Transforming ideas in trying times

Albie Sachs takes part in ‘Playing with Fire’ debate

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Serene, at peace, steely. These are words that come to mind, watching retired Constitutional Court Judge Albie Sachs participating in a debate last Thursday at the University of Stellenbosch.

Judge Albie (as he asks to be called), commences by describing his reaction to the events which led to his terrible injuries, when in 1988 a bomb affixed to his car by apartheid regime operatives in Maputo, Mozambique, took his right arm, and his sight in one eye.

“When I realised that I had survived a bomb, that I’d not been kidnapped and was on the way back to South Africa and jail, I fainted back into the blackness.

“I’ve only lost an arm. They came for me, and I’ve survived,” he says, and thus began his long road to recovery. “My conviction was, that as I got better, my country would get better.”

Having set the stage, he turns to the substance of the debate, titled “Playing with Fire: The meaning of art in troubled times” – in conversation with Faith Pienaar, BSc Agriculture graduate (oenology and viticulture), who has chosen to work in the field of student leadership, as project manager in the university’s transformation office.

Ms Pienaar also played a leadership role in the #FeesMustFall campaign at Stellenbosch University in 2015.

Judge Albie recounts the time in Maputo when he decided to ship his collection of artwork accumulated while he was in exile – his flat had more art than furniture – back to South Africa, to the University of the Western Cape (UWC), where it would form part of a permanent collection.

The vagaries of customs in Maputo being what they were, he arrived back in the country before his artworks, to play a central role in our democratic evolution.

“But it was the phone call I received the other day from UWC, telling me not to worry because my artwork had been taken down and put into storage for safe-keeping, that troubled me deeply,” he says, and thereby skilfully sets the scene for the rest of the debate. No longer is it a debate about art in troubled times, it is about the ongoing countrywide student protests.

The allusion to the destruction of artworks at UCT, some by noted anti-apartheid activists and black artists, raises the contradiction that exists in the current discourse. Is the destruction of art a manifestation of change, of revolution, Ms Pienaar’s point?

Or, as Judge Albie suggests, does such destruction eventually lead to the destruction of one’s own humanity, which prompted the ANC in exile to initially reject terrorism, and to consistently refuse to use torture throughout the struggle years?

Continued on page 3