



A MASTER OF THE ARTS

by PRIEUR DU PLESSIS

Gordon Vorster just wants to be a writer but his other talents keep getting in the way

THE swallows darted and milled in tight circles, their wingtips barely touching the rippling water below. I leaned over the high balcony and watched them swoop into a rocky alcove, scurrying into their nests of mud to feed titbits to their young.

Farther on the Crocodile River gushed foaming white over hidden boulders before spilling into the Hartebeestpoort Dam. Overhead a squadron of wood-pigeons banked to starboard and swept over the purple Magaliesberg to the north. A cicada colony shrilly buzz-sawed in the thorn trees at the water's edge.

"You see now, that's why I came

here. Now I'm close to nature. Where else will you get this tranquillity?" Gordon Vorster — painter, author, poet, actor, critic — turned away from the balcony of his angular stone house (once described as "an artistic remodelling of the Magaliesberg"), his piercing blue eyes fixed on mine.

"Here a man can work." Gordon stroked his grey goatee. "I built the house myself. It took nine years, but it's all mine. Nothing worries me here."

We drank coffee, poured by Gordon's charming wife Yvonne, at a well-worn yellow-wood table in the lounge. Under a wide, high stone fireplace a black coal stove glimmered dully. It didn't look out of place in this unusual house.

"It's a Welcome Dover. I used to sleep next to such a stove in my parents' house during those bitterly cold nights on the diggings."

GORDON VORSTER has indeed come a long way from the diamond diggings at Warrenton. His father had diamond fever, and the family eagerly expected him to turn up that big one that would put them in clover. But they waited in vain.

The Depression struck. Gordon, 14 years old, had to leave school. He found a job as a bookkeeper with an accountant in Kimberley for R8 a month. Out of this meagre salary he had to pay for his board, send money home to his folks and continue his studies.

At the outbreak of World War II he joined the Defence Force and served in North Africa and Italy in a communications unit. For some time he'd been trying his hand at writing short stories and poetry. Now, with bombs exploding around him and bullets whizzing overhead, he began writing in all seriousness.

Before the war he'd met Yvonne van Schalkwyk, who worked for the South African Press Association in Johannesburg. He sent his writings from the battlefield to her. She typed them and took them to a publisher, who found a ready market for Gordon's descriptive poems and stories.

Peace came, Gordon returned to South Africa and married Yvonne. In Italy he had made friends with a number of local painters and visited several exhibitions of their work, as well as the great art treasures of Rome, Florence and Milan. There and then he decided to give up bookkeeping. He wanted to be an artist.



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He enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand for a fine arts course. In 1947 producer Pierre de Wet approached him to write part of the script for one of the first Afrikaans films, *Geboortegrond*.

Gordon fell in love with films, and in 1949 he made the film version of the monumental *Hans die Skipper* by D. F. Malherbe, again with De Wet. In quick succession he worked on *Inspan*, *Kom Saam Vanaand* and *Hier's Ons Weer*. He wrote the zany script for the popular comedies by Al Debbo and Frederik Burgers, the local Laurel and Hardy.

I WAS scriptwriter, decor designer, general handyman — I even scrubbed the studio floor. Peter Lamb, David Millin and Johnny Brown were the cameramen. Those were hard times. We had to use part-time actors because our budget didn't provide for full-time professionals," Gordon reminisced.

Meanwhile he was doing film reviews, and wrote cricket and film comment for several newspapers and magazines. He also kept up more serious writing, and joined the Playmakers, an amateur dramatics group who tried to present experimental theatre.

Gordon did the decor for the film version of Alan Paton's *Cry The Beloved Country* in 1950. He directed a few documentaries, then 20th Century Fox asked him to shoot a number of full-length movies for them.

He wrote, directed and produced. Some of the films, like *Ruiter In Die Nag*, were hits; others were less successful.

The censors often wielded their scissors with wild abandon through Gordon's celluloid masterpieces. Pierre de Wet wanted to include a ballet sequence in *Kom Saam Vanaand*. But first the censors had to approve.

A CLERGYMAN on the panel thought that if this scene was left in, people sitting in the front



Gordon Vorster's unique stone house took him nine years to build.

row of the cinema would be able to peep under the ballerinas' tutus. Pierre was incensed; he protested wildly, but to no avail. We had to scrub that scene."

This sort of thing discouraged many budding young actors — after months of hard work the censors would peremptorily reject three-quarters of a new film. Actors on whom vast amounts of time and money had been spent gave up and left.

In spite of his packed filming programme, Gordon perfected his painting technique and held his first exhibition in 1955 — the result of 14 years' work. Already established as a writer and film personality, he was immediately accepted as a painter and his exhibition was a roaring success. He had made his name overnight in this field, and his paintings were chosen for the South African exhibitions at the Venice Biennale and other major overseas art festivals.

His fame grew. He held several exhibitions, and regularly appeared on the SABC's *Art Forum* programme.

Ten years ago he decided to concentrate on painting. He built his house — it resembles a fort without the gunslits — and set to work. He carted his easel and palette to the Transvaal Bushveld and the Kalahari and immortalised his beloved great outdoors on canvas. Gordon became one of South Africa's most sought after artists.

But for such a creative mind as his, painting was not enough. He composed a series of poems which the SABC recorded on a long-playing disc and sold overseas, and took up the chisel and mallet to become a renowned sculptor.

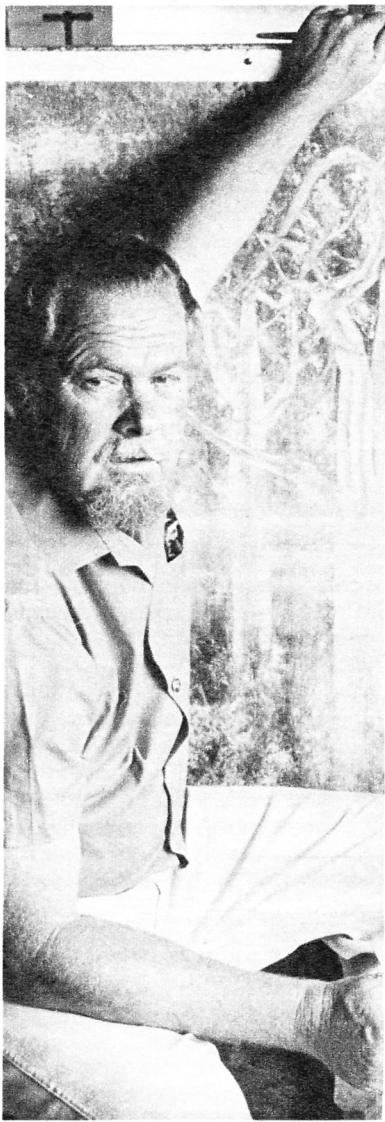
TWO years ago he was on a painting trek in the Bushveld when a messenger brought him an urgent message from producer Jans Rautenbach, who needed a male lead for *Pappa Lap*.

"I accepted. It was a welcome change not to have the hundred and one worries of making a film oneself. All I had to do was concentrate on my role."

This film earned a lot of money and critics called it one of the best

Turn over

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"Almost Victorian materialism to modern abstract" is how Gordon Vorster describes his style.

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films to be made locally. In spite of his intention to stick to painting, he's considering several film offers right now.

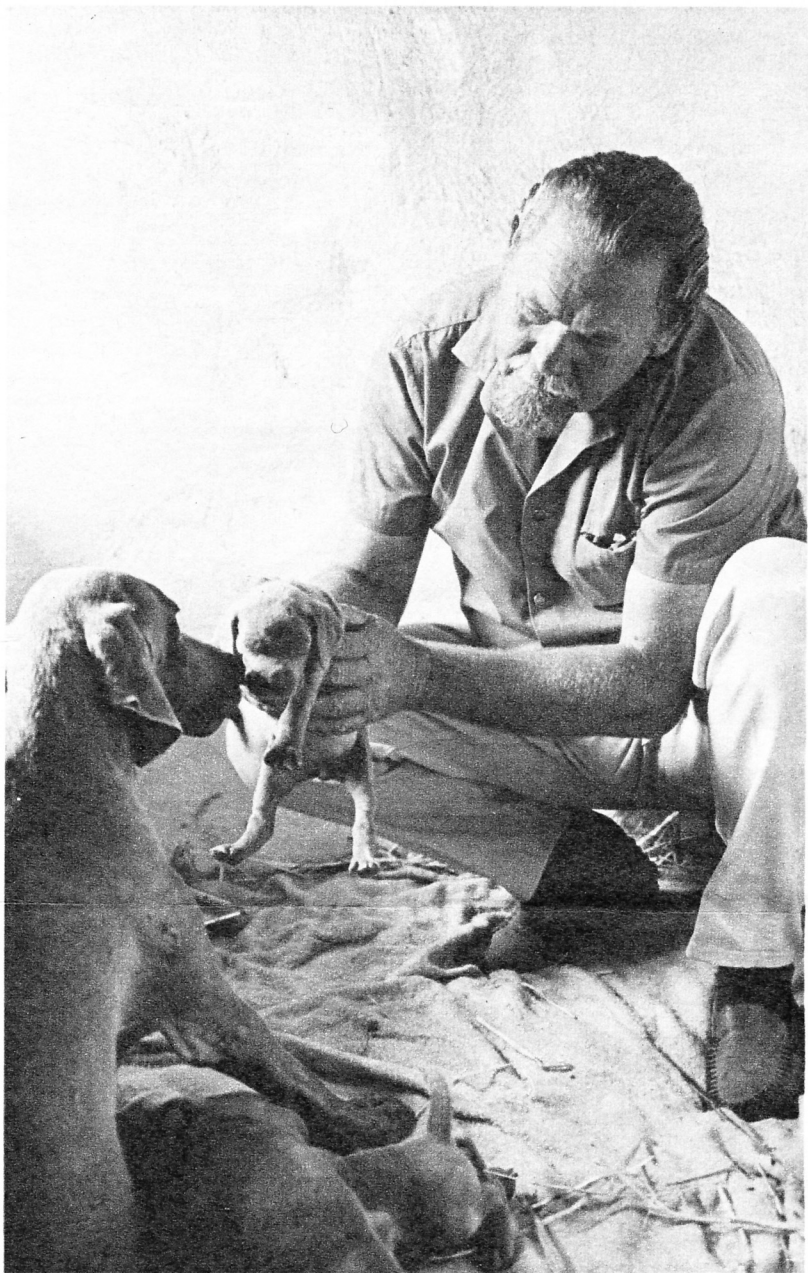
"There have been good, bad and very bad South African films. Unfortunately so much hogwash has been dished up to the public that local films have achieved notoriety, but I think we're becoming increasingly discerning — I'm sure we won't put up with the really bad stuff much longer.

"I pity professionals such as Jans and Emil Nofal who are trying to make quality films, only to have their products judged by the same standards as the rest."

We ambled through to Gordon's studio, which takes up one whole flank of the house. It has its own entrance hall and an altar-like stone slab in the centre. Paintings, some of which we'll exhibit in Pretoria this month, litter one side. In one wall is set a panoramic picture window with views over the dam; the other is hewn out of the solid mountain rock.

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Weimaraners form part of the Vorster household. Gordon fondles a new arrival, while its wary mother watches her master.

ABOUT his style, Gordon says: "It's rather confusing because I'm not tying myself to one or the other school. My work is mainly an almost Victorian materialism, varying to modern abstract. If I feel like materialism one day, then that's it. The next day I might feel like standing four metres away and tossing the paint with a long-handled brush on to the canvas. Sometimes I use only a pencil or a stick of charcoal. I'm always experimenting."

An abstract panel caught my eye. "One of a series for Dr Albert Wessels," Gordon said. He clearly had customers who could afford his prices. Paintings he sold for R35 in 1955 are now unobtainable at under R1 000 apiece.

He and Yvonne have two daughters: Mariana, a housewife, and Karen, a fine arts student at the

University of South Africa.

We walked through the spacious garden with its abundance of indigenous flora. I saw three vehicles in the carport to one side. Gordon followed my gaze.

"You buy a car today, and tomorrow it has depreciated by 25 percent. I buy old, quality cars which can no longer depreciate and even start gaining in value after a while. Take the Bentley — it's 16 years old and has done more than 250 000km. Yvonne's Porsche is the same age and already it's worth more than we paid for it. I travel about 24 000km a year in the old Land Rover to the Kalahari and the Bushveld.

"They're all old cars — just think what I've saved during the past 15 years in not having to buy a new car every two years! "