

## **Nanda Soobben honoured by Heritage Awards**

*Nanda Soobben has added much to the cultural life of South Africa, writes Peter Machen*

When I meet Heritage Award recipient Nanda Soobben at his Centre for Fine Art, Animation and Design, he is sitting at a desk in the foyer of the school. It is from this desk, which in most other such institutions would be occupied by a receptionist, that Soobben produces his daily political cartoons, which have over the years appeared in the pages of many of this country's newspapers, as well as being syndicated around the world. And as I talk to him, Soobben's position at that front desk, rather than in a fancy, private office, comes to signify much about his approach to life, art, business and education. It is an approach that, despite the legacy of apartheid and its impact on Soobben's life, has gradually been reaping rewards for him in recent years. He has been internationally recognised for his hard-hitting satirical cartoons, winning many awards, most recently Vodacom Journalist of the Year in the cartoon category. And the education of all these young minds at his school is clearly also a reward in itself.

Because while Soobben has blazed a trail for black cartoonists in contemporary South Africa, in the process providing a biting insightful analysis of post-apartheid South Africa, he is also opening the doors for young new South African design talent with his school which opened in 1994. The Centre is one of the only places that offers an integrated Fine Art and Graphic Design Diploma as well as a Higher Diploma in Animation, and through the school, Soobben is generating a conscious new breed of graphic designers and artists.

He shows me around the school, which despite the absence of 21<sup>st</sup> century sheen, is an extremely well resourced education centre that puts most other design schools to shame. There is a constant buzz of activity, although most of the students are not in the building but doing work experience at firms, an important element of Soobben's approach to training young minds. He shows me a reel of animated shorts produced by his students. The shorts are all very different, but what they have in common is a sharp sense of commentary and a wildy off-the-wall approach, something that has no doubt filtered down from the front desk.

But despite his success, Nanda Soobben remains one of Durban's most unsung talents. As a young man, he was a gifted artist and graphic designer, but like many black creative people under apartheid, he was forced into exile until the early '90s, as there was no space in the old South Africa for dissident creative expression and graphic design was a "whites-only" occupation. And even today, because of the legacy of apartheid, Soobben remains marginalised to an extent. He compares Zapiro and himself to Gary Player and Papwa Sewgolum. Which is not say that Zapiro endorses the status quo as Player did, but that his success, relative to Soobben, is in some ways about his whiteness and a white-owned media.

It is appropriate that Soobben has been recognised by the Heritage Awards. The legacy that he has built is substantial. His collected body of cartoons reflects a national diary of the past two and a half decades, his school is an important cog in the national creative engine of South Africa, and his international presence has helped teach the world a little more about South Africa. And, in another example of his ongoing desire to encourage courage and individuality, Soobben has even set up his own small awards ceremony, the TLTL (Too Little Too Late) Awards, which are given to individuals who contribute unselfishly to the community without the recognition they deserve. But most importantly, Soobben, along with a handful of other South African cartoonists, continues to help ensure that the space for dissent in South Africa remains available to all of us.

The Heritage Awards is a high-profile annual event which sees six phenomenal South Africans honoured for their contribution towards the preservation and promotion of South African heritage and culture. The other five awardees are Johnny Clegg, Bheki Mseleku, Noria Mabasa, Jay Pather and Alfred Nokwe. The awards ceremony takes place on Saturday 19 September at 7pm at the ICC Durban at a glittering function. To book contact Leanne at [rsvp@kizo.co.za](mailto:rsvp@kizo.co.za) or on 031 566 4324.