

[Home](#) > [Printer-friendly](#) > VSAFF: Albie Sachs' Soft Vengeance tells South Africa's peaceful path of resistance

VSAFF: Albie Sachs' Soft Vengeance tells South Africa's peaceful path of resistance

by [Travis Lupick](#) on Apr 2, 2014 at 11:15 am



The title of a new documentary about one of South Africa's most influential civil-rights activists, Albie Sachs, came to the man more than a quarter-century ago.

"I was lying in a hospital bed in London, recovering from having been blown up by a car bomb that was intended to kill me," the aging freedom fighter says on the phone from Cape Town. "It cost me my right arm and the sight of my left eye. And recovering in London, I received a note from a friend of mine. It said: 'Don't worry, comrade; we will avenge you.' And I thought to myself, 'Avenge me? Are we going to cut off their arms? Are we going to blind the people who did this? Is that what we're fighting for?'"

Democracy would be his “soft vengeance”, Sachs explains in a wide-ranging interview with the *Georgia Straight*. “My anger was very much directed at the system, not at the individuals.”

Then a lawyer involved in the African National Congress’s fight to end apartheid in South Africa, Sachs had decided on a path of peaceful resistance. Despite the violence that confronted him so directly the day he was attacked in 1988 in Mozambique, his resolve never deviated from that principle.

Sachs, 79, is flying to Vancouver for an April 5 screening of the documentary *Soft Vengeance: Albie Sachs and the New South Africa*, which is opening the fourth annual *Vancouver South African Film Festival*. A question-and-answer session will take place after the film, followed by the VSAFF gala event at Fluevog Shoes in Gastown.

One of the most fascinating scenes in Sachs’s documentary comes with the introduction of *Henri van der Westhuizen*, a former South African military-intelligence officer.

Van der Westhuizen was involved in the bombing that took Sachs’s arm and eye. At first, he comes across in the film as unrepentant. “Nothing that I did, I did out of my own means,” Westhuizen says. “I did [it] because I was a soldier, and I got an instruction.”

But his perspective softens as he recalls his first meeting with Sachs. “That is when a reality dawned on me, big-time,” Westhuizen continues. “I became humble, right there and then.”

Sachs recalls the meeting with equal weight. “He’s looking at me; I’m looking at him,” Sachs says in the film. “And I see in his eyes, ‘So this is the man I tried to kill.’ And I’m saying to myself, ‘So this is the man who tried to kill me.’”

Sachs, who went on to become a judge on the Constitutional Court of South Africa, concedes that it’s not easy to work with opponents who have hurt you but that’s what peace often requires. Any grudge he might hold against Westhuizen is behind him.

“The people and the oppression are the past,” Sachs says. “The triumph, really, is in transforming that negativity, the negative energy of that time, into something positive. That’s where the constitution comes in; that’s where the progress that we’ve been making in South Africa becomes so significant.”

Turning to contemporary politics, Sachs rejects the notion that the continent of Africa is somehow homophobic, a suggestion that’s gained media attention in recent years with anti-LGBT legislation passed or debated in countries like Nigeria and Uganda. Sachs emphasizes that South Africa has protected LGBT individuals’ right to marriage since 2005, when he took part in a court decision on the matter.

“Since then, we’ve had hundreds and thousands of same-sex marriages,” he says. “Love carries on.”

Sachs also notes that South Africa’s constitution might be the only document like it that expressly forbids discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. It’s a legacy that he ties directly to the fight against apartheid and the ideals of Nelson Mandela, who appointed Sachs to the

constitutional court and who died in December 2013.

Madiba, as Mandela is affectionately known, is very much on Sachs's mind these days, he reveals. But it's not a saintly version of South Africa's first black president that Sachs remembers.

"That trivializes the real Mandela," Sachs explains. "He was a revolutionary. He took up arms, he was willing to fight, to kill and be killed, he was willing to die, as he said in his trial. He was tough in that sense. And he was thoughtful, intelligent, and he spoke for a movement. His strength came from his ability to work with many people, to embrace the visions and outlooks of other people, to speak to everybody, and to articulate the consciousness of a whole generation."

Today, it's those qualities that Sachs says he wants to see in South Africa's up-and-coming leaders.

"These ideas are still deeply entrenched in the minds and hearts of our people, and new generations are being inspired by them," Sachs says. "That's what gives me the hope that the ugliness in our society...can be dealt with in the spirit of Mandela, long after Mandela has passed from the scene."

Follow Travis Lupick on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#).

Source URL: <http://www.straight.com/movies/619071/vsaff-albie-sachs-soft-vengeance-tells-south-africas-peaceful-path-resistance>