

WORDS: LESLEY STONES

A master of satire

Playwright Mike van Graan cunningly nudges his audience towards adjusting their thinking as he dissects socio-political issues in SA through his memorable plays

When the world goes crazy with racism, corruption and state capture, you don't know whether to laugh or cry. You'll do both simultaneously if you treat yourself to one of Mike van Graan's plays. His searing satire will have you laughing loudly before you suddenly find a lump in your throat or moisture in your eyes as he tackles social ills and challenges your attitudes and assumptions.

Van Graan is possibly South Africa's most important modern playwright, with a catalogue of 30 works that help explain the idiosyncrasies of our country to ourselves and, increasingly, foreigners as he takes South Africa to the global stage.

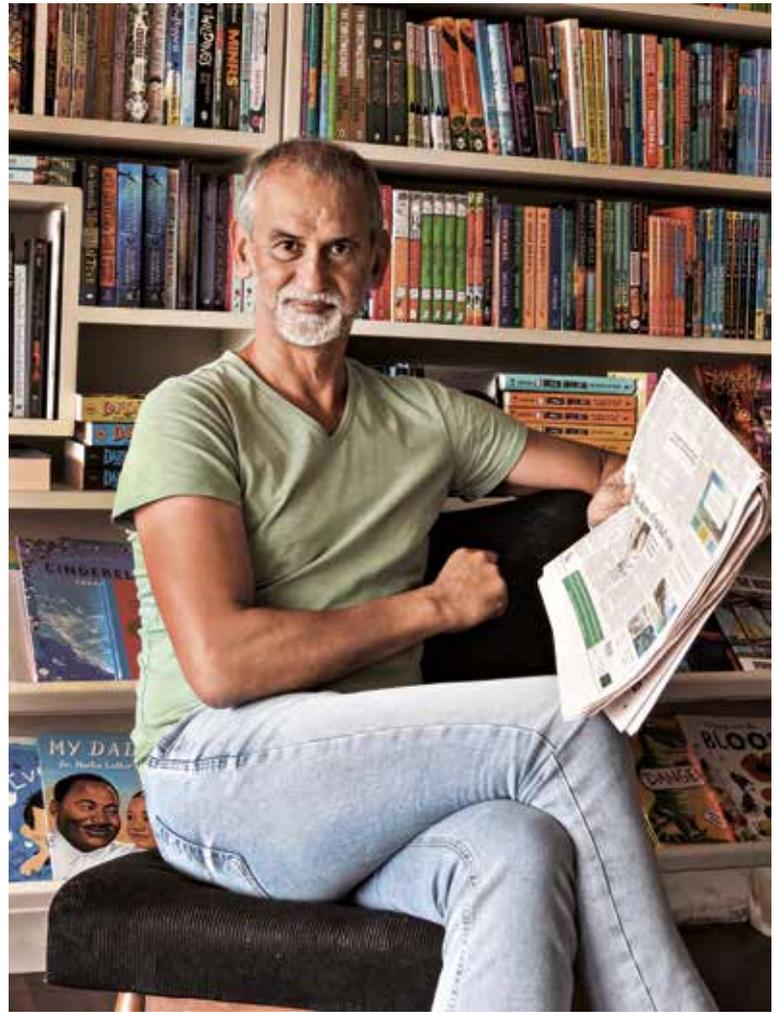
"A country in transition like ours is much more interesting to write about than in the old days when you knew who the good guys were and who the bad guys were. Nowadays, it's so much more fraught with complexity and contradictions," he says.

His gripping drama *When Swallows Cry* tells brutal stories of migration, with bursts of humour relieving the crackling tension. *Pay Back the Curry* is a heady mix of wit and wisdom that leaves you helpless with laughter. Clever satire is an under-appreciated art, and Van Graan is an absolute master.

He has an enormous talent for writing diverse characters that are utterly convincing. His latest play, *Another One's Bread*, blesses its four actresses with hilarious lines and powerful personalities. It also raises issues about poverty and hunger, in a comedy that nourishes your brain without being too heavy to stomach. Some of the funds raised from ticket sales from this play about feeding schemes raised R25 000 for a communal kitchen.

In conversation, Van Graan is softly spoken and quite intense, giving long, thoughtful answers punctuated by a ready laugh. Now 58, he's often mistaken for a white guy with a healthy suntan, although his attitude and actions were shaped entirely by being coloured. He could only study drama at the University of Cape Town after gaining a permit from the Department of Coloured Affairs. Not surprisingly, his first plays were written for anti-apartheid rallies.

Van Graan's CV is almost as long as one of his scripts. He's spoken about activism in the arts at conferences around the world and served on numerous local and global advisory boards, focusing on how theatre can



drive social changes. In May, he flies to Sweden to receive the 2018 Hiroshima Prize, a prestigious award for cultural activists who foster dialogue, understanding and peace.

Good theatre can present a way to heal traumas of the past or present, sometimes using satire to laugh the pain away, and sometimes offering catharsis through confrontation. "As a playwright, you don't want people to leave the theatre feeling that the world is so bad that there's nothing you can do," he says. "You want them to leave with a sense of 'wow things aren't great, so what can I do about it?' I want audiences that are entertained, but who are also going to think a little more, and if any of them take further action to change the world, I'd be most delighted."

Van Graan could write pure comedy too, but where's the fun in that? "I really wish I could do pieces that are light for light's sake, but I'm not sure I'll get there," he grins.

Certainly not yet, because the piece he's crafting now is a global satire with the tantalising title of *Mexican Waves (and other Trumpian nightmares)*.

• Catch Van Graan's explosive political thriller *Green Man Flashing* from 10 April-12 May at *Auto & General Theatre on the Square* in Sandton, Jo'burg. For more information, visit: mikevangraan.co.za