

ROOTING IN DARK PLACES

Investigative journalism is a lonely and dangerous craft and none was better at it than the late Kitt Katzin. Here deputy editor-in-chief of The Star,

REX GIBSON *pays tribute to his former colleague*

IT is impossible not to have vivid memories of Kitt Katzin. He was a vivid person, restless and vital. We were colleagues for 15 years – first on the *Sunday Express* and then when our paths crossed again on the *Sunday Star* – and many was the time that circumstances required us to work closely together.

In his solitary vocation – the job of an investigative reporter is a lonely one – he always needed a fellow journalist against whom to test his ideas, his theories and his information. Never was this more so than in the weeks and months preceding his Information Department revelations.

As his editor at the time, I became his sounding board: a not unmixed honour, for he required of his listener the same degree of commitment and enthusiasm as he was ready to give himself. I know he felt that this kind of support was not always forthcoming. He was right. He was a hard man to keep up with.

I have in my mind's eye this picture of him – constantly taut and excited, hovering on the edge of his next, his greatest scoop, the back of his cigarette box meticulously recording the cigarettes he smoked too freely – as we spent endless hours in secret conclave, assessing the evidence of malpractice and corruption he was gradually accumulating. I think he enjoyed talking a news story as much as he enjoyed finally writing it.

"One day," he promised, "I will bring you the story of how the Government is secretly funding *The Citizen*." And one day he did, beating all his peers to the story they all craved to break.

Who then was Kitt Katzin? It is difficult to answer the question adequately. It was always easy to see his sterling qualities – his doggedness, his undoubted courage, his boundless dedication, his runaway enthusiasm. Numerous professional awards and honours – more than any other South African journalist has achieved – bear testimony to his successes. Indeed, if the printed pages of his newspaper scoops were his only epitaph, they would speak volumes for the service he did to his community and his country.

But they would still tell only half the story, Kitt the man was more complex and subtle than that.

He was driven as much by his own devils as by his determination to expose dark deeds. He had an

overwhelming need to succeed – and as great a need for recognition. In a curious way, he lacked self-confidence, though no one who was subjected to his telephone cross-examination would ever have known it. But he spent more time than he should have done seeking reassurance and even in trying to convince himself and others that every story he did was better than the last simply because it was the latest – a manifest absurdity.

He flourished best when the adrenalin of the chase was in his veins. If he had been born in the days of early man, he would have been an incomparable hunter.

The risks he knowingly took (the intermittent threats to his life were real enough) were strangely at odds with his dedication to his role as a family man. His home was not so much a castle as a haven, a place of refuge. It was where he gathered the strength to carry on – from his children and, more especially, from his wife Yvonne. Paradoxically, Kitt's job sometimes brought danger to the home he cherished.

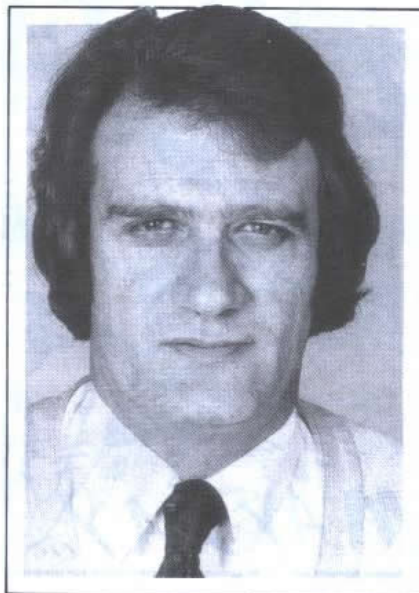
One part of him dearly wished to separate his private life from his professional one. But the other part would not let him do it. His home telephone, like the several phones he employed in the office, was his master. Day and night, it

brought information, rumour, malice and mischief. And scoops, of course, if one was prepared to dig hard and long enough. Kitt Katzin was always prepared to do that.

His chosen path in journalism was not an easy one. Investigative reporting offers low moments to match the exhilarating highs. It requires of its practitioners the ability to ferret tirelessly, to endure the disappointments of the false trail, to have the patience to patch together – sometimes over months and even years – the trivia of a thousand snatches of information before ever a coherent picture emerges.

If there is one phrase that recurs in all the tributes to him, it is the one about his "pursuit of the truth". When he was awarded the highest accolade of his journalistic colleagues, the Pringle Award, last year, the Chairman of the Argus company, Murray Hofmeyer, wrote to him: "Your tenacity at getting at the truth is already legendary".

Kitt Katzin held it as self-evident that ordinary people were entitled to be told the truth. He devoted the better part of his working life to digging out truths that politicians and bureaucrats, great and small, tried to hide. ●



The late Kitt Katzin