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Ronnie Govender - a short biography and bibliography of this KwaZulu-Natal author.

Ronnie Govender (1934 -) was born in Cato Manor, Durban, and has strong feelings about this community as is evident in most of his 13 plays and his collection of stories, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*, for which he received the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Africa region. During his eleven year teaching career, Govender wrote and directed his first play, *Beyond Calvary*, which received critical acclaim. As a protest against bourgeois theatre he formed the Shah Theatre Academy to foster indigenous theatre and pioneer the cultural boycott. In keeping with the cultural boycott *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, one of South Africa's longest running plays, refused invitations to play at establishment venues and in London. His most well known play, *At the Edge*, was invited to countries all over the world, and won Vita nominations for Best South African Playwright and Best Actor. In 1991 Govender was appointed Marketing Manager of the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town, and two years later appointed director of Durban's Playhouse Theatre. In 2000 Ronnie Govender was awarded a Medal by the English Academy of South Africa for his contribution to English literature. He is presently writing a book of personal experiences and reflections.

Selected Work

from '**Brothers of the Spirit**' in *At the edge and other Cato Manor stories* (1996).

There was a scarcity of rice in those days and you were something of a big shot if you had rice served in your house. Mealie- rice wasn't all that bad, if you knew how to cook it. If you weren't careful, the broken mealie grains would end up as a mushy porridge. The trick was to ensure that the broken mealie grains retained their wholeness like rice. Still, there was nothing like the real thing and those who had got used to rice for lunch and supper never quite got used to mealie-rice. Premlall, however, retained fond memories of mealie-rice. Slipping into old age, Premlall, or Cut-Neck-Bobby as he was popularly known, would recall those days with watery-eyed nostalgia and thrilled his grandchildren and other youngsters in the district with his tales about the good old days in Cato Manor and what a mouth watering combination mealie-rice, dhall and dry-fish chutney made.

'Those days, the mealie-rice was mealie-rice! My friend, Ninney, used to only eat mealie-rice and he was a strong man. He was a centre-half and I saw him score a goal from the half-line. What you think of that? ... Yes, from the half-line!'

'And don't talk about the dhall and the dry-fish chutney. My mother, your great naany, used to grind the spices with her own hands. Cut the chillies from the garden and dry them. Then the mealie-rice steaming one side, the dhall going koosh on the stove, and my mother putting fresh dhania on top of the dhall and then cooking the dry-fish on the kadaar on the open fire; we'll be just waiting to eat ... Mealie-rice was so good in those days.'

It wasn't just the mealie-rice or the dry-fish chutney or the hand-ground spices that were at the nub of his nostalgia. There were a host of haunting memories of a lifetime spent at the hearth of his atman: the soil he'd never imagined he'd one day be torn away from, the rich, red soil of Cato Manor.

Nostalgia, however, is the hand-maiden of delusion. The good remains, the bad recedes and so it was with the mealie-rice. If Cut- Neck-Bobby had to choose now, he wouldn't touch the stuff except when the cane was down, as an occasional and novel deviation from the regular menu. Besides, his wife Chandra would now have nothing to do with mealie-rice.

'You old pagla, what the next-door people will say. The children all working now. God gave so much - now you want mealie-rice. I don't know what's wrong with you!'

How times have changed ... Nowadays people waste food. Those days life was hard. That was not the only hardship although Cut-Neck- Bobby didn't remember them all that well - because no matter how tough things got, his parents made sure that they had clothing, a roof over their heads and something to eat, and when things got really tough there was always the herbs that grew in their well-tended garden. God only knows how he managed it, but Cut-Neck-Bobby's father, Ramnath, who was a market gardener, built a house and sent all eleven of his brood to school.

Education was to him a sacred duty, 'Matha, Pitha, Guru, Deivam - first your parents, next your teacher and then God.'

Everyday Cut-Neck-Bobby's father would load his baskets, hung at either end of a bamboo pole over his sturdy

[zoom](#)


Ronnie Govender



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Translations: 

shoulders with the different types of vegetables from his garden and trudge over the hill to the tarred roads of Berea, where he would sell his wares to the white madams, most of whom had grown quite fond of their efficient and reliable vendor, Sammy, although they never really bothered to find out what his real name was ...

'Fresh dhania, Madam, fresh carrots, big, big cabbages ...'and under his breath he would mumble whenever one of the madams bought dhania, 'Arreh, what these people know about dhania. They don't know nothing about jeera or garam masala. Cultured people eat cultured food. They only eat kmvtchi food - meat, meat, boiled meat all the time. What they know about food? What they know about anything? That's why they frightened for us, they don't want to give us a chance. If I only get one shop there by Fenniscowles Road - if they only give me a chance, I'll show them ...'

But he was a wise Sammy. Or so he thought, as he kept his feelings to himself and smiled graciously at the madams.

'Hello Madam, hello Madam. How's Madam's corns today? No, the ones on your toes. Still paining? Oh shame.

Madam must put manja. My house anything happen we put manja, where doctor and all that! Can't afford it.

What's manja? Oh, that yellow thing you put in the curry. How you say ... turmeric powder, that's right.

'You know, Madam, my son, the eldest fullah, stupid fullah, he cut his leg with one broken milk bottle ... thava big cut, no zaggeration. We put manja, put manja, thava no time got better. Must use manja, Madam. What, Madam? Cabbages? For you only sixpence. What, two cabbages? Lovely, Madam, thank you, thank you.'

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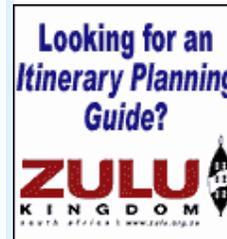
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