

Other Voices - Confessions of a TV Translator

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"I'm setting my lawyer on you," said the furious woman, speaking from a Crimplene shop in Joburg. "You told lies on TV. When I tried to book the holiday you promised, they told me you made it all up. I can get you into big trouble." It was the second of April, 1983. At the time I was a TV language dubbing translator, producer and director. I freelanced on the fringes of a sophisticated South African sound industry, which used the microphone, not the camera, to create powerful illusions. And it was such an illusion that got me into trouble.

Sometimes a good jazzing up is the only way to make certain programmes worth airing. When an SABC rep bought a series in Europe, the deal often involved lesser programmes the producers were dying to get rid of. One of these items landed in the SABC language dubbing department. It was an hour-long satire produced by an Austrian TV news magazine, shot in Greece, full of jokes about garlic. Asked for suggestions, I said, "Why don't we recut it, write a satirical script with a South African angle, dub it into Afrikaans and air it as a national hoax for 1 April next year?"

Having talked myself into a job, I rearranged scenes and cut running time to half an hour. My script portrayed a country called Alburria, on the straits of Hormuz, connected to the Mediterranean by the fictitious Aleppo to Abadan ship canal. The main product was garlic, and the national dish was goat tripe fried in fish oil. There were barbed hints about the Info Scandal in South Africa, a hot talking point at the time. Alburria was a hell on earth, where a two-week holiday cost only R400, including airfare from Joburg to Cyprus, a cruise liner through the imaginary canal, and five-star hotel accommodation in Port Garlick with goat tripe for dinner every night. I enlisted two brilliant artists who are sadly no longer with us: Friedrich Stark did a lip-synch Afrikaans version of my script; Paul Eilers recorded the voice-over. The title was Koningryk van Knoffel (Kingdom of Garlic), billed as the first in an imaginary documentary series. Dubbing boss June Seymour approved the final product and it hit the airwaves on the evening of April Fools' Day.

I wasn't sure how things would pan out. Because many people are unaware they've swallowed an illusion. That year I had treated my kids to a movie starring the Trinity duo: rugged Bud Spencer and handsome Terence Hill. We met a neighbour and her kids in the queue. She said, "This is a real movie – not like the fake things you dub." I didn't say Bud and Terence had just been lionized by Joburg's Italian community. Or that Bud was born Carlo Pedersoli; Terence was christened Mario Girotti. Bud's English came from Lloyd Battista; Terence was dubbed by Robert Sommer.

Early talkies were filmed without sound. The actress would recite the alphabet as she emoted. A translator would then write dialogue that suited the energy in her face. When her lips met (a bilabial) p, b or m was required. If her teeth showed on the lower lip (a dentilabial) that meant v or f. A voice artist recorded the lines while an endless loop of film played, and the best take was mixed in with music and sound effects. Alfred Hitchcock looped *To Catch a Thief* with a location guide track so Cary Grant and Grace Kelly could give a nuanced vocal performance. When stereo sound came in, especially with musicals, looping was a necessity. Today, computerised Automatic Dialogue Replacement (ADR) is standard in the movie industry. The SABC began using coloured stripes drawn diagonally on the film to cue voice artists. The ladies who drew them were known as streeptrekkers. They later became synchronisers, writing out the dialogue in full on a transparent film projected horizontally below the picture.

Lip-synch dialogue is an art. It takes an hour to translate a minute, rolling a tape machine back and forth while you mouth experimental lines under your breath. It's easy when a mouth is off-screen, or covered by a full beard. But when an actress with a porcelain complexion and encarnadine lipstick is in big close up, you hold thumbs. A problem can take weeks to fix. I had one at the beginning of *Arende*, retitled as *Cape Rebel* in English. The scene was of a burial at sea. A preacher intones the 23rd Psalm, a bugler plays *The Last Post*, and the body goes overboard. Flip Theron, playing the preacher, says, "Ek sal in die huis van die Heer vir ewig (pause) bly" That went nicely into "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever," with the

f and v synching beautifully. But the “bly” was left floating in space. On deadline day, I had the answer. The preacher says, “Bugler?” just before The Last Post rings out. I’m proud of the translation, which features in an M.Phil thesis praising my “transference of subtext”. It was by another bright talent who is long gone, Louis Calitz.

I confess to naughtiness, especially in jazzing up dull documentaries. In a documentary about Komodo dragons, there was a sequence of two great lizards mating. One of them opened its mouth, and I dubbed in a throaty roar. That’s the only reptilian part I ever played. The voice-over deliberately imitated the tone of Godzilla, and I used a lot of jungle music. I went to town on German documentaries, which I found very prosaic. The voice-overs lacked poetry. They listed such things as kilometres travelled, rolls of film shot, and cans of bully beef consumed by the film crew. One crew filmed a scene at Yungai in Peru, the devastated site of a 1970 earthquake and landslide from the snow-clad peak of Huascarán. It buried the town of Yungay and 25 000 inhabitants. The commentary was full of tonnes, altitudes, facts, facts, facts. Later, the film shows a blind harpist playing in the street of a nearby town, without any comment. I took out all the statistics and put in my translation of the harpist’s lament: Under Huascarán, white as a bride/ Runs the Rio Santa black with tears.

On the afternoon of the second April 1983, I waltzed into the SABC dubbing department to ask about reactions to Alburria. The main switchboard had been complaining about a flood of calls from travel agents. One lady had left her number several times. I called her, and she threatened legal action. But when I asked her about the appeal of goat tripe fried in fish oil, she snarled, “Very funny ha-ha,” and hung up on me. I heaved a sigh of relief. Nowadays I create illusions in novels – it’s a lot safer. Since Alburria I have fallen from grace only once on April Fools’ Day. It was at DRUM in the early years of this century. I ran an article headed New Age Crystals Made My Penis Grow, which really got me into trouble because the switchboard was blocked solid for two days and mail bags were strained at the seams.