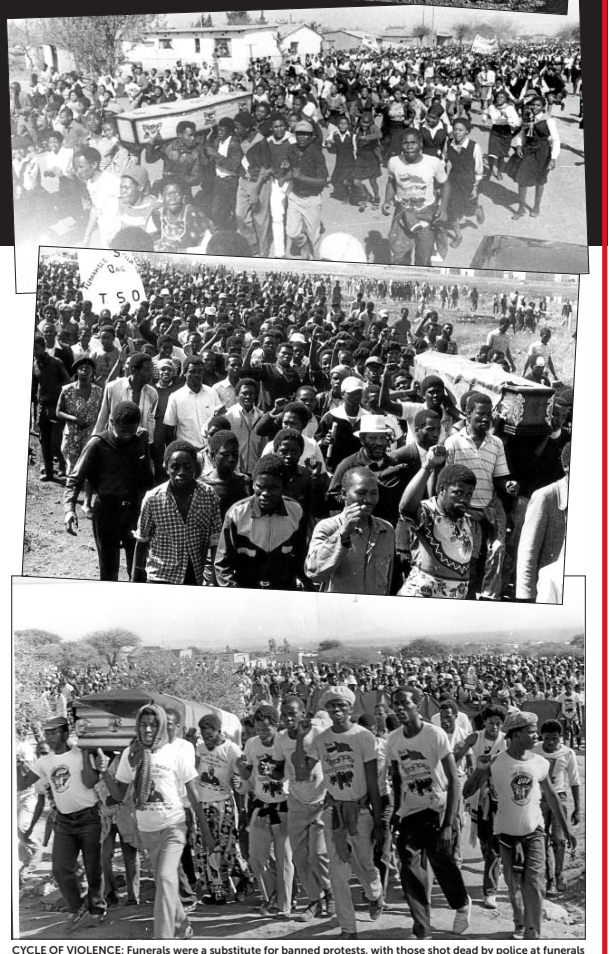
BEREFT BUT UNBOWED



In her memoir, 'Keeper of the Kumm', playwright and author **Sylvia Vollenhoven** remembers working as a Sunday Times journalist reporting on unrest in the turbulent 1980s and the day a hand grenade opened her eyes to the vulnerability of the apartheid state

IT is 1985 and, like many others in the media, I am part of the cycle of covering township unrest, the inevitable funerals that result from it, and then the funerals of the people murdered by the police at the previous funeral. Weekdays of rioting are book-ended by weekends recording the rituals of death.

The United Democratic Front and the banned African National Congress set up funeral committees. The funerals become political rallies that defy sombre tradition. Isolated relatives weep in large, almost jubilant crowds. Hundreds of people determined to show the police and soldiers in armoured vehicles — with names like Casspir, Buffel and Ratel — that we are not afraid. Bereft but not bowed.

"Press card, please," says a khaki-clad comrade behind a trestle table at the entrance to the stadium. I am in a long line of mostly foreign journalists. Very few local media cover these events.

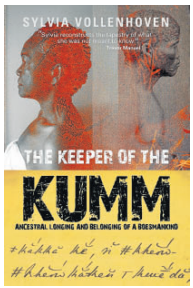
I show my blue and white Sunday Times press card signed by the editor, Tertius Myburgh, who is hoping for a National Party diplomatic posting. He has taken the newspaper from the fairly progressive stance of Joel Mervis to one that will please his party bosses.

"Sylvia, my dear," he says when I question him about his blanket ban on covering township unrest, "I believe that there are forces at work here that go way beyond the violence in the townships. The government's strategy is to come down hard on *opstokers* (agents provocateurs) and prepare the ground for negotiations with black moderates. I am on the side of peace and restoring law and order."

The term "black moderate" has become synonymous with "sellout". People who go down this road have their homes burnt, are ostracised and occasionally necklaced.

My heart sinks when I realise that Myburgh either believes the propaganda he is repeating or is even more cynical than I have come to believe.

When Chester Crocker, the architect of US president Ronald Reagan's "constructive engagement" policy, visits South Africa, he has a desk in our offices. The assistant editor, Fleur de Villiers, calls him Chet and takes him to lunches and on township tours. "Constructive engagement" is Reagan talk (and that of his sidekick, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher) for easing the pressure on the National Party government to end apartheid. Effectively, they're supportive of the white government in Africa's last "colony", saying that friendly coercion is more effective than an alienating anti-apartheid stance.



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On the ground, it is carte blanche for the army and police who are now killing and jailing more people, many of them underage children, than in the entire history of apartheid.

"Let's just shoot her in the tits right now," says a young soldier on the back of a Casspir armoured vehicle. I've been turned away from the media registration table at the funeral of Sithembele Mathiso because I'm wearing trousers. I had assumed that a khaki shirt and jeans would make me look like a marshal or a comrade. The army and police are on the lookout for journalists today.

Leaving photographer Ambrose Peters behind, I've made my way to the car. As I open the boot, the armoured vehicle stops right next to me, rifles trained on my back. I don't know if they have recognised me and I dare not look around as the soldiers laugh at the "tits" remark.

Slowly I climb into the car and drive away. For a while they follow me but they have bigger fish to fry today and soon they lose interest. Alone in the small blue Volkswagen, I laugh loudly.

I could have been killed going in search of a dress to get into the stadium where the funeral is being held. A man in front of me is refused entry because his hairstyle is the popular "curly perm". A woman is told to remove her sunglasses. Peters is given a woolly cap because his hair is too straight. It's a warm day in August and the winter rain has stopped for a while. Ambrose struggles to work as the large cap makes him sweat in the afternoon sunshine.

The comrades have a long list of behaviour they regard as disrespectful or un-African. Nobody argues with them. With each funeral, the khaki-clad marshals become more aggressive. White media people are never told what to wear or how to behave. Black people, including the journalists, are scrupulously vetted and the arbitrary criteria have little to do with security issues. Police spies mingle in the crowds.

We drove into the township before dawn so we could escape the police roadblocks. At a friend's house in Gugulethu, I change into the only dress that fits me. I return to the funeral disguised as a schoolgirl, unprepared for the response; though Peter Magubane, the renowned struggle photographer, hardly noticed me before, he offers to take me under his wing and give my career a kick-start. In the midst of all the drama, I am being propositioned by an older man with a weakness for short gymslips.

Teenager Sithembele Mathiso was shot by police at the end of July and about 6 000 people attend his funeral. Very few of us know exactly who Sithembele is; all we know is that he died in the recent wave of unrest. Most of us are here to show solidarity with the anti-apartheid struggle. In the church, the thundering political rhetoric overshadows the sermon.

"We want our freedom, we want all our freedom and we want it now," says a member of the UDF, echoing the words of their leader, Rev Allan Boesak, at the launch two years ago.

Outside, the Casspir, Ratel and Buffel armoured vehicles practise military manoeuvres. I want the praying and singing to continue so that we can stay here in the church where it's safe. Someone whispers to me that Dr Boesak and a group of clerics have been arrested trying to enter the township to attend the funeral. The absence of Dr Boesak makes us all the more vulnerable.

Soon we are leaving the church, singing, dancing, toyi-toying in a long line, many of us in the "colours of the people", the palette of resistance — the black, green and gold of the ANC, the yellow, black and red of the UDF or the red and black "hammer and sickle" of the South African Communist Party.

By the time the crowd leaves the graveside in the late afternoon, the police have had enough of this long day. They block off the street where Mathiso's family lives. People are making their way there to share the traditional funeral meal.

When I hear the rifle shots I don't quite know whether it's only teargas the police are shooting or whether we're under attack from bullets. People run in every direction. The policemen on the ground are beating people with sjambroks. Some agile young people are running across the roofs of the matchbox houses. Through the teargas I see the police and army vehicles moving off. The notorious Captain Dolf Odendaal, who is on a mission to crush all resistance in the Western Cape, is walking back to his vehicle.

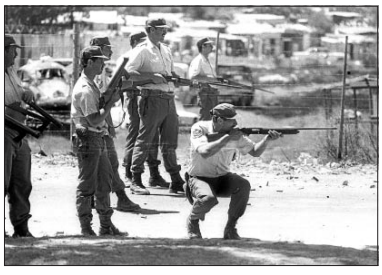
> As I lie with my face in the sand, I am terrified and excited . . . It is the first time I've heard anything other than police gunfire

I am standing in a small field with a low rise opposite the police. Suddenly there is an explosion and I am flung to the ground. It sounds and feels as if a bomb has gone off. As I lie with my face in the sand, I am terrified and excited at once. It is the first time I've heard anything other than police gunfire.

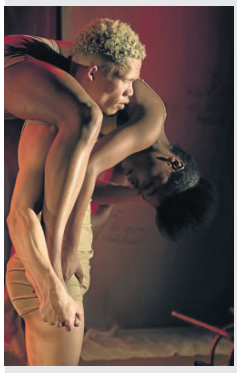
When the smoke clears, we see that it was a grenade attack from the rooftop of one of the nearby houses. Several policemen, including Dolf Odendaal, and a few white media people who thought they were safe behind army lines, have been hurt.

That day in the '80s is the moment I first believed that we could one day win the fight. My fear of the anti-apartheid struggle being overpowered by the state ends with a simple hand grenade blast and my face half buried in the sand.

● *'Keeper of the Kumm' is published by Tafelberg, R220*



WAITING GAME: Police ready to disperse crowds with birdshot and rubber bullets in Crossroads, Cape Town, in the 1980s Picture: TIMES MEDIA



WORD THERAPY: Dancers Byron Klassen and Adelaide Majoor in a stage performance of 'The Keeper of the Kumm' by Sylvia Vollenhoven Picture: CUEPIX

Sangoma's advice: listen to ancestors

SYLVIA Vollenhoven has also written a play titled *The Keeper of the Kumm*, which tells the same story as her memoir. But whereas the book is nonfiction, the play is a fictionalised account of the facts.

Both tell of Vollenhoven's experiences of becoming ill while working for the Gates Foundation in Ghana.

She returned to South Africa and, after no success with mainstream medicine, went to a sangoma who told her she did not have a conventional illness but an "ancestral calling".

She began to write. "The more I wrote, the better I became and now I am completely fine," said Vollenhoven.

The play, directed by Basil Appollis, stars Quanita Adams as the character based on Vollenhoven, and features music by Hilton Schilder and choreography by Namaqualand-based dance teacher Alfred Hinkel.

It was a commissioned work on the main programme of the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown this month, where it was hailed in the festival paper Cue as a moving "poetic conversation between an urban, contemporary journalist and her ancestral spirit guide".

It will be staged at Artscape in Cape Town this week, from Wednesday to Saturday, and in Johannesburg early next year.

"Kumm" is the word for a story or anything told in the now extinct /Xam language — in which the motto on the South African coat of arms, "diverse people unite", is written. — *Gillian Anstey*

CYCLE OF VIOLENCE: Funerals were a substitute for banned protests, with those shot dead by police at funerals in turn requiring funerals Pictures: LEN KHUMALO, JABU KUMALO, JOE MOLEFE, MBUZENI ZULU and others