



It's My Life. First Run/Icarus Films.

Reviewed by Marc Epprecht

Published on H-SAfrica (December, 2002)

HIV/AIDS and Civil Society in South Africa

It's My Life offers a highly provocative perspective on the politics of HIV/AIDS treatment. The story is a compelling one. It follows Zackie Achmat, a founder and the current president of South Africa's Treatment Action Campaign, through five months of activism to make anti-retroviral drugs available at public cost. The TAC had originally pressured the government to promulgate legislation that would enable generic production of anti-retroviral drugs. This was a major breakthrough in a country where the government appeared to be fiddling while the people burned—over four million South Africans were infected with HIV in 2000 yet only a few hundred could afford the exorbitant cost of treatment. The major multinational pharmaceutical companies, however, then sued the government to block what they claimed was an infringement of international patent law. The TAC joined the case as a “friend of the court.” In that role, it was instrumental in shaming the companies into backing down from their suit. The companies have now gone so far as to offer their drugs at cost, a huge victory with implications throughout the developing world. When the government dawdled in taking up this offer, the TAC, supported by the main trade unions, turned against its former “friend” and sued the government. This case was also successful and has compelled the government into adopting a relatively aggressive policy of providing anti-retroviral therapy to pregnant mothers. All of this makes for a dramatic and ultimately encouraging story of people power. Achmat is the charismatic, immensely clever, and arguably fanatical personality behind it. *It's My Life* follows him through the period around the first trial (April 2001).

We see him in court, leading public demonstrations, doing interviews for the international media, strategizing with fellow activists, and hanging out with friends and family. We also see him visiting the doctor a lot and lying in bed feeling ill. In this way, the film humanizes the pain of HIV. Also, it draws dramatic attention to Achmat's remarkable energy and moral courage. Indeed, one reason for the TAC's success was Achmat's principled refusal to take anti-retroviral drugs as long as they were not available to the population as a whole. By putting his life on the line, he powerfully exposed the cruelty and hypocrisy of the main proponents of the patent regime or delay. Dramatizations of Achmat's boyhood are interspersed with the contemporary action in order to flesh out our understanding of his political convictions. There is an “in-your-face” quality to these segments, not unlike Achmat's work as an author and film producer.[1] The young Achmat wrestled to understand his sexual attraction to white men in a racist and homophobic society. He went on to become both an anti-apartheid activist and one of the guiding lights of the gay rights movement. The film is unabashedly one-sided, which may partially explain why it has won so many prizes from gay rights organizations and film festivals in the West. The South African government and companies come off as incompetent, greedy, callous, duplicitous, and/or just plain stupid. This is probably accurate in many cases. However, intelligent and caring health-care professionals have come out in support of the government's cautious approach to drug therapy. Why bankrupt the health care system on drug treatment when so many necessary preconditions to good health are missing, they ask?

<cite>It's My Life</cite> does not give their point of view a very respectful airing. Rather, it highlights a television interview where the president of South Africa looks especially dodgy. <p> In my own view, Thabo Mbeki has made some poor judgements in his response to a national catastrophe. Making him and his ministers look like fools, however, surely does not advance the cause of HIV/AIDS prevention. Indeed, some audiences might interpret the drama as presented in a decidedly unhelpful way: scary black dudes oppose wise "white" leadership (with nameless black cheerleaders and victims in the background). But what about the argument that South Africa cannot deal with the crisis with drugs when it is still paying back apartheid-era debts to the West, for example? <p> Without presenting the broader context of the debate, we are left with a heroic but dangerously over-simplified tale. All the better, I suppose, to stimulate further debate that could lead to more appropriate, global responses. At 73 minutes, however, including numerous "art" shots of doors closing, of day-to-day life in Cape Town, and of cars going by on the street, it is probably a bit too long for use in most classrooms. <p> Note <p> [1]. Achmat, Zackie, "'Apostles Of Civilised Vice': 'Immoral Practices' and 'Unnatural Vice' in South African Prisons And Compounds, 1890-1920," <cite>Social Dynamics</cite>, 19:2 (1993), pp. 92-110; idem. "My Childhood as an Adult Molestor: A Salt River Moffie," in <cite>Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa</cite>, M. Gevisser and Edwin Cameron, eds. (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1994), pp. 325-341; Zackie Achmat and Jack Lewis (director/producer), <cite>Apostles of Civilised Vice</cite> (Johannesburg: South African Broadcast Corporation, 1999). These sources all contain some of the most homo-erotically explicit language and scenes published or broadcast in Africa to date.

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Citation: Marc Epprecht. Review of , *It's My Life*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. December, 2002.

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