

Ironies of the new nation

Willie Bester may have changed his mind on history, but his works still reverberate with social commentary

WENDYL MARTIN

tgw **sunday**

CAPE Town artist Willie Bester is dead set against changing the street names in the city.

"It is wrong to destroy history," says Bester, whose principal concern in his art has been to record events in South Africa in visual terms.

He admits this is a drastic about-turn from when he went about the city with a screwdriver removing apartheid signs.

"Now the meaning of the sign collection is different. Any history should be accepted. It is wrong to destroy history and evidence. I am not happy with current renaming of places. Rather name new things. When I took down signs, I did not understand the value of it."

His art gained international fame in the 1990s for his distinctive interpretations of township life, his extraordinarily moving commemorative portraits of struggle leaders and his more recent, monumental salvage sculptures and installations, focusing on the complex realities and ironies of life in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

His work is on exhibit at the Rose Korber Summer Show in Camps Bay.

We meet at his home in Kuils River, which his website describes as "a beacon to his uncensored artistic expression". A unique blue and purple building, it looks more like an art sculpture than a house.

Like Bester's works at Rose Korber, it is interactive. Cogs and wheels form part of the mechanical theme. The lounge has a large yellow car suspended from the



CREATING: Willie Bester at his Kuils River home. His work is part of the Rose Korber Summer Show in Camps Bay. **PICTURE:** CANDICE CHAPLIN

ceiling. It's art that doubles as a hammock.

Bester's collection of apartheid-era signs is placed in prominent places – the base of a coffee table and an old "whites only" beach sign from Durban out by his pool.

He has been a full-time artist for about 17 years. He started his working life as a dental technician, making false teeth.

"I have been doing art since I was seven-years-old. False teeth are like sculptures. Then I grew into making bigger sculptures," he says.

Bester even has a set of old

South African flags which he is still considering how to use in his art.

For some of his current work, including that at Rose Korber, Bester trawls townships, scrapyards and informal settlements, looking for material such as metal sheets, shoes, tools and electric equipment.

"I walk through to townships. I negotiate to buy pieces or find new material to fill spaces, such as a metal frame that is a part of a shack."

Two paintings at Rose Korber called *Thembi* and *Thando Simba*

depict children and are framed from such metal sheeting.

He says putting children in his art comes from community work he does at creches and schools.

Two other pieces – *Metal Spade with Child's Red Sandals* and *Metal Spade with Child's Yellow Sandals* speak to the idea of child labour.

Each spade has a set of child's shoes that are welded on to a platform on the spade.

The shoes are modelled with flat metal sheets.

The art speaks to the innocence of children juxtaposed with the

hard labour of the spade. It is a jarring image.

Bester says that the art shows an element of exploitation, the idea of handing a spade to a child.

He says new shoes were given to the children these were taken from.

Bester concentrates on his welding during the day, and paints at night so that he does not disturb his neighbours.

A piece from his Social Engineering series that was at the gallery is now back in his home due to space restraints. It is, however, still for sale.

It is an eclectic mash-up of metal shoes, bullets, paintings, a spade and electrical equipment.

"I am always wondering about how systems work – like water and electricity. They are complex."

The house is filled with his art – all part of his collection – and many are interactive and still tell a story.

Bester points out a yellow seat made from welded metal parts. It looks like seating for a transport invention out of steam-punk fiction. The seat-rest is made of glass and a metal box containing chipped enamel crockery.

He calls it *Poverty Driven* and says the poor create seats for those in government.

In an elevated space of the house is a travelling art work he calls *Africa Remix* – it is a surprisingly dark work depicted through his welding. It shows a dictator holding a vicious dog and a gun.

"It is about violence instigated in townships and power drunk systems."

Bester's art and home speak about a man submerged in his messages of social injustice.

The Rose Korber Summer Show is at the gallery at 48 Sedgemoor Road in Camps Bay. It is open from 10am to 6pm daily. Call 021 438 9152 or see www.rosekorberart.com

Russian surrealism with a message for South Africa

ROBYN COHEN

IN NIKOLAI Gogol's surreal story *Diary of a Madman*, a low-level clerk falls in love with a beautiful woman who is the daughter of his boss. She is way above his station in life and eventually he goes insane.

Acclaimed actor Jeroen Kranenburg has adapted the story and is performing it at 6 Spin Street Restaurant and Theatre. Costume, props and set are by Koos Marais.

The story was first published in 1835 by the Ukrainian-born Russian dramatist, novelist and short story writer. His work is not often staged in Cape Town so it is a treat for audiences to get a taste of this rather surreal tale, told by a madman and a dog.

Kranenburg says as far as he is aware, the work hasn't been staged in South Africa for over 20 years. *Madman* has been receiving acclaim abroad and in the last couple of years, Australian actor Geoffrey Rush has received rave reviews for his performance in a production staged in Sydney and New York.

Kranenburg's adaptation is very



ACCLAIM: Jeroen Kranenburg in *Diary of a Madman*.

much his own vision. No stranger to *Madman*, he staged it way back in 1992 when he was living in Amsterdam. He moved there in 1979 shortly after he graduated from drama school at UCT.

His fellows from the illustrious class of 1978 included Richard E Grant, Sean Taylor and Fiona Ramsay. Kranenburg left because he did not want to be conscripted into the South African Defence Force.

During his 17 years in exile, he was active in theatre in Amsterdam and Berlin.

He managed to get himself declared mad when he was called up for the Dutch army (his whole family is Dutch) – but that's another story.

He returned to South Africa in 1996 and has received acclaim for his roles. He dazzled last year in Jane Taylor's *After Cardenio* (not to be confused with Shakespeare's *Cardenio*, currently at Maynardville).

The Diary of a Madman we are seeing now is a completely new staging, Kranenburg says. "I like a good story. That is the basis of everything and Gogol writes stunning stories."

The story is one of the first studies of megalomania in literature, he says.

As to the relevance of the story of a downtrodden clerk from 19th century Russia for contemporary South Africa, that is self-evident: class is a burning issue in our society.

"I have taken on this madman and I play him with a South African accent, although it is set in St Petersburg in the 1830s.

"It's a story that has relevance for our time as it reverberates with what is happening now. Gogol's observations are totally and utterly relevant to me."

Diary of a Madman is one of six Russian-themed theatrical portraits Kranenburg is working on and hopes to perform this year. The others are Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, Chekov's *The Boring Man*, Tolstoy's *A Confession* and Maxim Gorky's *Life of a Useless Man*.

Tickets are R100 for the show and R240 for the show and a three-course meal served from 6.45pm. Veteran restaurateur Robert Mulders, who operated the fabulous fine-dining Rozenhof in Kloof Street for 25 years, has cooked up a Russian-themed meal.

The menu changes weekly and features dishes like chilled borscht with pampushky (doughnuts) and Ukrainian plum torte, fruit compote and lemon cream.

Diary of a Madman is at 6 Spin Street Restaurant and Theatre at 8.15pm, Tuesdays to Saturdays until February 2. Book at 021 461 0666 or e-mail reservations@6spinstreet.co.za