

Hot Lunch



By **ASPASIA KARRAS**
with **Sicelo Mbatha**

● Meeting Sicelo Mbatha for a hot tea (I have to mix these meals up) is akin to taking a masterclass with a highly evolved spiritual guru.

I thought I was going to talk wildlife conservation and our relationship to nature with a remarkably adept storyteller. I had gleaned that much from my speed-reading of his book *Black Lion: Alive in the Wilderness*, co-authored with Bridget Pitt.

What I got was a crash course in living and dying. And, more importantly, how to do them well. The tea, the delightful little buccellato cake from Tortellino d'Oro and sumptuous seasonal cherries that pop in your mouth like small love bombs, were incidental and offered in my dining room as Sicelo and Bridget rushed around Joburg on a whistle-stop publishing tour.

For an hour I was transported to one of Sicelo's walking trails and experienced the surprising sense of my surroundings falling away as I listened to his stories, told in a resonant baritone with quiet intensity.

We should all be walking single file listening to this man as he brings us back to a deeply humane understanding of our small part in the bigger picture. Bridget explains the Sicelo effect thus: "I was struck by how he mediated the experience of the wilder-



Wild at heart

Co-author of 'Black Lion' Sicelo Mbatha at his home on the banks of the Matigulu River in KwaZulu-Natal. Picture: Rogan Ward

ness. I was expecting adventurism, high adrenaline, running away from rhinos. But it was actually very meditative, even when we ran into rhinos. A lot of what I carry is the experience of walking through rain, doing the night watch under the stars and listening to Sicelo. He has such a beautiful way of enabling such an intimate connection to nature."

Much of the magic Sicelo weaves comes from doing his work on foot. He explains: "I think the vehicle creates this atmosphere of

being a spectator – you go there with your camera, your binoculars, you are not intertwining with anything. But when you are walking, when you are sleeping under the stars, when you are preparing your sleeping bag and you find a little creature in it wanting to share the space with you, you realise: 'I am sharing the space with everything. I am here now but I can be taken by lion, I can be taken by crocodile, I am not dominant, I am part of everything.'

"For me that is why the world is upside

down, because we are approaching the environment and the earth with the sense of being dominant and owning it, and that is why you find that we take, take, take from the earth because we think it belongs to us, but we belong to it. If we destroy the earth, we destroy ourselves."

He tells a really personal story about how this idealisation of nature as only something beautiful is a mistake. Growing up as he did in rural KwaZulu-Natal meant walking to school every day. He lost his closest friend to

a crocodile while crossing a river, feeling the grip of his friend's hand loosen as the creature pulled him under the water.

"The whole scenario of my friend being taken was shocking and I was haunted by this depression for a long time. I developed ways of ignoring it, but there was a lot of fear. The very next day I was supposed to go to school and cross in the same spot where my friend was taken by the crocodile. I walked across and wrote a maths examination. The courage I got from that has stayed with me. He wanted to be a teacher, I wanted to be a game ranger. I took it upon myself to finish school on his behalf, so I could say to him, 'I am here now and your spirit can come along with me.'

"When I finished matric my parents couldn't send me to university so I decided to volunteer in the park as a means to get into game ranging. About three months into my volunteering I was trailing with two game rangers, Baba Thabete and Dumisani Kumalo. We heard the chattering of monkeys in the trees, a bunch of mongoose came running, behaving very strangely. We could suddenly hear the sound of terrible grunting, then silence. Then we could hear the slosh of mud and walked into a scene where these big crocodiles – scary guys and their green heads full of algae – were killing a buffalo. Eventually the buffalo dropped its head and gave up. Then Baba Thabete said 'Pumula manje' – now the buffalo is at peace. His life is ending but another life is beginning for the buffalo and you cannot have two lives. You have to let go of the previous life and embrace the new life.

"So many people are haunted by their past, it stops us from experiencing the new life. I felt like he was talking directly to me, like he was sent so I can make peace with myself. After that the anger, fear and hate started to evaporate like dew at sunrise. It was a big healing."