

Arts

Political photographs
sad and telling

By LEN CLER-CUNNINGHAM

In an essay "On Lying and Politics," Hannah Arendt long ago pointed out the entirely contemporary danger in confusing Madison Avenue public relations with genuine politics, the difference between selling an inherently "defactualized" "image" to a "consumer" and the legitimate political contention among electoral candidates for the decision of the voter, which, in an open society, necessarily involves some ascertainable elements of fact.

—Renata Adler, *The New Republic*

There is a danger that viewers will underestimate the apparently simple images of Andrew Danson's *Unofficial Portraits*, currently on exhibit at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU). This photographic exhibit of 59 self-portraits of prominent Canadian politicians, at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels, appears to be just that self-portraits. In actuality, when read properly, these "self-portraits" are pictorial essays which translate into a complex discourse on the contemporary representation of political figures.

The primacy of the photograph as the most common source of visual information is indisputable; from ads in streetcars to billboards on the street we are continually bombarded by visual images inducing us to buy, trust, or try. "It's time for a change" is a catch phrase as comfortable selling feminine hygiene as it is an opposition party. The last group to have missed the power of advertising, and specifically the power of the photo, is politicians.

Ever since Nixon's loss to Kennedy was partially attributed to his appearing at a debate with poorly applied make-up and a five o'clock shadow, the question of "visual impact" has become predominant among political handlers. And Canada is not immune to this contagion. Discussions by professional political analysts of the recent election debate between provincial party leaders in Ontario were overwhelmed by comments concerning clothes, stance, appearance, and who "looked best"

or "looked confident." One newspaper went so far as to rate the hair—Bob Rae had the best, while Peterson appeared with a more conservative cut than usual. The unfortunate truth is not that we have become a nation of aestheticians, but the collective victims of visual overdose.

This is but one of the questions which Danson raises in a subtle and inventive manner. Danson entered each subject's office and carefully arranged the background using biographical objects. The subject was then left alone to the camera, and if he chose, rearrange the environment and electronically trigger the shutter—John Turner took the opportunity to remove a book entitled *Our Family Has Two Faces*, before the photograph was taken.

Sadly, Turner missed the point and misconstrued the title of the book as a possible reference to his own beleaguered Liberal Party. But, Danson is far too subtle and intelligent for that. The title referred to the public and private faces of the politician—and the terrifying result when political figures are consumed by the latter. It is frightening to see leaders such as Mulroney, Peterson, and Eggleton aping what they believe to be "classical stances." The "man-of-vision" schtick comes across as unimaginative, self-absorbed, and rather absurd when compared to the creative and intellectually self-confident muggings of Jean Chretien or Ian Scott. There are some sad and telling images, such as John Bosley's vivid assertion of an authority he never had when Speaker of the House, or our fundamentalist Federal Minister of Health and Welfare, Jake Epp, clutching a bible to his side while a religious homily lays just over his shoulder.

In *Unofficial Portraits*, Danson uses the vocabulary of portraiture to examine the political photograph as an indicator of the materialistic presentation of politicians today—that fine line between politics and Madison Avenue public relations.

Unofficial Portraits continues at the AGYU until October 30.

Dirk Uys takes no sides

By MICHAEL REDHILL

For well over 30 years, South Africa's policy of apartheid has held sway. The longevity of such anti-human legislation has been matched by the fervor of only a handful who have spoken out against South Africa's politics. Many have been jailed. Pieter Dirk Uys has not.

Dirk Uys' one-man show, *Adapt or Dye*, has traveled the globe since 1981 and is now docked at U of T's Hart House Theatre. It's hard to judge Uys' show in terms of theatre. In those terms, it's a ham-fisted, over-baked comedy. In terms of its message, its satire is life-affirming.

Uys, himself a white Afrikaner, plays all 18 characters in the play, who range from army officers, to blacks, to P.W. Botha himself. While the play can be light-hearted, its message of peace is unmistakable and unpartisan. Uys is careful to point a finger at everyone. He says his purpose is "Not to take sides . . . both sides are equally violent and irrational. My job is to reflect the situation."

After seeing (and enjoying) the show on Thursday night, I had a chance to meet with Uys to discuss the show, and especially how he gets away with it. Although he has been doing *Adapt or Dye* since 1981, Uys says he's not tired of it, because his audience isn't tired of it.

"The show is always changing with the headlines, so it stays fresh." He says he gears the show to his audience. In South Africa, he has to be careful that it's not indicting to the degree that the audience switches off. Understandably, they don't want their entertainment to convict them.

The show is popular in South Africa due mostly to one of the characters, Evita Bezuidenhout, South Africa's answer to Joan Collins. Evita B has been the focus of a number of videos and even a feature film. "They flock to see her," says Uys. "And they're captive, so I throw in a few of the unpalatable bits. Often, it's the kids that drag their parents to see the show. The kids love the rebellious side of it."

Uys has to be careful not to make the show too difficult to watch, for fear of losing his audience. In Canada, it's a different story. "I can be a lot looser outside of South Africa.



WHAT DO YOU MEAN 'WHEN AM I DUE?' Pieter Dirk Uys as one of the 18 characters he plays in *Adapt or Dye*!

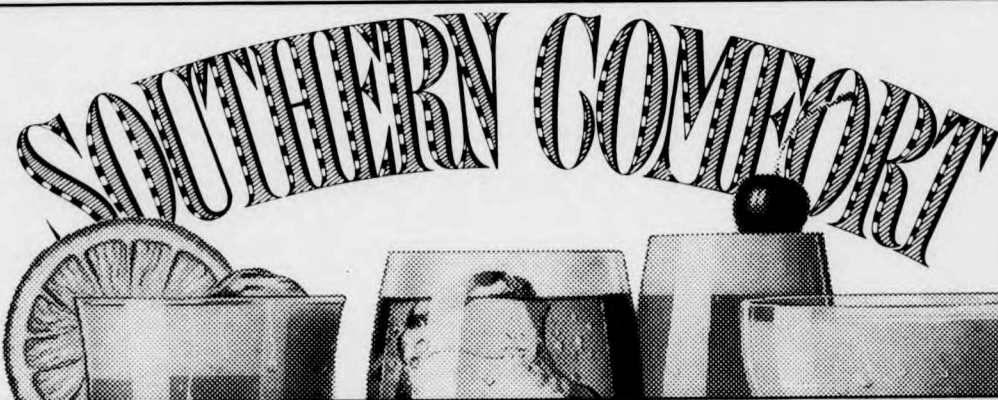
But in the States and Canada, much of the show has to be given over to explanation. In South Africa, suggestion is good enough to get a laugh because everyone knows who I'm talking about."

Most interesting was Uys' response to my question: How can you, as an artist, be free to stand up to the government when so much is restricted under the state of Emergency? He said: "In South Africa, you confuse bureaucracy with bureaucracy. I ask the censor board to come to my show. They say they can't because no-one's complained. 'I'm complaining!' I say. 'Now come to the show . . . there's eight tickets waiting for you.' So they come. And on Monday I call them and ask how they liked it. They say, 'Pieter! You can't do this or say that, and this has to come out,' etc., etc. 'Come and get

me,' I say. 'But first let me call ABC and NBC and *Newsweek* and *Time*. I want my 10 minutes now.' And of course I never hear from them again. The last thing they want to do is create any more martyrs. No more Bikos. Actually, I must admit I have two lawyers who keep me from committing libel. The show is offensive, dangerous . . . and true."

It is. It takes no sides. It indicts Bishop Tutu, Botha and blacks who serve in white armies. After six years *Adapt or Dye* is still an important vehicle, with Uys at the helm. "In social movements, the artist is often the last hope. As long as South Africa keeps writing my material, I'll keep doing the show."

Adapt or Dye plays until October 14 (depending on P.W. Botha, says the back of the programme).



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