THE HISTORY BOYS

Iconic images are often associated with political and cultural events in history; they are the images which help to shape our view of the world. Jürgen Schadeberg and Steve Schapiro are two photographers involved in creating those images over a period of six decades in South Africa and the United States respectively. They may not be household names but, as Eleanor O'Kane and Sean Samuels discovered, both photographers have found themselves shooting events which have changed our lives.

JÜRGEN SCHADEBERG

From his home in the Normandy countryside, Jürgen Schadeberg is telling me about his induction into French village life three years ago. "After we moved here, two ladies came to the door with a parcel containing a bottle of champagne, a box of biscuits and an invitation to a dinner and dance in the village. Apparently everyone in the village over the age of 65 gets this," he says, as if he still can't quite believe it. "It's quite normal here."

More than 60 years after moving from his native Germany to Johannesburg, where he became known as 'the father of South African photography' for nurturing the first generation of black photographers, he is still touched by the sense of social inclusion that he finds in rural France.

Born in Berlin in 1931, Jürgen was apprenticed to the German Press Agency in Hamburg, and was taken under the wing of a photojournalist who taught him the basic elements of photography. Arriving in Johannesburg at the age of 20, where the system of legal racial segregation known as apartheid was in its formative years, the young German found freelance work at the newly relaunched *Drum* magazine, one of the few publications at the time aimed at a black readership. In its previous form the magazine had depicted the black population in either tribal or folksy settings; however, Jürgen's arrival coincided with a new editorship and policy of highlighting the cultural, political and social lives of South Africa's urban black population. "*Drum* was the first and the only one to really take an interest in the black world rather than the white world," he explains. "It was pretty different." For him and many others, the relaxed, colour-blurred atmosphere of the *Drum* offices was a world away from the rules and regulations that governed public life under apartheid. One of the few whites on the editorial team, his experience and knowledge – limited though it was – proved crucial to the magazine in its early years. "When I arrived in Africa I was a one-eyed man among the blind. There was no history of documentary or photojournalism in South Africa and among the black population there was no history of photography at all. They never had the opportunities or finances to get into it."

Part of *Drum*'s editorial policy was to put a large emphasis on photography to ensure it remained accessible to a largely illiterate black readership. In this way, readers could be informed of the burgeoning protest movement as well as the exploits of their favourite jazz musicians and pin-up girls. While trained photographers willing to work for a black publication were thin on the ground, the offices were buzzing with young black writers, educated in missionary schools and highly literate. The dichotomy proved a problem. "It looked terrible

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Far left: Nelson Mandela returns to his prison cell on Robben Island, 1994, and, left (centre), at the Defiance Campaign trial, 1952; below: The Three Jazzolomos, Johannesburg, 1953. Opposite page: Jürgen Schadeberg with his students Peter Magubane (left) and Bob Gosani, 1955.

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Above: Midnight Kids, 1954.
Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Punch & Judy man, London, 1977; waitress break, 1979; gambling quartet, 1953.

that on a magazine that was basically cover-to-cover pictures, all the images were photographed by a white person and all the writers were black.”

Jürgen, with his unique skill set, was given the responsibility of remedying this by training photographers in the *Drum* office. Under his tutelage a generation of new and talented figures emerged, notably Bob Gosani who came to the offices as a messenger boy. Gosani became Jürgen’s darkroom assistant and went on to capture some of the most unjust and humiliating aspects of apartheid. Famously, Gosani covertly captured images of a degrading ritual known as the Tauza dance, which was carried out at a Johannesburg prison. Naked prisoners were routinely forced to dance in a humiliating fashion before guards to ensure they weren’t concealing any weapons. When Gosani’s pictures were published in *Drum* there was a public outcry and the government was forced to act. On his role as the father of South African photography, Jürgen graciously claims it was merely a matter of circumstance, dismissing his mentoring role as “a necessity at the time”.

With no other opportunities for learning, ‘*Drum* school’ became a nurturing ground for a generation of aspiring young black men, with Jürgen’s band of fledgling photographers unhindered by their lack of a photographic heritage. “There was definitely a lot of enthusiasm for learning,” he remembers. “It’s very easy to teach someone who has no visual background, because there are no prejudices. The young photographers picked it up very quickly and we produced some very good photographers eventually.”

Cash was always in short supply and wages were meagre. “Everybody had to freelance and work elsewhere, photographers, writers, even the editors. Kit was very expensive and that was a problem too.” Although he personally favoured a Leica, the office camera was a precious Rolleiflex until the Japanese released a cheaper version, the Yashica Flex, which, Jürgen recalls, was “very tough, simply built and very simple to use.”

His role meant that more often than not he was office bound rather than on assignment. “I couldn’t be out that much as I had to look after the layout, the design and the printing. If I had had a job description it would have been production manager/art director/picture editor all in one! I used to get 40 [South African] pounds a month and the rent on my one-room apartment was 25 pounds a month.”

Despite poor wages and the lack of kit, the *Drum* offices were a magnet due to their unique atmosphere in that political climate. “It was an island. Once you walked into the office it was a different world, a different society, different laws. No laws, in fact, and no racism. It was a positive atmosphere.”

Assignments, when he was given them, often meant working with his close friend and colleague Henry Nxumalo, renowned for his undercover stories on the harsh treatment of blacks by the white regime. One of the few really experienced journalists at the time and known as ‘Mr Drum’, Nxumalo would go to impressive lengths to get his story, often putting himself in danger, with Jürgen inevitably brought into the frame too.

The pair worked together on one of *Drum*’s first major political stories, about the mistreatment of farm workers. “Henry went to work as a labourer on a farm where the farmer was notorious for beating up his men and that sort of thing. It was a very courageous thing for Henry to do. I don’t think many journalists would do that these days.” Nxumalo duly signed up for work at the farm. “I shot him ‘touching the pencil’, as signing up was called, because it was assumed that blacks wouldn’t be able to sign their own name.” Several weeks later, with Nxumalo having fled the farm, the pair returned to take pictures, Jürgen posing as a lost German tourist with Nxumalo as his driver. “Henry came along as my ‘boy’, as the drivers were known then. My German accent was still strong then, so we showed up on the farm with me muttering that my ‘boy’ didn’t have a clue where he was going.” The pictures in the bag, the ensuing article published in 1952 sparked public outrage.

“Henry always chose the worst places to go and he always got his story. I remember we were trying to do a story about conditions at a very brutal prison

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called The Fort in Johannesburg. We'd heard a lot of reports about it and Henry decided to get into the prison to investigate. Inevitably, the only way in was to get arrested.

"We had a problem because we only wanted him to go in for a couple of weeks, not longer. In those days it was forbidden for black people to possess alcohol so we got drunk together in a shebeen and then Henry took a bottle with some brandy in it and went straight to the police station and made a lot of noise, behaving in a drunken manner. But the police totally ignored him – I think they were busy doing something else – so eventually he got himself arrested because his ID wasn't up-to-date and he got his story." As Jürgen recounts stories of undercover ruses, laughing as he remembers being chased by farmers wielding shotguns and having to pretend his *Drum* colleagues were his servants, it's easy to forget that this was, in fact, the most serious of work. Five years later, Henry Nxumalo was found murdered while investigating an abortion racket. He remains, like Jürgen, one of the most influential figures in the magazine's history.

Whether it was to document a jazz night or a political event, Jürgen often found himself the only photographer in the room. "If there was anything going on in the black world – be it political, social or cultural – there would be no white press there. They weren't interested at all." The vibrancy of urban black culture appealed to the jazz-lover in Jürgen, who still remembers listening to Louis Armstrong in an air-raid shelter in Berlin at the age of nine. "White society was dull, the people called themselves 'European' and never really realised they were in Africa although they might have been there for generations. They didn't know what was going on and tried to maintain the world they had come from. That made them terribly boring and not very dynamic, whereas the black society was very dynamic, especially the music and the jazz."

Working long days and frequenting the jazz clubs of the Johannesburg suburb of Sophiatown by night to photograph rising stars was part of the job. "You couldn't really work normal hours. You didn't get normal pay – nothing was normal!" he laughs.

As one of the very few white people to inhabit the jazz clubs, Jürgen was more than welcomed by the black population. "I think it was partly because they were delighted that someone was taking an interest in them. They were usually totally ignored, you see. The black community felt that they were doing

Above: Penny whistlers, 1954; below, covers of *Drum* magazine, left to right: High Ritz, February 1955; Sax player, May 1955; Dolly on the beach, July 1955. Right: Kids on staircase, taken in 2006.

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things that were important socially, creatively and politically and yet no one took any notice. They had no way of expressing or communicating among each other in the way that most societies have; there was nothing, and I think that when someone came with a camera and asked them questions they were very happy about it."

Jürgen has photographed Nelson Mandela across six decades, firstly in 1951 and most recently in 2006 when the political leader opened his exhibition documenting the 1952 Defiance Campaign, which first brought him to the fore. "It's been wonderful to follow him all these years. As Mandela himself says, it's been a long road."

Leaving South Africa in 1964, Jürgen moved to London and lived there for 20 years, during which time he met his wife Claudia. He spotted her on a bench in a square in Primrose Hill while he was climbing over a wall to see a friend. "She had the most BBC of accents," he explains, "and sounded very clever." In London he taught at the Central School of Art and Design and continued to work as a freelance photojournalist for the left-wing political magazine *New Society* as well as the *Sunday Times*, *Telegraph* and *Observer Magazines*. "We had to do a lot of colour. It was the time when colour television was emerging, which took away a lot of advertising from the press. To pull back the ads the newspapers started the colour magazines and we had to shoot with 64 ASA Kodachrome film. It was very difficult to shoot with a slow film but they wanted high-quality colour so we had to run around with a box full of filters. It was quite a job but very interesting." Although his work during this period has not been seen widely, it is these images that Jürgen is most proud of and he is preparing a book of lesser-known work from his London years.

The biography on his website contains an exhaustive – and exhausting – list of book titles and exhibitions spanning five continents and five decades. At nearly 80 he shows no signs of slowing down despite moving with Claudia to rural France three years ago, drawn by the lifestyle and cultural heritage. "I think France is the society most interested in the visual arts." He describes how, when he was renovating his home, the plumber, mason and other workmen took an interest in his images. "They all got quite excited by my pictures so I invited them to my next exhibition and they all turned up with their families. There aren't many societies where you'll get your plumber coming to your exhibition but they all were tremendously interested. It's a very visual society."

The author of several books and 15 documentaries about South African culture and history, he agrees that his *Drum* work and the Mandela pictures are what he is best known for, although again he resolutely refuses to bask in any glory. "I think that one isn't really that interested in being known. The only reason to be known is to make a living, so that people will buy your work. If you're not known, people won't buy your work." He travels back to South Africa for exhibitions and workshops, and says the people are better off and feel freer now. Are young South Africans aware of his part in their country's history? "To some degree they are," he says. "But things are quickly forgotten. People don't really learn from history."

He believes that many young photography students these days are looking afar for subject matter. But why go to Asia and Africa when there's just as much going on right in front of your eyes? He has just published a book about his village in Normandy, the culmination of a two-year project, a tribute to village life. "We've got a jazz club, there's opera in the chateau, a big market nearby... Everybody is looked after, no matter what background they come from," he almost sings. "Life is wonderful."

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