

## London Recruits: “You’ve gotta act.”

*Written by Maya Pillay*

I first met Ronnie on a sunny morning in Jozi in February 2022. Well, I say ‘first’ but, growing up in London the youngest daughter of a South African exile, I was surrounded by a vast amount of ‘aunties’ and ‘uncles’ who my father always called ‘Comrade,’ one of whom was more than likely, at some point, Uncle Ronnie. For this reason, Ronnie and I agreed it was our ‘first meeting’ as adults (conversely, you wouldn’t catch me dead referring to him as anything other than Uncle Ronnie usually, but for the purposes of this piece and my word count, I will drop the title of respect for one’s elders).

Something that has always struck me when I make my, now annual, pilgrimage ‘home’ to South Africa is the way politics drips from people’s lips unprompted, always. To me, South Africa is an inherently political space. Whether it be a conversation with an Uber driver, a family member, friends over a pizza, someone in a shop - everyone will have an opinion and pretty much always one they’re willing to share. Political discourse engulfs you, and I love it.

This was also very much my childhood experience; the news was always on, my parents’ friends would arrive, station themselves around our dinner table and debate would unfold. Growing up with a family who’d been part of the struggle was ‘cool’. I’d proudly announce that my dad had been in prison in South Africa and tell the story of my uncle’s jailbreak. This gave me some playground kudos: “Does your dad know Nelson Mandela?”

However, I was born in 1992. By this point, Mandela was free and everyone swore they’d always stood against apartheid... History had been rewritten.

It was only as I got older and started to really delve into things that I realised this had not always been the case. The country I now call home had not always been kind to my father and his comrades. Indeed, upon arriving in the UK they were seen by many as terrorists. My mother (a white, British woman from Yorkshire) was seen as mad by some to marry this terrorist from South Africa. Margaret Thatcher condemned the ANC as a “typical terrorist organisation.” (Conversely, her husband, Denis, had business interests in the country.) The Federation of Young Conservatives wore ‘Hang Nelson Mandela’ badges.

The UK, USA and Israel were the last to end support for South Africa’s apartheid regime. It’s important we remember this context and this ostracism from society. As I listened to Ronnie’s story of finding ‘London Recruits,’ it would have been easy to assume that their choice to join the struggle was a simple one, but in reality they would have faced a huge amount of backlash in the UK, aside from the risks they were taking in South Africa. The right road is not always the easy road.

For my dad and many South Africans it felt as if they had no choice. South Africa was their country, they had to fight for it. There is something, to me, particularly impressive about young British men and women who were willing to risk it all for a country that was not theirs, it's an act of unity and solidarity – people willing to stand up against the status quo, whether it be directly going to South Africa to carry out secret missions, protestors in Swansea storming the rugby pitch to show their disdain for the exclusively white Springboks playing in the UK, or those who tirelessly argued with friends and loved ones that apartheid was evil.

As I sat with Ronnie in his beautiful garden, namely to interview him about his first wife, Eleanor, our conversation flitted between stories of the struggle to current day events. In his eighties, he is still fiercely political and a believer in human responsibility to stand up against wrong. I am in no way surprised he was able to mobilise 'ordinary people' to enter a police state and risk so much. They were very clear that they were not the white saviours, they simply amplified the voices of the leadership at a time so many had been forced underground.

To me, the London Recruits are an example of hope in humanity. Indeed, the line which has stayed with me from our interview is one which I believe Ronnie and many other South African struggle heroes instil in all those they come into contact with: "You've gotta act." It's one they have carried all their lives, and one I believe we could all learn from.

**London Recruits is available on screens from 22 November 2024. Catch this 'People's Release' across the UK, at screenings in cinemas and with a network of partners, local volunteers and organisers.**

**Find your nearest screening [here](#).**

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*London Recruits has a host of connections to Wales including the director: Gordon Main. Producers: Geoff Arbourne, John Giwa-Amu and Peter Edwards plus cast: Tom Evans, Alex Gwyther and Jack Ayres. It was filmed in Pembrokeshire (Haverfordwest and Roch), Cardiff, Cwmbran and Mamhilad. It received funding from Ffilm Cymru Wales.*

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