

## Small man made big difference in SA

Jonathan Jansen | 29 November, 2012 00:34



**He was an unlikely hero. Small in stature, reticent in public, and very soft-spoken, Gert Johannes Gerwel could easily be missed in a crowd. Nothing in his early life destined him for greatness; he grew up on a sheep farm in the rural Eastern Cape in a district of Somerset East.**

Yet "Jakes", as he was called, would become a giant in public life and in higher education.

To a generation of students who sat at his feet, you approached him with caution for the man had an intimidating grip on politics, society and his first love, Afrikaans literature.

That was precisely why those of us who grew up in the English language were cautious. How could the man find redeeming qualities in Afrikaans? This was, after all, the 1970s and what happened in Soweto had imprinted on young minds an unreflective negativity towards the language of the oppressor.

But the professor could explain the rich and variegated history of Afrikaans better than any, and persuade angry activists of the role of the slaves and the first inhabitants in helping to shape what would have been a more beautiful language had the Nats not messed it up.

Jakes was not, however, a language sentimentalist when it came to Afrikaans. His doctorate (DLitt) at the Free University of Brussels would uncover the misrepresentation of black people in Afrikaans literature, drawing attention to racist stereotypes and the disservice done to the language by white nationalist writers.

It was the way in which he offered a systematic criticism of race and language in literature that impressed for he was able to keep the attention of conservative white readers even as he wrote in what the target audience then, and some still now, hold to be "their" language.

What Professor Gerwel will be remembered for in the general population, however, is the boldest act yet of innovation and activism by any university principal - the day he declared the University of the Western Cape to be "an intellectual home of the left". Under the sweltering heat of apartheid, he stood up one day and made the most eloquent argument yet for the different traditions embodied in the conservative Afrikaans universities, on the one hand, and the liberal Afrikaans universities, on the other hand. UWC, by contrast, carried a different historical burden and political mission - a place where a critical intellectual tradition rooted in the struggles of the working class would flourish.

In that instance, a struggling "bush university" started its transformation from an ethnic project of the apartheid state into what has today become one of the most impressive research and teaching universities in South Africa.

That criticality has come to infuse the curriculum, teaching and public events of UWC - something immediately evident to the visitor from outside the Bellville campus.

This is certainly a far cry from the racist professors who taught me, the constant boycotts of classes, and running from teargas and police during my unpleasant undergraduate student days. The foundations for the transformation of UWC were undoubtedly laid by Gerwel, who held the job of Rector between 1986 and 1994.

It came as no surprise that a great honour would fall on Jakes when he was called on to serve as director-general in the office of our first president, Nelson Mandela, and cabinet secretary in the government of national unity from 1994 to 1999. With his activist credentials and formidable academic achievements, he could take up academic chairs and leadership positions at universities anywhere in the world; but for him, working in the shadows of our greatest leader, Mandela, meant more than the countless boards on which he served and the string of honorary awards and doctorates he would receive. It is also a measure of his integrity that he did not use that appointment to write about Mandela - a book which would have been a runaway bestseller all over the world given his enormous literary talents.

We seldom spoke; I still treated him as my senior and not somebody you called for purposes of small talk. But at the height of troubles at my current university, Gerwel wrote a moving piece in an Afrikaans newspaper commending our actions and the vision of a future based on healing rather than recrimination. I picked up the phone to thank him not only for that column, but for a life well lived.