

Nestling With The Warriors;

On the set of *Shaka Zulu* 1985

By Ian Knight

Next to me, the nearest warrior turned to me and grinned, giving me a thumb's up. He was just a few feet away, on the end of a line of perhaps twenty men that stretched off down under the curve of the river-bank. His head was a waving mass of black ostrich feathers, and a broad spear-blade glinted behind the shield held down in the tangle of undergrowth by his side. We were crouched in the lee of the bank, just a few feet away from where the shallow water of the iMfule river flowed over its sandy bed. On the bank opposite, fifty yards away, another group were going about their business, apparently unaware that we were there, women fetching water in pots, men idly sharpening their spears on stones.



Then, suddenly, in the fringes of the bush beyond, more feathers could be seen bobbing above the undergrowth, getting nearer, until a line of warriors, dressed like those beside me, emerged into the open. Women screamed and ran, and men grabbed for their shields and hurried to form up, but the sudden attack scattered them and they began to fall back into the river in front of us. It was the moment the warriors next to me had been waiting for and, with a shout, they sprung out from under the bank, splashing through the shallows, cutting off the fleeing fugitives and trapping them in the middle of the river. Attacked on both sides, the men put up a fight, shields smacking into each other with a fierce thump, spears flashing and men falling heavily into the water. In no time it was over – the ambushed warriors were dead, and the victors were jubilantly rounding up their women.

As they walked back to me, the party on my side were smiling, and my friend, spotting me taking photos, paused to raise his fist in a triumphant ‘black power’ pose.

None of it was real, of course, except perhaps the black power salute; it wasn’t 1820 but 1985, the shields and head-dresses were real enough but many of the fur costumes were fake, the spears were made of plastic, and, thankfully, the dead warriors were soon up and laughing with the rest of us. I had just watched a short scene being filmed for the epic SABC TV series *Shaka Zulu*.

Looking back, I am still surprised at my cheek in blagging my way on-set. I was on the middle of one of my more adventurous trips to KwaZulu – it was still in those days, the dying gasp of apartheid, a nominally independent ‘black homeland’, and a distinct administrative area to Natal – spending six weeks with a friend hitch-hiking around the historic sites. I was in my 20s at the time, and foreign travel was still a new experience to me, and looking back now I realise I had probably bitten off more than I could realistically chew. This was in the days before tourism to the battlefields – none of the popular lodges near the sites now where there then, there was nothing in the way of public transport, not to mention the fact that we were two white blokes wandering at will through a notionally black African area at a time when tensions within the country were beginning to erupt into serious violence. Before I went the South African Embassy in London assured me that I needed a permit to enter a homeland area, and I had applied for and received one, together with a letter of welcome from Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who was then head of KwaZulu. I depended on this, and a certain amount of naivety, to see me through – although interestingly, even in those bureaucratic days, when a shimmering sense of watchfulness hung over the country, no one would ever ask to see it.

The trip as a whole produced its fair share of stories. I remember us standing beside the road somewhere near Melmoth, holding up a sign for Vryheid; a passing police van pulled up next to us and a very stern Afrikaner policeman came over. ‘You can’t display a sign beside the road’, he said, with a clipped firmness that was distinctly unnerving, ‘Get in the back!’ We grabbed our rucksacks and did as we were told, and as I climbed into the cage, where prisoners were kept in transport, I asked meekly ‘What did we do?’ ‘Ach, man’, he replied. ‘we’re going to Vryheid – I’ll give you a lift!’ And then there was the time we slept in the newly-completed, but not yet open to the public, huts at the oNdini royal residence, with mice running over us all night, and the time we got lost on the Fugitives’ Trail as night came on, crossed the river in the dark, and ended up sleeping in the grass beside the road on the way to Rorke’s Drift...

It was early in our trip, however, when we were in Eshowe, that I discovered that the filming of *Shaka Zulu* was going on. This was early in my writing career but I was genuinely writing for a number of history magazines and, on the strength of that, I sought out the production office in town and asked to be allowed onto the set. To my surprise they were enthusiastic – only later did I realise that there was an embargo on overseas’ actors working in South Africa at that point, and that the series had been shot in the face of an almost complete lack of overseas interest. They were delighted to have a ‘foreign journalist’ willing to write about the project, and it didn’t seem to matter that I was writing for *Military Illustrated* rather than *The Sunday Times*.

I had, it seemed, arrived right at the end of the shoot (‘It’s a pity you weren’t here on Saturday – there was a big party to say farewell to Edward Fox and Robert Powell’) and things were winding down, but there were still a few pick-up shots to be done. I was told to report to the office the following morning, and they would take me out to the set. I remember an assistant driving me out – at the time I had no idea where we were going but now I remember we were on a hill overlooking a

spectacular lake, and I realise now that it was one of the sets that was later turned into the Shakaland hotel complex. I was ushered into a large hut where they were filming a short scene, the one in which the Boer translator Piet writes Shaka's name on a hide. The actor playing Piet was on his knees, explaining with some urgency to King Shaka that writing was not a form of witchcraft. The camera was focussing on his head and shoulders, and the hide, and only King Shaka's feet were in view – and, indeed, in costume; above them, out of the glare of the lights, actor Henry Cele was wearing a fleece against the morning cold. It was my first exposure to the smoke-and-mirrors world of movie-making. Once the scene had been shot my host offered to introduce me to the Director, William Faure, a short, young and rather intense man who had been the subject of a lot of press criticism recently, most of it questioning whether the series was taking an essential pro-Government, pro-apartheid view of history. Perhaps he had read some of this that morning, but he was certainly seething and, as my host explained I was 'a British journalist', he looked at me fiercely and said 'If you have come to say that I am a Government stooge you can just **** off!'. Without wanting to admit that I was more used to writing for model soldier magazines than for cutting-edge political journalism, I assured him I was only going to write glowing things, and he relaxed a little, and we passed a few moments talking less controversially about the project. On the way out, my minder made soothing noises, and explained that 'Bill's been under a lot of pressure recently. But – I think they are filming a battle scene today, would you be interested in seeing that..?'

Would I? And so off we went again, mostly bumping along narrow dirt tracks into the middle of somewhere else. Again we pulled up in quite a busy parking spot on top of a hill – I remember trucks and cars and people milling about with equipment. 'Have you seen my brother around?' someone asked me, 'he's doing the fake blood for the battle-scene'. The location, it seemed, was down at the bottom of a steep valley below – I'm pretty sure it was on the spot where the tourist lodge Simunye later stood – and judging by the number of people passing up and down with camera, lighting or catering equipment the only way down was to walk. As I was going down I met an impi coming up – a group of extras who had been in an earlier scene, and were finished for the day; they were in a boisterous mood, and came past me still wearing their headdresses and carrying their weapons, but with jumpers and jackets on their bodies against the cool air. Down at the bottom I was surprised to see a much-bigger set up, with an extensive crew and equipment on the flats overlooking the river, and dozens of extras waiting to be allocated their places. I was introduced to a rather more relaxed Second-Unit Director, who told me they were about to film a scene where the Zulus were ambushing – someone, anyone – at the river, and I could go where I wanted, providing I kept out of shot. I think they filmed the scene twice, to cover the angles, while I was there, and it was after the first take that I realised the Zulu warriors lying in wait were out of sight under the river-bank and could only be seen when they charged out.

And thus I found myself with one of King Shaka's smaller military victories played out right before my eyes.

That evening my friend and I had repaired to the bar of the George Hotel in Eshowe to discuss our movements. I was all for spending another day or two around the set but he, less of a movie fan than I, was getting bored, and wanted to go exploring. While we were talking someone passed us and said 'Hello boys – those don't sound like local accents!' It was actor and documentary maker Kenneth Griffith, who had a small part in the series, playing a Jewish businessman who accompanied the expedition to Zululand ('They left a real character called Nathaniel Isaacs out – and Isaacs was Jewish. I thought it was very important that the Jewish community be represented, so I persuaded Billy to make my part Jewish'). I was well aware, even then, of Kenneth Griffith's genuine interest in South African history – he had made the centenary documentary for the BBC, *Black As*

Hell and Thick As Grass, which remains one of the most exciting and original documentaries made about the Anglo-Zulu War – and as we explained what we were doing he warmed to us, bought us dinner (hey, we were hitch-hiking!) and he spent the evening telling us of historical sites he had found interesting around Eshowe. I told him I had been out on the set, and he asked if I had met Henry Cele, who played Shaka. I'd seen him of course, but not spoken to him, and Kenneth offered to introduce us.

This, as it turned out, proved to be an unsettlingly clandestine affair, and an interesting insight to me, as a foreigner, of the extent of the restrictions under the apartheid regime. Henry was staying in the same hotel – but the rooms allocated to black Africans were hidden away round the back, there were separate bars and dining areas, and blacks and whites were prohibited from mixing on hotel premises. And so, I guess, we broke the law, as Kenneth invited us back to his room, then went off and returned with Henry in tow; as he came through the door I swear we all looked over his shoulder for signs of a secret police presence, watching us. We only managed half an hour together but Henry was relaxed, chatting easily about his sudden career change – he had gone from being a professional footballer, a goalie known as 'The Black Cat', to playing Shaka, a role he won with his undoubted athletic presence – and the responsibility he felt bringing to life Zulu history's most iconic and controversial figure. Before he went, he and Kenneth posed for a photo with me, and I have regretted ever since that I didn't have something a little more sartorial to wear in my hiking rucksack.

That proved to be our last brush with the production – the following day I gave way to my friend's insistence that we get off and 'explore some real history'. Oddly that day seems like history itself now, with the passage of thirty-five years in between, and the passing of most of the people involved. Once Kenneth and I were back in England we kept in touch, and visited one another on an off until his death in 2006, chatting over obscure aspects of South African history. I never saw Henry Cele or William Faure again, though both are sadly gone now too (and too young, Cele in 2007 at the age of 66 and Faure in 1994 at 45), and I doubt very much whether the handful of articles I wrote about *Shaka Zulu* had the slightest impact on its reception. When it was screened eventually on British TV it was allocated an odd late-night slot over several Saturdays, reflecting, presumably, the unease in production circles about a project which had apparently been made with the blessing of the South African government. Not that it mattered; the series was shown around the world anyway, and had a dramatic impact in the US where nothing of its type – placing black African figures at the centre of their own history – had been seen before.

It's difficult now not to see *Shaka Zulu* as the product of the fraught times which produced it - overwrought, at times over-long and seldom ever under-dramatic, a bravura attempt to add a degree of King Arthur mysticism to the foundation myths of an African kingdom, dark, brooding and bloody, yet often extraordinary viewing. It may not be the King Shaka of history but it is certainly the King Shaka of all the many conflicting myths and legends about him, and it remains a remarkable piece of television; I remain rather proud of the fact that I was there when a small part of it was made.

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1). With Kenneth Griffith, left, and King Shaka himself – actor Henry Cele, centre.