



Music of TRANSFORMATION

A prominent South African neurosurgeon has made his family farm a place of psychic, emotional and cultural healing from the deep scarring of the long, dark years of Apartheid.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY / LINDA VERGNANI

If you ask the people what transformed them, they say what transformed them is music," says leading South African neurosurgeon Professor Mark Solms. Author of the bestselling book *The Brain and the Inner World*, this exuberant academic is sitting outside the restaurant on his old Cape Dutch wine farm, Solms-Delta. A beaming waitress brings hot chocolate, while guinea fowl chirr in the surrounding vineyards and the mists part briefly to show snow-tipped peaks.

But this seemingly blissful farm, in Franschoek near Cape Town, hides an excruciating past of slavery, Apartheid and oppression. Solms, once named International Psychiatrist of the Year, is relating how after he took over the farm in 2001 he had to draw on his medical training to start uncovering and healing the deep psychological and social scarring his employees had suffered.

His remedy was an extraordinary scheme to bring about post-Apartheid transformation, which resulted in his workers getting one-third ownership in the farm. He also collaborated with experts and his employees to establish an indigenous food garden, promote authentic Cape cuisine, revive folk music and encourage traditional instrument making.

Brilliant, intense and highly personable, Solms looks more like a rugby player than an academic. His family has farmed in South Africa for six generations, but Solms followed a different path. After medical school during the final years of Apartheid in the 1980s, he worked as a neurosurgeon at Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto, operating on people shot and injured by the army and police. To escape being conscripted into the army, he left the country. "Well, the thought of

going from caring for the victims of the violence to perpetrating the violence was unthinkable."

He has had a meteoric career and is still honorary lecturer in Neurosurgery at St Bartholomew's and the Royal London School of Medicine and director of the Neuropsychology Center of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. He returned to South Africa in 2001, "terribly homesick" after years in exile.

DIGGING INTO THE PAST

Appointed Professor of Neuropsychology at the University of Cape Town, Solms wanted to play a part in transforming his homeland. His family had bought a share in Delta farm three generations back but never lived there. The farm was under another owner and almost bankrupt when Solms bought out the creditors.

To his dismay, he discovered the farm workers were "living like animals". Six of the seven extended families were crammed into the old wine cellar. "They had no hot water, no electricity. This place was a cesspit. Here where we are sitting was a stinking French drain."

Solms called meetings with each of his workers and their families, explained that he intended to transform the farm and asked for their ideas. Instead of responding, they looked at the floor or each other. "They were intimidated, they were daunted, they were confused — it was excruciating. There was no possibility of having a conversation about anything."

He explains he wanted to "miracle away the past", tell them he was a good white person — unlike his predecessors — so let's plan a bright future together. What they saw was another white farmer whom they did not trust, who scared them and who was "talking some bullshit".

Later, realising he was serious, his employees took advantage of Solms. They began arriving late for work and chopping down beautiful camphor trees for firewood. "My neighbours were also telling me, 'You don't understand. These people are like that. They're lazy and you can't trust them.'" Some right-wing farmers urged him not to improve housing for his employees because under new legislation he would have to give them equivalent houses if he ever evicted them from the farm.

In desperation, Solms decided to take a case history of the place so he could diagnose what was wrong. "It's not that I thought the farm workers were the patient and I was the doctor. The whole place was the patient. The social fabric was the patient and the farmer is central to what's ailing the social fabric of farms."

He employed archaeologists to dig for traces of the earliest inhabitants of the area and historians to find out about what had happened at the farm, previously known as Zandvliet, in the 300 years since it was established.

Their findings are now housed in the Museum van de Caab, which has individual plaques commemorating each of the 200 slaves once kept captive on the farm. The artefacts displayed include Stone Age tools left by San (bushmen), who once lived in the fertile valley, and 2000-year-old pottery shards from Khoi herders. The exhibits include details of each of the European farm owners and first-hand accounts of what happened in the Apartheid years and beyond.

In their oral histories the farm workers recalled the thrill of getting their first pair of shoes when they were 10 or 12 years old. "They said they used to put their feet in the cow shit in winter to keep them warm," says Solms. "Can you imagine that?"



Many employees were taken out of school when their parents became ill or infirm so they could work for the farmer and prevent the family being evicted from their accommodation.

MY PEOPLE WERE HERE FIRST

Solms could now understand the fatalism of his employees. They felt powerless to plan for the future because their entire family and community culture was “shaped by Apartheid and, behind that, nearly 200 years of slavery and, behind that, the dispossession and genocide”.

Some were ashamed of their heritage until the archaeologists explained what they were finding. Farm worker Bennie Daniels was helping the archaeologists when they dug up “incredibly beautiful” microlithic Stone Age tools from a 6000-year-old settlement site just 50



From top: Sanna Malgas strums tunes on a tin-can guitar; Malgas with Professor Mark Solms; garden manager Johan O'Rayn shows off some impressive melons.

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metres from the front door of the historic home where Solms and his family live.

Holding up a tiny stone blade, Daniels looked Solms in the eye and said, “You see, professor. My people were here before yours.”

Solms realised that what needed treating was the taking of land and of people and brutalising them in this way. “Now, how are you going to fix it?” he asked himself. He thought of donating the farm to the workers in recompense. “I realised the truth was I didn’t want to give it back. I love it too much.”

Instead, he and his close friend and neighbour British philanthropist Richard Astor decided to help the workers to buy their own farm. Solms and Astor put up their two farms as surety for a bank loan to buy a third farm for the impoverished workers. The new farm is held by the Wijn de Caab Trust, established in 2005 to address the social and economic inequalities of farm residents and other employees at Solms-Delta.





The trust's beneficiaries are all those who lived and worked on the three farms and were "disadvantaged by Apartheid". Through the trust, around 200 residents were given one-third ownership of the land and a third of the profits. Solms adds, "Actually, as it happens, all the profits, because Richard and I don't need the profits."

WE CHANGED THE WHOLE FARM

The trust has used the money to build houses for the employees, pay for private healthcare, set up a pre-school, fund all levels of education and assist those in distress. "All these kids who were just being educated for farm work, they can do whatever they like," says Solms.

The trust also funds sporting and cultural activities, including four farm bands. Solms says the residents now take great pride in their traditional cuisine and music and, astonishingly, in their shared Afrikaans language, once regarded as the preserve of white Apartheid supporters.

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Built to attract more tourists, the farm restaurant, Fyndraai, offers a delicious new take on traditional Khoi, Afrikaner farmer and Cape Malay cuisines. The menu includes dishes like *bobotie* spring rolls with pickled *spekboom* (bacon tree), salad and fruit *blatjang* (chutney) and rooibos panna cotta.

Taking me around the indigenous *fynbos* (fine bush) and *rhenosterbos* (rhino bush) food garden, which was started to supply the restaurant with ingredients, genial garden manager Johan O'Rayn tells me, "We changed the whole farm.

"When Mark bought the farm and said, 'Let's do some changes', we decided what programs to have on the farm so we could share." They reintroduced grapes and in 2005 started producing the first wines. They also offered new job opportunities and training to employees. O'Rayn, who was



previously a security guard, was offered a role as a tour guide in the museum and later got involved in the garden project.

Cookbook author Renata Coetzee, an expert on South African culinary traditions, drew up a list of plants that had once grown in the area and had been used by indigenous people. O'Rayn learned more about botany from an ethnobotanist, hired to collect many of the 400 species of herbs and food plants from the bush and other farms.

In the centre of the sun-shaped garden with its radiating paths, O'Rayn shows me rows of harvested indigenous melons. He explains the watermelon-sized *makataans* are used for jam while the small, bitter *tsama* melons are still a source of water for San people, from whom he is descended. He squeezes purple juice from wild olives, used as black paint in ancient rock art, offers me fingernail-sized wild figs to taste and shows me glistening red tortoise berries.

NOW I'M IN THE RIGHT PLACE

Sanna Malgas, a former domestic worker who is now involved in the farm's Cape Music Project, says, "Everyone has got a better living on the farm." For this middle-aged woman, who was taken out of school in the "eviction years", the biggest difference is education and opportunities. "When Mark sees you want an opportunity, he makes it for you."

Malgas's opportunity arose out of music research done for the museum. A musicologist was commissioned to record the remaining folk music, which developed in the time of slavery.

The musicologist interviewed an elderly alcoholic, Hannes Floors, who said he knew the traditional songs but complained the strings on his homemade guitar had broken in 1973. The expert restrung his guitar and

filmed Hannes as he began singing the old songs. Mrs Floors came out to dance and the fascinated kids who gathered to watch later asked Hannes to teach them to play the guitar.

Soon the workers formed the Delta Optel folk band to play the "old songs", which were then popularised on the community radio station. There are now four bands on the farm, including an 80-strong marching brass band.

Malgas takes me to a whitewashed building and opens a room filled with different traditional instruments, including "bull roarers" and seed rattles, and homemade instruments like *blik* (tin can) guitars. "We make all these instruments with our hands," she says, playing a few tunes.

"I was growing up with all these instruments as a child. I never think that I could end up on a farm that will tell the history of the Khoisan [Khoi and San] and the bushmen. I am so happy that, though my father and mother are gone, the tradition is still living on this farm."

She paid little attention when her grandmother told her how her ancestors used stone tools to cut things. But when the archaeologists uncovered the ancient tools, Malgas says, "I was jumping around and feeling in my heart: 'Now I'm in the right place.' It was like a tape recorder in my head of what my grandmother said about the Khoisan, but we never believed what she was telling.

"It takes me back to where I came from. I feel I'm at my home. I am looking forward to working in the music museum and I want to take this further. I want to go forward. I respect this whole farm for bringing my heritage back. I'm feeling this form of joy. This is what I want to see growing and not dying." 🍌

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