



Gordon Small
(Photograph: Natal Witness)

Gordon Small (1927–1995)

(This tribute was spoken at the funeral)

In the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral in London there are the memorials to some of Britain's greatest sailors, soldiers and airmen. To the right of the doorway which leads down to the crypt there is a modest plaque. In Latin (which being interpreted) it says — 'if you seek a monument, gaze around'. This is the monument to Sir Christopher Wren, Britain's greatest architect.

Well, if I gaze around me for a memorial to Gordon Small, I see firstly this vast throng of grieving friends. And secondly, outside this building (for which as it happened Gordon — submitted a sophisticated design which did not find favour with the judges) I see — not only in Pietermaritzburg but dotted all over Natal — an impressive list of monuments. So I want to say something first about Gordon the man whose life on earth has now come to an end; and then to offer some words about Gordon Small the architect.

Gordon was born in Scotland in 1927. His father William Wells Small brought his family out to South Africa in the mid-1930s. He was a cabinet maker and a fly-fisherman and, as one might expect, he had that rare quality of taking infinite pains about whatever he did. And he passed this quality on to his sons Billy and Gordon. And downwards with their wives (Alta and Joyce) through to his grandchildren, so that we recognise readily enough a family which has been gifted from generation unto generation.

Gordon was hilarious when he talked — as he often did — about his early recollections of Natal in the 1930s and 1940s. At Durban High School he was not (and I think he would have been the first to admit it) a distinguished scholar. But he was sensible about cultivating his talents in the arts and in those many things which make for a civilised life. So it was that he acquired a lively, yet sensitive, feeling for history; for literature; for music; for ‘wine, women and song’ but most particularly of course for the theatre. I think I should explain that when I include ‘women’ in this wide spectrum, it is in the most gracious sense of the term. The fact of the matter is that in the 35 years or so that I have known Gordon and Joyce, women just as much as men cherished Gordon. He was the raconteur, the amiable friend, never oppressive with his generous words of endearment. And women loved him for it.

He had that remarkable quality, not definable, of making his friends and even acquaintances, feel that they had always known him. One of the first recollections of my wife Joy concerning Gordon almost 50 years back is of Gordon on the top of a tall step ladder, painting scenery for some long-since-forgotten stage production. Gordon was quite capable of working all night on such things and often did so. Of course in those days Gordon and tall step ladders were more compatible than they came to be in his latter days. And Malcolm Woolfson recalls that many years ago when Gordon designed the set for one of Malcolm’s productions at the Jewish Club in Durban, Gordon thought the colours were not quite right so turning to Carol Marais who had painted the set he said ‘Carol, my darling, I think we shall have to paint this “an interesting green”’. And so they did: there and then. Gordon was inclined to talk that way at times. And whilst Malcolm, the producer, had no idea what Gordon meant by ‘an interesting green’, Carol did. And it was marvellously successful.

Gordon was, I think, touchingly delicate — even tentative — in his dealings with his friends and with his family on important matters: a civilised reluctance to occasion hurt (with an inadvertent harsh word or action) was always part of him. Yet when things did not matter very much, he could become the stern authoritarian. And on the building site he assumed an imperious assurance calculated to strike fear in the hearts of contractor and client alike — even if at times the working details were set out on the backs of his famous cigarette boxes.

He loved people. He loved non-malicious gossip — but not exclusively. He seemed to know everyone, more particularly in the theatre and in the world of the arts, and he could hold a dinner table enthralled. Yet, when it came to important family occasions he spoke with a simple and moving sincerity and a compelling compassion.

He smoked too much. And drank moderately — so to speak — and loved good food. Gordon and Joyce in the late 1950s were the first two genuine modern restaurateurs in Pietermaritzburg. But, alas, their restaurant, ‘The Elephant’, was long before its time. It if impoverished the Smalls, which it did for a time, at least it enriched for all time the lives of countless friends to whom Gordon recounted stories of the restaurant and above all their cherished patron Colonel James Turnbull, MC, Indian Army (Retired). James was very much Gordon’s sort of man.

Gordon’s death leaves a great black hole in the cultural life of this city. It came to be accepted generally that if any question touching the cultural life of our city had to be answered the person to turn to was Gordon. I think of the Macrorie House Museum and the Van Der Stel Foundation; (and old Cecil

Francis — the guardian angel of both). I think of the Pietermaritzburg Society; the Civic Centre Committee; the Elevation Control Committee. I think of his endless and loyal and innovative involvement with the Friends of the Tatham Art Gallery and his membership of the Acquisitions Committee of the Gallery itself. And his astonishing transformation of the Old Supreme Court landmark (reaching back to 1865) into one of the most beautiful art galleries in our country. He was always sniffing about, looking, discussing, digesting, suggesting. And his conducted tours of 'The Lanes' became famous, so much so that the City Council accorded him the honour of naming one which leads off Church Street 'Small Lane' after him. But not big enough, really, having regard to what Gordon did for Pietermaritzburg. The trouble, quite simply, was that Gordon seemed to know more about all of these things than the countless others who worked so willingly with him. So they all — we all — looked to Gordon for his answers. But I believe he loved it. And his gentle enthusiasm pervaded the lives of so many of the citizens of Pietermaritzburg. He was anxious to improve the amenity of the place and to live in peace with his fellow-citizens doing harm to no one regardless of colour or race or gender or creed. I have little doubt but that many people in this city are going to miss Gordon much more than they appreciate at this awful moment of reality.

But Gordon did not serve Pietermaritzburg alone. Through the theatre and his involvement with the South African Institute of Architects (of which he became President-in-Chief at one time and from whom he received a gold medal for his excellence) his knowledge and enthusiasm sent pulses throughout the country and kept him in constant touch with the ephemeral world of the theatre in particular and of the arts in general.

Who, for instance, remembers the Criterion Theatre on the Esplanade in Durban where Gordon, the schoolboy, appeared in the choruses of musical productions which he always made sound nonsensical? Or in the not so distant past The Alhambra which, ironically, became upstaged by Gordon himself?

Or at the University of Natal here in Pietermaritzburg where he and his close friend Peter Hey, and later, others, put on lively productions which lifted the head and warmed the heart during the darkest days and coldest nights of apartheid? And the memorable Brickhill-Burke productions? Or the earlier Adam Leslie reviews? And many others — there seemed to be no end to his continuous performance. The town and gown both tugged ceaselessly at Gordon's elbow whilst his deft and delicate hands kept drawing in order to earn a living.

It is generally acknowledged I think that Gordon's masterpiece was the conversion of the old Princes Cinema and the re-cycling of Schlesinger's Tudor Playhouse to raise up, phoenix-like, the new Natal Playhouse. It was a prodigious feat of imagination and complicated planning. This he achieved, at about one-half of the cost of the equivalent and grandiose status symbols created elsewhere in the Republic. He was, I think, a little wistful that the old Natal never had the money that was available elsewhere. But I do not think this fussed him. He had an all-embracing love for the theatre wherever it was and whoever was involved. And he was generous in his praise, though not uncritical, of anything good that was done elsewhere.

Inevitably I have drifted into my second theme so let me turn directly now towards Gordon Small the architect.

In the jargon of the profession he was called 'an architect's architect'. As a layman I take this to mean that his peers recognised in him special and superior qualities of invention which they acknowledged ungrudgingly. Those special

qualities, I believe, consisted in addition an uncanny feeling for space, for sight lines and for axes touched with the widest knowledge in his field and those values we rather loosely think of as the values of western civilisation. To these he added a sharp eye and a retentive memory for detail both ancient and modern. Nothing seemed to escape him. Let me give you an example. He told me himself that the design for that heavy braid-work at the foot of the grand velvet curtains gracing the Opera stage in the Natal Playhouse came from nowhere more exhilarating than a detail in a corner of a mere sand-blasted glass pane in one of the mundane Victorian double doors which give access to the ground floor of the City Hall here in Pietermaritzburg.

This is no time to dwell on the technical skill and ingenuity which Gordon and his partners and their associates applied to the creation of the Natal Playhouse. Nor do I propose to recite any sort of list of his more notable public buildings; let alone reflect upon the Cleopatra-like variety, however seductive, of his domestic architecture. His houses seemed so effortless. But they were not. They were — I know — the product of an intense concentration and meticulous calculation — and sometimes a long gestation.

Yet I cannot refrain from referring to some of his more notable buildings. The Law School at the University here in Pietermaritzburg. And the Arts block with its magical Hexagon Theatre. And to the gem-like theatres he produced for Cordwalles and Cowan House. To the additions to St Alphege's built on a churchmouse's budget. Or to the massive new Supreme Court building which houses not only the Supreme Court of South Africa and the Judges, but the Deeds Registry, the Surveyor-General's Office and the chambers of the Attorney-General — a multigrade job if ever there was one. It was built originally at a cost of about one-third of what was spent at that very time on mere additions to the existing Supreme Court building in Johannesburg. Yet the Secretary for Public Works whose duty it was to award such commissions on some sort of insensitive roster of architects told me at a formal dinner that he had never even heard the name of Gordon Small despite the fact that Gordon and his office had in terms of their joint mandate with an associate produced their plans and their specifications and their contract documents timeously — and all in immaculate Afrikaans.

But I do not want to end on a sombre note. What is triumphantly clear to all of us as we gaze about Natal, is that Gordon Small, the architect, has left us a rich legacy of buildings which in themselves will remain a lasting monument to him, the architect, long after the echoes of the words of the last of us here today have faded quite away.

But until we do, each one of us will — I know — continue to cherish in our hearts the warmest recollections of Gordon Small the man — a remarkable and a very sweet man.

SIMON ROBERTS