The *Sunday Times* was a strange paper in the old days where there were some strong anti-apartheid pieces being written and some good investigative journalism but at the same time they did a lot of the kind of 'page three' tabloid-y kind of stuff so they – well, actually they had the back page of the *Sunday Times*, the sort of smut stuff – so kind of an odd paper in the old days. It has now got a very strong investigative arm, well certainly by South African standards 'cause there's not enough money for investigative journalism in South Africa. Its editor is Mondli Makhanya, with whom I have a very strong connection (I also have a very strong connection with Ferial Haffajee at the *Mail and Guardian*), and the *Sunday Times* is still the biggest newspaper in the country in terms of each issue sold. Now the four Independent Group newspapers: the Independent Group for a while had a reputation of being a little bit too toadying towards the new government; they have worked to try and defray that a bit, they've tried to move away from that and they've now, I think there are some, certainly the *Cape Times* has got a very strong independent voice of its own, they've got some very good writers. So the *Cape Times* is, I would say, the most, I'd say the strongest independent voice in that Group. The *Star* is one that, for a while, did look a little bit too kind of acquiescent towards doing what the ANC spin-doctors wanted it to although there

would be people at the *Star* who would fight that opinion. They have changed now, they have changed, and the other two, *Pretoria News* and *Mercury* have also changed along with that. So it's a – and I mentioned the *Cape Argus* – less said the better. *Cape Argus* – my stuff was appearing in the *Argus* from '96 and '97 – they have tried to be deliberately down-market, but down-market doesn't necessarily have to be as bad as the *Cape Argus* has been. It has really not been good, and it surprises me because there have been some reasonably good editors who have been through that paper and are not there anymore and I don't understand, they haven't been able to change it to anything good. There's now a new editor there who was my editor at the *Cape Times* and I really hope he's going to do something with it because it's – I don't know if – have you seen the *Cape Argus*?

No.

[Pause] For the purposes of the interview, rolled eyes! Doesn't have much impact on tape, but keep going. [Paul laughs]

Did the same cartoons go into each of the publications, or were you doing separate cartoons for each one?

The weekly publications – the *Sunday Times* and the *Mail and Guardian* – always have their own one, you know, one per week; the *Sowetan* was also, you know, that was at one stage five a week and then four a week, only for the *Sowetan*, and now – but then sometime reprinted in the *Cape Argus*, I mean, for that short period – and now the Independent Group ones, the same three cartoons go into those four Independent Group publications, but different cartoons from the *Sunday Times* and the *Mail and Guardian*.

That's at least five cartoons in a week?

At the moment five cartoons, at one stage six, even at one stage when I started doing the *Sunday Times* I was doing two – you know, one for the *Mail and Guardian*, one for the *Sunday Times* and five for the *Sowetan* and that was a – that was killing.

I can understand why you have an assistant. That's crazy! Ok, so what kind of support have you received from your editors for your cartoons? Have there been some instances where your editors have been very much against what you're trying to produce in terms of AIDS cartoons?

[Pause] Ninety per cent – I don't know what, somewhere between 95 and 98%, if I could put a figure on it – of the cartoons I've done have been pretty much supported by the editors. I really do think that the media have been pretty universally critical of government's position and I've sometimes been stronger, even more critical than some of the publications I've worked for but they've never – no, take out the word never – they haven't often crossed swords with me on what I'm trying to do, so that's been good. One most notable exception was a cartoon I tried to do on the death of Peter Mokaba who was a deputy-minister at the time of his death and was a senior person in the ANC, having been a very strong ANC youth leader and who, by the way, I'd admired enormously in the days of the anti-apartheid struggle, a very courageous, strong leader. But it was pretty well known that he had HIV and it was also, I wouldn't say well known

but it was certainly known in the circles that I moved in, that it was certainly thought that he had been persuaded to go off ARVs by none other than Thabo Mbeki. Peter Mokaba had, by the way, become a very, very virulent AIDS denialist, I mean, one of the worst AIDS denialists that we had, much more vocal than Mbeki who had, in his intellectual, enigmatic way, queried the link between HIV and AIDS and then pretended that he'd never said that; he basically has lied to the country on that issue. So [pause] Peter Mokaba had not made any bones about the fact that he thought that ARVs were 100% toxic and that and he was viciously critical of the Treatment Action Campaign and anyone who I actually identified with in the HIV AIDS struggle. He duly, having gone off his ARVs, died of an AIDS related disease but it was denied by – it was – no, there was no confirmation that came from anyone in government or anyone close to him in the family etc, etc, it was all covered up. I did this cartoon which talked about some of the rumours – it alluded to the rumours that were going around, that he died of malaria...

Asthma...

...asthma, rheumatoid arthritis or something, I can't remember exactly what it was, but all these things, I picked those things up from various media; I looked for things like that and then I did this cartoon of four people, the first three saying he died of one of those rumoured diseases, and then the last person was the doctor who had a death certificate in his hand, and he said "Of denial", so Peter Mokaba actually died of denial. And I got into a major fight with the then editor of the *Sowetan* who didn't want me to do the cartoon in that form, didn't want the last guy to be in a doctor's uniform, and I said that would take the entire point away out of, you know, from the cartoon because that person represented medical understanding, medical knowledge, scientific knowledge as opposed to all these rumours and all the denialism and stigma around HIV/AIDS and the denialism that was coming from the government and Peter Mokaba was coming from the government. And we got into a bit of a slanging match about it and he was new to the newspaper at the time, and then he wouldn't let me – he wanted me to make changes and I said "If I made any of the changes, can I put the cartoon in tomorrow?" He said, "Not tomorrow." "Why not?" He said, "Because I'm letting the ANC Youth League pay tribute to Peter Mokaba and it would be seen as disrespectful", so I said "Please, I mean, surely different voices is what you want in the paper? That gives it credibility." He said, "Are you questioning me?" and I said, "Well", I said, "Let it go". We ended on not a very good note and then what happened after that was that I offered it to the *Sunday Times* who jumped at it and then I was duly suspended by the *Sowetan* for a week because I had the audacity to publish this cartoon that he said he was going to get, you know, later and amended on another day. I didn't want to change the cartoon and I didn't want to hold it back; I wanted it to be published and so that was a very nasty little spat. I was suspended without pay for a week.

I'm trying to think of – there've been a couple of others where I've – where editors have persuaded me to hold back a little bit or to change a couple of things, but I don't feel that any of those have been complete censorship. Sometimes there's a strengthening of the cartoon when just pure vitriol gets changed into something more satirical or more interesting – it actually sometimes works better for the cartoon, so it doesn't worry me. So that's the only one that's been a major problem.

Compared to other issues that you've written about, would you say that you've received more or less support for your HIV cartoons from your editors?

I would say this: I've received among the greatest amount of support that I have for any issue that I've covered a lot.

[Pause] Do you think – and this might come down to why you do cartoons in the first place – but can cartoons make a difference in the AIDS epidemic? Can it possibly save lives?

I think it goes back to that earlier question of yours as to whether or not I could make any assessment of how much the cartoons have had an impact and I'm saying that I would say that it'd be, it would be a bit, it would be overstepping the mark to make a complete tangible connection between cause and effect. So in that same way I would say that they contribute towards that current of hammering at the government position and in that respect that sort of body of criticism and opinion has – the fact that the Treatment Action Campaign has been accepted so widely internationally – the fact that people outside the country see that there's a body of critical thought within the country and connect with those things, I think all of those things do work together to in some way help with that process of saving lives. Again, I don't want to overstep the mark in terms of making a direct connection between cause and effect.

What is your opinion of the current government-sponsored HIV prevention campaigns that we see on billboards around the city and on the television? I mean, you deal with images and text: what is your assessment of these images and texts that you've seen?

I think there's huge vested interest in the 'Love Life' campaign; 'Love Life' has made – there are a lot of people who've made careers out of, in a sense, complicating the issue, trying to do poster campaigns that are in some ways too clever-clever for their own good. Instead of saying things in a fairly direct way, they say – and by the way my 'credentials' for being able to criticise them in this way are a little bit more than simply being a cartoonist who does satirical stuff in the newspapers. I was doing HIV/AIDS education in 1992; I had a little group called 'Story Circle' and we produced a comic called *Roxy* which was very successful, there were more than a million copies published. Of course, it was a funded thing so, again, one can't make too many claims about that because when you get funded you can produce a lot of shit and publish a lot of them and say, "Well, we published more than a million." But we did publish a lot and got a very good response, it was used in schools, it was something that the Health Department back in '92 was very cagey about in certain areas because they were very conservative, it was pre-democracy times, it was during the transition period and certainly religious groups fought us tooth and claw. So it's not as if I'm saying "You've got to be just straightforward and conservative only". I'm saying you've got to be edgy and you've got to appeal to the youth and you've got to use everything that you can to do things that amount AIDS education as opposed to sort of satirical cartooning that I do now; it's a different thing. Occasionally, you know, one cartoon in twenty might be a sort of more educational one but nineteen out of the twenty will be satirical stuff. So I do understand what AIDS education is about – and I'll show you this thing, *Roxy*. I feel that the 'Love Life' [campaign], which is, you've got huge funding and massive backing from all over

the place, I think they've in some ways squandered that support, squandered that money by producing stuff that is difficult to understand, not very strong, direct messages, and hasn't been shown to have particularly effective results. And I certainly wouldn't trust the government, in terms of what they've done, I wouldn't trust them on any of these messages because they have these sort of 'ABC' messages, you know, the 'abstinence, be faithful and condomise' thing which they – actually, you've got two things: you've got the kind of 'Love Life' thing which is complicated and kind of risqué and often a bit silly in my opinion, and on the other hand you've got the government with the more conservative thing, the abstinence thing which is not clearly explained. I mean what that, even for example, the link between abstinence – let's not say abstinence – between say be faithful and condomise and all that, these are sort of mantras that get repeated: abstinence, be faithful, condomise. Yet a huge number of people get infected with HIV within their marriages; the men through the inherited system that we have here, the sort of migrant labour system that got set up during colonial times and also the large – we have a fairly large country and you have lots of people like truck drivers moving up and down across the country, and then a whole lot of sex work industry that happens in support of those kind of truck drivers. As a result of all that is you have many men who within their marriages have a set up in town and a set up in the countryside: their wife and family will be in the countryside, and maybe they have another wife or a mistress in the city, or they are migrant workers who use the services of sex workers or the truck drivers use the services of sex workers and then within their marriages a woman who is, as far as she's concerned, being faithful to that one man, gets infected with HIV. Those kind of links [aren't made], because of the difficulty of explaining those things and are often not properly made when people repeat the mantra of ABC. So I have a problem both with the more conservative end of AIDS education, posters and things, and with the more hip and risqué ones; I think both of them are not working properly.

I got driven around Soweto when I was in Johannesburg and I probably counted about six or seven 'Love Life' billboards and they looked like advertisements for Nike sneakers; they were very slick, you know, three or four bold colours, clearly designed by graphic artists, but then I'm looking around Soweto and there was just a huge gap between this super-slick, ritzy, clean, smooth, very white, very sanitised, urban image versus what I was seeing in Soweto. The campaign wasn't using the local language, it wasn't showing any black people...

Not showing any black people?

Yeah.

No!?

Well, these ones I saw were like – they were more like just images of body parts or – and it was just mainly block colours rather than photographs of people or...

You know what the sensitivity is around that is – and some of those designers and people are not doing enough workshopping and figuring it all out, you know, [because they] think they're all clever-clever and graphic designing and whatever they have to be – the one thing that they would be very sensitive about is the issue of stereotyping HIV

AIDS as a black disease. So then they overcompensate by doing that kind of stuff. So, you know, there's a myriad of problems here.

There's hardly any white people living in Soweto, you know, and that's where these six or seven billboards are, so who is Love Life speaking to? That campaign might work in Melville or somewhere like this or Parktown or a nice place in Johannesburg, but it just seemed to be all wrong for Soweto.

You know, I love talking about this stuff, but it's sort of [getting late]; so, how many more questions do you have, Paul?

We can stop there if you want, that's fine.

Have got more or less what you need from me?

Yeah. If I can grab some of those cartoons as well...

You need the cartoons. David just found that stuff...

[Interview ends with chatter between Paul, Jonathan and his assistant David as they look at cartoons]

When citing this interview, please use the following:

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