

Flashback Hotel: Early Stories by Ivan Vladislavić (Random House/Struik) R180
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This welcome reissue of Ivan Vladislavić's two early anthologies, *Missing Persons* (1989) and *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories* (1996), has the added interest of enabling us to look back, with the hindsight of the later achievements, and trace something like a trajectory in the development of this original and inventive writer. Both originality and inventiveness were there from the start, of course, in, for instance, the wonderful conceit, in 'The Box', of one Quentin suddenly finding that he can abduct public figures from the TV set and keep them in a menagerie in the spare bedroom; or, in 'We Came to the Monument', the meeting between a runaway statue and a young woman driven with her family to squat in the Voortrekker monument.

As these two examples demonstrate, Vladislavić has from the start worked with a kind of heightened reality, whereby the everyday assumes a surreal clarity. The stories are set in a recognisable South Africa, and are yet distorted into dream or nightmare. So, in 'When My Hands Burst into Flames', the unusual, to say the least, event is meticulously recorded as taking place in the United Building Society in Hillbrow, with repercussions for a German tourist entering the Chelsea Hotel. (The collection as a whole will, incidentally, serve as a memento of the old Hillbrow – anticipating in this respect *The Restless Supermarket* of 2001.)

Even where the setting itself is less specific, as in 'The Terminal Bar', the terms of reference tend to be recognisably local. Here, for instance, we have the gruesome comedy of a family murderer, one Boshoff, who shot his wife and daughter, affectionately known as Bossies: "Then he turns the weapon on himself, but can't pull the trigger. 'He discovered,' says Father O' Reilly, 'that he had too much to live for.'" This is a story, we feel, that could only have been set in South Africa.

The surreal distortion is more extreme in the earlier volume than in *Propaganda by Monuments*: it is as if Vladislavić were gradually tending to anchor his imagination more and more firmly to the actual details of urban living. Thus 'Autopsy' recalls 'When My Hand Burst Into Flames', in also being something of a guided tour of Hillbrow, but the incident giving rise to the journey – in this instance a fancied spotting of Elvis – is marginally closer to something that could conceivably have happened. So, too, the marvellous title story, though not exactly plausible, is satirically rooted in the fancied correspondence between a functionary in post-Stalin Russia and a taxi-owner in post-apartheid South Africa.

As this example demonstrates, the trajectory I have noted also absorbingly traces the decades spanning the transition to democracy. Thus 'The Prime Minister is Dead', the first story in *Missing Persons*, grimly recalls the Verwoerd years; whereas 'Courage', towards the end of *Propaganda*, recalls, from a distance of some years, "the first days of our freedom [when] it was not really necessary to be nice to the whites any more." And the justly celebrated "The Whites Only Bench" wittily recalls the slightly edgy euphoria of the transitional Rainbow Nation days when all we had to worry about was how most tastefully to commemorate the dreadful recent past.

Though there is no simple line of development – a late story like "Isle of Capri" veers back unexpectedly to the surreal style of the earlier tales – it does seem true that Vladislavić is here moving gradually towards the topographical realism of *The Restless*

Supermarket, Exploded View and *Portrait with Keys*. Or rather, the topographical realism has always been there; it's just that in the later work it comes to dominate, at the expense of the zany surrealism of the early stories.

Is this a loss? I know some readers who would say yes, the later works seem less imaginatively inspired, less gloriously inventive than the earlier. 'The Omniscope (Pat. Pending)', for instance, contains a Joycean cornucopia of objects, apparently for their own sake: at such times Vladislavić seems to delight in the sheer multitudinous thingness of things, with little regard to verisimilitude.

But other readers, this reviewer included, may feel more at home in the rendering, with fictional heightening, of the ordinary and the recognisable. 'The Tuba', for instance, is a hilarious but telling rendering of (Southern) suburban Johannesburg, in which the absurdity of the situation – a tuba player in the Correctional Services orchestra taking exception to the joyful noise of a (black) Salvation Army band – needs no imaginative embellishment, though it does modulate into a closing vision of the "big mouth of the tuba, growing smaller and fainter, passing out of our neighbourhood, our lives, and our times."

Similarly, 'Courage' is as funny as it is because Vladislavić recognises that humour can be grounded quite sufficiently in the actions of ordinary people doing ordinary things in their ornery way. The account of the feckless (and trigger-fingerless) Kumbuza being transformed, through the artistic endeavours of one Peter Meyerhold Becker, into, literally, the concrete embodiment of military-style courage, AK 47 and all, shows Vladislavić in something of a Herman Charles Bosman vein.

If that suggests that he is here also less original than in his more surreal flights of fancy – well, yes, perhaps. But fortunately we don't have to choose. The pleasure of this collection is that whichever aspect of Vladislavić's genius appeals to you, the surreal or the realist, there is plenty of both here.