

WILSON MOOTANE

Joni Brenner

(University of the Witwatersrand,
South Africa)

On the 19th of January, 2010, Wilson Mootane died. Joni Brenner, who painted and sculpted his face for seventeen years, relates the story of his last hours.

Anne Stanwix, a friend, and a profound and deeply respected doctor, had made all the arrangements for Wilson to be admitted to her clinic at the Johannesburg Hospital at 8 am on Tuesday the 19th of January. She'd managed to retrieve the Edenvale hospital records from October, and planned to do some further tests to see what was making Wilson so ill, so sore, so weak; to try and see why he had such severe anaemia and desperately low haemoglobin.

My partner Scott and I drove out that Monday morning to Senotlelo in KwaNdebele to fetch Wilson and his wife Francina. They were expecting us sometime around 8 am. We'd agreed to go in Scott's car because it was bigger and stronger than mine, and we left at 5 in the morning. About 8 kilometers from Wilson's home, we stopped briefly on the side of the road, after which the car would not re-start. Stuck on an unnamed road, between two unnamed roads, we called the AA to come and rescue us. They said it would take them an hour and would cost 4500 Rands. We said ok. I called Wilson to tell him. He was waiting; he was disappointed; but I assured him we'd get there – just a little later than planned. About five minutes later a red Cell-C mini-bus taxi pulled up. A man got out. I was nervous, not know-



Wilson in the studio, 2002.

Photo: Courtesy Joni Brenner ©

ing whether he was stopping to hurt or help us.

He said, “My name is Sidney, are you people alright?”

We said we were alright, but the car wasn't: it wouldn't start. We asked him to help us jump-start the car. It worked, and we exchanged a few words expressing our deep gratitude, and set off for Senotlelo, marvelling at this Good Samaritan experience.

Wilson and Francina were ready and waiting. They had been ready since 7. Wilson stood up and walked quite strongly to the car – using a stick, but nonetheless quite strong. We travelled well, if anxiously, back to Houghton in Johannesburg, and I walked Wilson and Francina upstairs to Scott's apartment. Wilson made a point, despite his weak state, of greeting and conversing briefly with Tony, the security guard at Houghton Heights. It was always his way.

Leora Maltz, who was doing some research at William Kentridge's studio around the corner, was staying with me. This had been arranged some time

before. So Scott, Leora and I slept at my place; Wilson and Francina were at Scott's across the road.

Wilson was exhausted from the trip, and quite weak. We agreed he should rest. I was to get some groceries for the evening meal and then pick them up at 7am to go to the hospital. Though they were tired, I left feeling it would all be alright. I was relieved and grateful that Anne would be looking after Wilson, and that she would take over the next day. I had told Wilson to pack a few things as Anne had said she would probably admit him for a few days to do the tests.

When I got to Scott's apartment at 7.05 the next morning, Francina and Wilson were not waiting for me, ready to go, as I had expected. Francina said they had not slept at all; that Wilson had complained of sore legs all night. Wilson was dressed, but lying on Scott's bed.

“Come Wil, let's go, I said. “Did you pack some things? Because you might stay a few nights.”

He looked at me with wide eyes and protested, “I'm not staying there. You said we would discuss it. You never said for sure I'd stay.”

He'd got a fright, and I felt bad.

“OK lets go and see what the doctor says”, I relented.

He was struggling to put his jacket on.

“Leave the jacket”, I suggested. “It's warm and you don't need to be smart.”

But, as it turns out, his Book of Life and other documents needed for the hospital were in the jacket pocket.

“Where is my cap?” he asked, quite loudly.

He put it on, struggled to stand up, and when he started walking he was disorientated.

“Which way must I go?” he asked at every doorway. “Where is the lift?” he enquired when we were right in front of it.

I was worried.

We eventually got out of the lift, and he started walking down the lobby, but he was stumbling and unstable. He lurched towards the red velvet couch and kind of collapsed.

“Take it easy my love,” I urged: words he’d so often said to me as I struggled with various paintings and sculptures in the studio. I phoned Scott:

“You’d better come right now; I can’t manage to take Wilson in the car on my own; I don’t think he’ll make it.”

I called the ambulance to come immediately.

I sat with Wilson.

I held his wrist; I felt his pulse very rapid; I touched his face, and I cried softly, “Wilson, stay with us. Stay with us.”

I felt his pulse grow faint; I felt it stop. I lifted his head and my mouth said, “Wilson. Wilson! Stay!” But in my mind I said, “Just go. Go well.”

And he was gone.

Just quietly stopped breathing. There was no death rattle. No drama. Just me and Francina on either side of him, crying; and quietly and respectfully watching from the corner, Tony, the security guard.

There was no death rattle. No drama.

The paramedics arrived after twelve minutes, which is not bad for 7am traffic, but he was already gone: his head back, his jaw dropped, and orange coloured ooze on his lip. Anne had said that he had no haemo-

globin, and severe anaemia. She’d said she was surprised that he hadn’t gone into cardiac arrest or had heart failure. Maybe this orange ooze was the colour of his blood: no red blood corpuscles. No pulse.



Wilson looking at one of his portraits
Photo: Courtesy Joni Brenner ©

He died of anaemia and we had no way of knowing what had caused it; what in his system had failed. I wished I’d paid more attention when he told me he was in the Edenvale hospital, but he’d just said his feet were sore and the doctors had said it was arthritis and had given him pain meds. He’d be home soon, he said. I didn’t think much more about it. He’d been to the studio three months earlier when he seemed fine: we’d worked hard, and as usual. But his deterioration was rapid. He stopped coming to the studio. He complained of pain in his feet. When I asked to see him on my return from an overseas trip he told me he couldn’t walk, he wasn’t eating much and that he was in KwaNdebele. When eventually

he allowed me to visit him in KwaNdebele, a week before the end I was frightened by his frailty. Later I learned from Anne that he’d been tested at Edenvale for prostate cancer, for TB and for various other things. He’d been much worse than he’d let on. It seemed the doctors had run out of things to test for.

His ECG was a flat line. The paramedics moved his body onto a gurney and took him in the same lift up to Scott’s apartment and laid him on the couch, covered in a white sheet. That was their main role, and I was grateful because it’s hard to move a dead body respectfully. They didn’t charge us anything, though the operator had asked whether I wanted a government or private ambulance, and that for someone without medical aid, a private ambulance would cost anything from 1500 to 3000 Rands.

The ambulance service had notified a funeral parlour, and these people arrived within minutes to offer their services: 7500 Rands to take the body to the mortuary, prepare it, put it in a coffin and transport it back to Senotlelo. We said we would wait for Wilson’s family to arrive and to make arrangements. They waited outside and hovered – to my mind, like tow-truckers – for a few hours.

In the meantime, Peter arrived. He was Wilson’s nephew; his brother’s child. He spoke with Francina, who speaks hardly any English, and who was only recently reconciled with Wilson after long years of bitter feuding. She had been caring for him for the past weeks in Senotlelo. She had asked Peter to get to her quickly because there were only these white people around. Wilson had a lot of white friends, some of them very high powered.

Then Wilson's son Stephen arrived. He looks exactly like Wilson. The Mootane genes are strong. Solomon the last-born, only twenty, looks like Wilson too. The family decided to get a funeral services from Senotlelo to come and collect Wilson. They came at 2.30 pm. They were respectful, and caring; a different order altogether from the tow truckers outside. Death is a business.

Sitting around the dining room table at Scott's drinking tea, Stephen said, "I heard you people had trouble with your car yesterday, what happened?"

We told him the story, and when I got to the part where the red Cell-C minibus pulled up, Stephen asked, "Was it Sidney?"

We were all stunned.

"How do you know Sidney?" I asked.

Stephen replied, "He's my best friend."

[some people orchestrate their own deaths and make sure that things happen in a particular way](#)

Amid her medical explanation Anne commented that some people orchestrate their own deaths and make sure that things happen in a particular way. I think Sidney was part of the plan, making sure we got to Wilson. I think Wilson wanted to die in the city; he was an urban man. I think people feel discarded or put out to pasture when they are returned to the homelands, to remote villages. Wilson's boys, Stephen and Peter, told us that when they saw that Wilson needed to be taken care of – that he could no longer look after himself in Alex, and that Olivia, his most recent love in Alex had gotten a job and was no longer there everyday – they had taken a decision to take Wilson back to KwaNdebele. But Wilson had so

strongly resisted this that in the end, they said, they had had to mix two sleeping tablets into his food, to get him into the car and back home. I was horrified. But it's also funny. So he was kidnapped!

[Johannesburg ... a place where he had been independent, agentive, confident and happy](#)

But I think Wilson wanted to die in the city: in Johannesburg, a place he knew better than anyone I know; a place where he had been independent, agentive, confident and happy. He did not want to die in the hospital. I like to think that Wilson wanted to die with me at close by. That it was his last gift to me, to allow me to be at his side. To feel the last breaths move out of him; to help him to leave. I think Leora was part of the plan because had we been leaving for the hospital from my apartment, Wilson would have died on the floor in the parking garage, there being no couches in the lobbies of Roxdale Mansions. And Anne, though she didn't get to treat Wilson, was the catalyst that got him to Johannesburg, to be with me, and to be in his city.

It's been seventeen years that I have painted and sculpted Wilson's face, and just recently, his body. It's been a deeply formative relationship for me. It has been an uncomplicated relationship. His arrival at my studio nearly every Sunday is why I have made what I have over the years. His presence, his life, has enabled my own. I think everything was how it was meant to be. I wanted to say to Wilson that he died well because I really think he did.