

## Old School Soldier: Saeed Rahbeeni and a Comics Life

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THE THIRD-TO-LAST MONTHLY meeting of the Igubu Comics Collective betrays a little about the current comics publishing situation in Cape Town. The meeting is centered around the production of the then yet-untitled bimonthly publication, *Helix*. Ed FL Babb asks a question of Loki, the core-member chairing this meeting. *What kind of pen does Daniel Hugo, the cover artist and co-editor on Helix, use to ink with?* Loki names a particular brand, which he says is the preferred brand since it's waterproof, and he mentions where to buy it. The conversation quickly degenerates into the flagging South African currency.

This is the kind of scenario which plays itself out at almost every comics convention, the world over. From Angouleme to San Diego, to Tokyo; wander into any comicon and you'll find a kid who's just learnt to draw asking this same question of a seasoned pro. So at one level, this kind of question reinforces the power relations within the Igubu Collective, the kind of relations between core and non-core members.

But at another level entirely it goes to show something else. Something more akin to the speed with which comics is lurching towards being a viable profession. If anything, this scenario played out at Igubu's monthly meeting goes to show exactly the technical proficiency with which each publishing and production task is tackled. Even non-core members need to know the tools of the trade, not simply out of an academic sense of interest, but because they are directly involved with exactly that process of production.

A part of me celebrates this notion of wanting to build a professionalism to cartooning. We've all waited long enough to see comics come into its own, and public reception of cartooning and cartoonists can only be impacted positively by the medium's self-publication of its protagonists as professionals. But an equal part of me writhes under the spotlight flare of such technicism. Surely it's the work produced rather than the way it is produced, or the tools used to produce it?

While the mask of professionalism remains a necessary evil at this point, it is the later impulse, the impulse to flee from a swiftly-establishing new technical order, that makes the work of Saeed Rahbeeni so engaging. And what engages me more than anything about Rahbeeni is his absolute willingness and brutal efficiency at throwing technicism to the wind. Like Steve Biko before him, Saeed Rahbeeni writes what he likes.

I'm not necessarily over-exaggerating when I mention Rahbeeni and Biko in the same breath. They both hail from that revolutionary cesspool that is the Eastern Cape. Rahbeeni of course is yet to be martyred for his political beliefs, but we'll see... When he is still relatively young his family moves to Cape Town where he completes his formal schooling, as well as an undergraduate degree in the Arts from the University of Cape Town. He goes into hiding for the next few years and eventually resurfaces directly in the public eye; working at the pre-Independent Newspapers Argus doing a daily strip on etymology.

All the while however Rahbeeni maintains a second job, a commercial one as a contract-illustrator for a Montague Gardens-based firm he often refuses to mention by name. But he does often speak of the unmitigated freedom with which he and other cartoonists there were allowed to operate. 'Which is probably why the company went bankrupt,' he muses.

With the rearrangement of the Argus under the Independent Newspapers consortium, his contract to publish a daily cartoon-strip is not renewed. It is only in early-1998 that he reestablishes himself with a newspaper, this time the recently relaunched Muslim Views. The final trade agreement between himself and the MV teams sees him sharing office space and resources while having to assist with layout and production of the paper. In addition, he has a monthly page appearing in every edition of the paper, entitled *Junior Jabbers*. And in the meantime, all his work-for-hire contracts, contracts which include Cosatu, Sadtu and a host of publishing houses, are executed from his MV offices.

And the final blow in a story that's as yet unfinished sees Rahbeeni move from Muslim Views to take a position as contract artist at the company that produces *Super Strikas* and *Howzat*, the sports-comics funded by Caltex and the Sunday Times.

And for all of this, what can really be said about Rahbeeni is simply that he is Old School, by which I mean a classical cartoonist. And I mean classical in the most technical of senses.

Gilles Deleuze, when writing the *Cinema*, produces a most marvelous rabbit from his philosophical hat. He subjects the history of cinema to an apparent timeline, in which classical period, a rupture and a modern period are delineated. The way in which cinema is made today, in other words, is distinct from the way it was made before the war, the Second World War which is seen as the rupture.

So let me shamelessly borrow exactly that notion and say that comics too, or at least comics in the twentieth century which is dominated by the US market, follows a timeline of a classical period, a rupture and a modern period. The rupture would of course be the nineteen fifties, when Frederick Wertham testified before the US Congress that in his opinion as a trained psychologist, comics was corrupting America's youth. Batman was a raving homosexual, Wonder Woman, a bondage-and-discipline sadomasochist and Superman, a Nazi. The medium survived, and for a time it seemed just barely. It sacrificed a limb in the form of EC Comics, and the industry as a whole submitted itself to an industry-created and self-enforced Comics Code Authority.

The comics which appear after the congressional hearings of the mid-fifties look very different to the comics before. And the approach of cartoonists to cartooning is equally different. Eventually, with direct sales distribution networks and increased publicity given to writers and artists, the US industry very much becomes that kind of writers-as-rock-stars that Ed FL Babb and Loki hint at in the third-to-last Igubu meeting of the year. Even pre-fifties artists like Will Eisner, Milt Cannif, Gil Kane, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby find themselves having a place at the grownups' dinner table. They find themselves honored as Legends from an Age of Gold.

Despite finding himself half a world away, in both space and time, Rahbeeni is very much cast in the mold of a US cartoonist from the nineteen thirties. For him inking is done with the kind of pen that can be bought for less than five bucks. And it can be bought at any store where pens are sold. Cartooning means learning different styles, so that the highly iconographic style of *Junior Jabbers* blends seamlessly with his more adult styles. Coloring means using magic markers, as well as ‘professional’ inks. And cartooning, far, far away from a commercialized and industrialized notion of comics, means being able to execute those projects dearest to your heart. And for Saeed Rahbeeni, those projects mean a comics edition of the epic Sufi poem, the *Council of the Birds and the Boy from Baghdad*, a serialized tale about a young boy who escapes the sacking of Baghdad by Mongol forces.

Old school cartoonists have nothing but time, and a playfulness that allows them to always learn new styles and sleights of hand. Old school cartoonists work with what is there and appear everywhere. So unlike Marvel of the sixties which is perhaps most directly responsible for the notion of an artist being identified with a singular style. And Old School cartoonists can be found the world over; in the US of the nineteen thirties with Eisner, Cunniff and others, in the post-war era of Japan with Osamu Tezuka, and recently with the New School artists of Europe like Kalonji, Stassen and Thom Ott. For them, as for Rahbeeni, comics is a way of life, rather than a profession. And industry magazines are littered with anecdotes of such artists reaching 90 without batting an eyelid.