

The Weekly Mail's first cartoonist was a fellow called William Kentridge. He bombed. He was not very good at it and he was as relieved as I was when we agreed after a few weeks that it was not working. Kentridge has since gone on to other things.

Soon after that Derek Bauer arrived in our offices with a portfolio of work which - in his gruff manner, throwing back his mop of hair, he slapped on the desk - and it was clear to us immediately that - like Kentridge - he could draw. But unlike Kentridge he could draw topical satire with a brutality and clarity and wit that knocked us off our feet. I recall us making an instant decision to take him on and for the next few years, for a piffling fee, he produced prolifically, consistently and with devastating impact. Boy could he draw, and boy could he do it with insight and power.

I thought carefully tonight about calling him a cartoonist. It is a strange designation and I hesitated to use it. If I called Kentridge a cartoonist, it would be a denigration. But Derek elevated this kind of work so that the designation, properly applied, is a tribute. Lots of people draw silly pictures and visual jokes and call it cartooning. Derek is to these dabblers what Woody Allen is to my uncle who repeats bad old jokes at family dinners.

Derek had something else that made him a truly great cartoon-artist. It was some deep-down, dark restlessness of spirit that burst out in his furious pen. He had a total disregard for anything he considered pretentious, a deep and abiding hatred of cant or nonsense of any sort. Nobody would call him easy-going, I think. He was challenging, and forthright and stood for no bullshit.

All of these are great attributes for a cartoonist.

He was also the most independent spirit I knew. With his pen in hand, he tackled anyone and everyone and let no-one off lightly. He towed nobody's line. He had an anarchist spirit and that is an excellent quality, maybe the most important one, for a cartoonist. It made him unpredictable, and you always wondered who and what he was going to tackle next.

There were other cartoonists who portrayed the contradictions and horrors of apartheid. That period offered, after all, some easy targets. But no one else did it with the effectiveness and impact of Derek, and I think that was because he was soft on nobody, brutal with everybody and never took the easy road of going for easy targets. He was clearly influenced by the great Ralph Steadman, but he sometimes made Steadman look polite and charming. Nobody ever accused Derek of being polite and charming. In my time as editor, no cartoonist has made me so nervous of what he might do and who he might take on next. What made it work, though, was that you knew he would be so spot on, so insightful, that there would be no choice but to defend him against whoever he had angered or irritated. And usually the drawing was so good, that you could only admire and respect.

Have a look at the range of work on offer here. The most brilliant work, I think, are the portraits, pictures with a multilayered depth that gets you really thinking about that person, that time and what they represented. I once made the terrible mistake of asking him not to draw me, as I knew how tough that would be. Of course he did so. It was only about 25 years ago, and I am just starting to recover.

He couldn't make a living from what we paid him, when we paid him at all. He branched out to turn his skills to profit and when he had made just enough to focus again on his choice of work, he died, tragically, too early, too young.

We miss Derek. The M&G misses him, even if they don't know it. Cartooning misses him. Art misses him. South Africa misses him.

I was honoured to be asked to speak tonight, a long overdue opportunity to pay tribute and say goodbye. Many thanks for those who have made this happen.

Anton Harber
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