



Reflections on the Inaugural Living Rights Festival

By Zenariah Barends

my naam is Februarie
ek is verkoop
my borste, privaatdele, my oë
my brein
is nog nie myne
soos die Sao José
loop ek opgekap
word ek telkens gesink deur 'n ander storm
geen Jesus wat op die water loop vir my

my naam is Februarie
ek soek nog die stang van die stuur
want onderwater lê die familie
die kind aan ma se rokspant
die ma aan pa se hand
hoe diep lê hulle, aan watter kant

my naam is Februarie
opgeveil, verkoop, die hoogste bieder
het ontslae geraak van my regte naam
geen vergoeding betaal
vir dit my naam, gesteel, gesink
onderwater lê dit nog
saam met die familie
wrakstukke van die Sao José
ten gronde geloop deur 'n wind
briesende branders wat die buit
se hele toekoms besluit
die profyt teen die wal uitsmyt

my naam is Februarie
die Masbieker op die Sao José
so was ek genoem
toe my hierse moedertaal gestalte kry

toe tonge met mekaar begin te knoop
en letters 'n vrye gang begin te loop
in 'n desperate poging in hoop
dat magte ook nie hierdie identiteit
moet stroop
word ek die Masbieker, net 'n naam
onder 'n ander lug gekraam

My name is February
I was sold
my breasts, private parts and eyes
my brain
are not mine yet
like the Sao José
I am walking ruined
often sank by another storm
no Jesus walking on water for me

my name is February
I still search for the rod of the steering wheel
because the family lies at the bottom
the child stitched to mother's dress
mother's hand locked in father's fist
how deep down are they, on which side

my name is February
auctioned, sold, the highest bidder
disposed of my real name
paid no compensation
for that, my name, stolen, sunk
underwater it still lies
with the family
wrecks of the Sao José
ran aground by a wind
furious waves that decided
the future of the loot
smashing the profit against the embankment

my name is February
the Masbieker on the Sao José
that's how I was called
when my mother tongue of here came into
being
when tongues started to form a bond
and letters started walking freely
in a desperate attempt at survival and hope

that forces should not strip this identity too
I became the Masbieker, only a name
born under a different sky



en diep gevul met skaam

and deeply filled with shame

My naam is Februarie

my name is February

I rearranged this landscape
my hands wove the patterns of the vineyards
my feet pressed the grapes
and I was paid with the wine
I carry Alcohol-Foetal Syndrome children on my back
my name is February
I still march on the eve of December first
I walk the cobblestones of this city
when I cry out in desperation
“Remember the emancipation of the slaves!”

My name is February
two hundred years after the Sao José
I was given the vote
they said I was free

but don't you see how often I am submerged
weighed down
I am the sunken, the soiled
forgotten
and yet memory will not leave me

My name is February
stranded at Third beach
but no one comes to look for me
no one waves from the dunes
no bridges back to Mozambique

my name is February
I will be resurrected
brought to the surface
unshackled, unchained, unashamed
My name is February.

(My Name is February - Diana Ferrus)

The inaugural Living Rights Festival (LRF) emerged from a deep yearning for a more just world, a world where social justice was more than a buzzword and transcended its status as a trendy phrase to become the lived experience for all. It was a bold undertaking, launched at a time of pervasive and seemingly intractable conflicts, none more devastating and enduring than the ongoing crisis in Palestine, which has been under occupation since 1948, ironically the same year



that South Africa became an Apartheid state. The LRF unfolded against the horrifying backdrop of the genocidal war raging in Gaza, a stark reminder of the immense gap between our aspirations for human rights and the brutal realities on the ground. While the spectre of a second Trump presidency loomed large, threatening to further destabilise an already fractured global landscape, the LRF served as a vital space for reflection, dialogue and action. Therefore, the timing of the LRF, on the cusp of a potential shift in global political power, also added a layer of urgency. The possibility of a future administration in the US overtly hostile to human rights and international cooperation, underscored the importance of building universal solidarity and momentum at the grassroots level.

The weight of the Gaza conflict undoubtedly permeated every aspect of the LRF. It served not just as a backdrop, but as a visceral and urgent call to action. How could we celebrate and promote "living rights" while witnessing such blatant ongoing violations of fundamental human dignity in Gaza? This question, I suspect, haunted many attendees and participants, forcing us to confront the uncomfortable truth that the fight for social justice is not a theoretical exercise, but a desperate struggle for survival and freedom for countless global communities, linked through the unprecedented and consistent demonstrations of solidarity throughout the world. The LRF, therefore, became more than just a celebration - it transformed into a collective act of bearing witness, a space to amplify the voices of those silenced by violence and oppression. Given this background, the launch event of the LRF in October 2024 focused on the efficacy of the United Nations, as an institution of global governance. The panelists, which included Amr Moussa, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Kumi Naidoo, Michael Lynk and Zane Dangor all indicated that the UN had not fulfilled its mission to promote global peace but given that the institution exists, it is imperative that it be transformed to meet its institutional mandate.

The powerful poetry of Khadija Heeger and the outstanding performance of The Little Giants, under the stewardship of George Werner at the launch event of the LRF set an important tone for the festival, which incorporated the arts as a fundamental component as it was woven intrinsically into its fabric. The arts served as a powerful vehicle for expression, resistance, and healing. From the thought-provoking exploration of Gandhi's legacy in the multi-media production of "Must Gandhi Fall?" to the unifying and inspiring "Unbreakable Spirits: Concert for Humanity" on December 1st, artistic expression provided a vital outlet for processing complex emotions, fostering empathy and igniting collective action. The Unbreakable Spirits concert, held at the Joseph Stone Auditorium in Athlone, integrated two important dates separated by geography and history - The International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People on 29 November and Emancipation Day on December 1st. It bridged the gap between slavery in South Africa and the ongoing struggle for freedom of the Palestinian people. The notable performance of the slave poem, My Name is February, by Diana Ferrus, which introduced this reflective piece, was one of the powerful moments at the Unbreakable Spirits concert, one of many such moments, which included riveting performances by Vusumuzi Mpofu, Tina Schouw, Lungiswa



Plaatjies, the Triple C Ensemble, Tierra Flamenca and the enthralling rieldansers, the Betjies van Betjiesfontein.

It was heartening that these artistic interventions were not merely add-ons to the LRF programme for they were integral to its purpose, offering alternative pathways of understanding while engaging with the urgent issues at hand. They reminded us that the struggle for living rights is not just a political battle, but a deeply human one, requiring creativity, imagination, and the courage to express our shared humanity in the face of adversity. As Paulo Freire (1970) stated, “The oppressed, who have been shaped by the death-affirming climate of oppression, must find through their struggle the way to life-affirming humanization, which does not simply lie in having more to eat.” Therefore, the arts provided a space for this affirmation, while simultaneously providing space for rage, beauty, connection, and most importantly - hope, which amplified the festival's message potentially leaving a lasting impact on all who participated.

Looking back, the inaugural Living Rights Festival was a powerful, if at times sobering, experience. It served as a potent reminder of the work that remains to be done, the injustices that need to be confronted, and the living rights that must be fought for and defended for all of humanity. It highlighted the need for movements dedicated to justice and equality to become more resilient, more creative, and more interconnected. The Living Rights Festival, in this context, felt like a crucial gathering, a moment to reaffirm our shared commitment to a different and more just future. Most importantly, it was an extended space to reaffirm the enduring hope for a better world, a world where the principles of social justice are not just words on a page, but the very essence of our shared humanity.

In conclusion my poem, *Sunbirds will Sing*, speaks to this vision of hope in what often seems like an impossibly hopeless situation.

When the day comes
and it will come
for the freedom feast
Olives, hummus and watermelons
will adorn long tables
scattered with petals of purple irises
For the children of Gaza
For the people of Palestine
Displaced no more
Sunbirds will carry songs
over borders, to all the corners
where lovers of freedom reside
On the resurrected walls
of bombed buildings
every name shall be inscribed



each brick will honour the fallen
From the red-soaked earth
a carpet of flowers
poppies, chamomile, honeysuckle
will blossom and spread
from the river to the sea
Tyrants take heed
Empires that planned to rule forever
have crumbled into dust
Mountain gazelles run swiftly
leaping to catch their dreams
like flowing water carves a path
through rocks and boulders
Treasured, long-held keys
will unlock stolen doors
Sunbirds will sing
Freedom cannot be caged forever

Zenariah Barends

The sunbird is a symbol of freedom in Palestine. There are other symbols of significance to Palestinians in this poem of hope, including the iris, watermelon, olives and the mountain gazelle.

Note:

Galaxy AI used for editing purposes.