

PHOTOGRAPHY

**“I won. But if I had a choice now, I would rather the whole thing had never happened”**





# Pulitzer!

*For South African photographer, Greg Marinovich, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his pictures of a man being stabbed and burned to death in Soweto, the honour is tinged with bitter irony. He spoke to **KAREN STANDER***

**“When I saw what was beginning to happen, I thought: ‘I’m not going to sit and watch this...’”**

**G**REG Marinovich, winner of the 1991 Pulitzer Prize for spot photography, cannot shake the horror of that day in Soweto which brought both death and glory. It is a bitter irony for the Johannesburg-based photographer that he should win the Oscar of photographic awards as a result of the violent and agonising death of a man suspected by his killers of being a spy for a rival group.

Marinovich's photographs, taken outside Soweto's Inhlazane's Station in September last year at the height of the worst-ever political violence on the Reef, drew enormous public reaction.

The same series of photographs has already earned him the Overseas Press Club Award, the Leica Award for Excellence and the French Scoop Award.

The irony of winning a coveted journalistic prize

from death is made more poignant by the fact that in the heat of the moment, Marinovich ignored his own precarious safety to plead with the crowd for the man's life.

“When I saw what was beginning to happen, I thought: ‘I’m not going to sit and watch this’.

“A month previously I witnessed a man hacked to death inside a hostel and I did nothing. I live with that guilt.

PLEASE TURN OVER

**“I saw that someone had tried to stab me. He swung the knife past me and I wasn’t even aware of it.”**



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"I knew I would not be able to live with myself if it happened a second time and I did nothing again to stop it.

"I argued with them. I asked them how they knew he was a spy. They said they just knew it. The people in that crowd spoke perfectly rationally. That was strange to me. I said what they were doing was crazy, the killing had to stop. They said they heard what I was saying, they understood, but they just carried on.

"Everyone was very serious, unlike the other time when the people were laughing and joking after they hacked the man.

"I found it a strange experience as a photographer. On the one hand one reacts purely and instinctively as a journalist. I saw the shots and realised they were amazing pictures. On the other hand, I knew I was watching someone being killed. I completely lost my observer status by intervening, but at the same time I knew I had to keep shooting.

"Several times people in the crowd tried to stop me taking pictures. I told them I would stop when they stopped killing him."

It was chance that brought Marinovich, a freelance photographer, and Associated Press reporter Tom Cohen to the spot that Saturday morning. They had gone to the township to do a story on hostels, the focus of most of the violence.

"The township was very tense after bad fighting in that area for three days. There were roadblocks and barricades in the streets. When we got to the hostel, we decided not to go in because it was so bad there. We decided to go to another one instead. We cruised around the area. Groups of people were standing around.

"We stopped on the ANC side and talked to some people. While we were talking, shots were fired and everyone ducked. But nothing much was happening."

Marinovich and Cohen walked around the area for about 45 minutes before returning to Inhlazane's Station.

"Suddenly I noticed that a train had stopped and a man was being pulled off the train by a group of people.

"They were pulling him down the stairs, stabbing him with knives. They stabbed him all over, in the head, in his body. They were hitting him with stones,



SOUTHLIGHT

Greg Marinovich

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some as big as my fist. Others were kicking him. They pulled him outside in the street near some houses.

"I didn't think at any stage that I was really in personal danger. But afterwards I watched video footage taken by a television crew and I saw that someone had tried to stab me. He swung the knife past me and I wasn't even aware of it at the time.

"While I was arguing with them, the one with the knife had cut his hand and he grimaced, looking at me as if he expected sympathy.

I thought: 'How can you expect sympathy from me over a cut in your hand when you're killing this guy?' Some kid

poured petrol on the man from a petrol bomb."

The crowd moved off to the top of the railway bridge where someone else had become the centre of an argument and Marinovich and Cohen followed.

Suddenly from below they heard the sound of petrol igniting in a fireball and the sound of cheering.

Marinovich ran to the edge of the embankment and looked down. Someone had set the man alight and he was running, trying to escape the flames.

Marinovich turns away as if to flinch from the memory.

"He was still moaning even after the flames were out.

"At the same time, this was perhaps one of the less brutal murders of the time. There were many more during that time that were much worse."

What was the importance of those pictures?

"It made people aware of what was happening out there. Locally they had a huge reaction, they really brought the horror home. It drew people into the situation, made them realise what it was like out there.

"How many whites had been into the townships and knew what it was all about?

"I think some of what I was trying to convey came through – the stupidity, the absolute craziness. We are butchering each other and for what? For nothing.

"But people will read into pictures whatever they want to see.

"*Die Patriot* (the Conservative Party mouthpiece) might have used the pictures to show how barbaric black people are, while the *Sowetan* or *City Press* used them to show what was happening to our people in the townships.

"Then again a Sunday newspaper might have used them with shock-horror headlines for sensationalism. The politics of a picture are out of your control.

"This worries me, but it is also just the way it is. As a photographer I am acting as a voyeur for other people. Those people will still make their own judgments, still draw the same conclusions whether they see the published pictures or are sitting in a ring-side seat. Politics is what people read into the pictures, and pictures are open to interpretations."

What bothers Marinovich about the



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attention his pictures have received is the danger of people generalising from them and forming a distorted view of a community.

"There were perhaps 30 people involved in a suburb of tens of thousands. Most people live in terror because of the violence.

"Photography isolates a moment and it becomes the norm. Horror becomes the way of life and people perceive all 'those people' as murderers.

"But this is true of all news pictures of violence."

Asked how he coped with witnessing such horror, he said: "I didn't. I freaked out over those two months of covering the violence. I became very introspective, and depressed. I didn't see anyone. But you learn to live with it.

"This was a war going on out there. It might not have seemed like a war to you or me sitting here, but it certainly was war if you were sitting in Soweto. It was murder, but it was in a war situation."

Marinovich said he was more affected by watching the television footage than by looking at his photographs.

"I knew what my pictures looked like, but everything in between was a blank. Watching television footage filled it all in."

**W**ill the awards make a difference?

"Oh yes. People will regard even my bad pictures differently," Marinovich replies wryly. "They'll ask themselves what I'm trying to show.

"Career-wise it will make a big difference. I also think I should be able to sell my more in-depth pictures, which is really what I want to do."

Although winning the Pulitzer Prize was wonderful, on a different level it was a terrible burden.

"I won, But if I had a choice now, I would rather the whole thing had never happened. It's not that I wish I wasn't there.

"If it had to happen, I'm glad I was there to show the world what happened. But if I could choose between the Pulitzer and that man still being alive, I would rather not have the award." ●

*KAREN Stander is a graduate of the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University and is national organiser of the SAUJ.*



### US award for AFP's Walter Dhladhla

JOHANNESBURG-based, Agence France Presse photographer, Walter Dhladhla recently won the 'Young Photographer' category in the International Centre for Photography's Infinity Awards.

The awards are sponsored by Eastman Kodak, which no longer has a presence in South Africa, and The Leica Camera Group.

Dhladhla is a self-taught photographer who got involved in the craft as a darkroom assistant at the now-defunct *Sunday Express* in Johannesburg. He joined the permanent staff of Agence France Presse in 1986.

The photograph on the cover of this edition of *Review* and the two pictures appearing here are taken from Dhladhla's award-winning portfolio.