

The gentle brilliance of TO Honiball

On 7 December 2005 the birth of a man today recognised as a cultural icon by some, but virtually unknown to others in South Africa, was celebrated by way of a retrospective exhibition of his work at the Sanlam art gallery in Bellville.



Humans in jackal's clothing. All the human traits are visible, plus some twists from the imaginary animal world. All the action was portrayed at full-speed-ahead.



By Francois Verster

Thomas Osche Honiball was born at Cradock in the Eastern Cape. The Honiballs of South Africa are originally from English stock, but in 1821 John Honiball married Susara Susanna Pienaar – and by the time TO Honiball's parents James and Johanna Honiball settled in Stellenbosch (about 1903), the family was very much Afrikaans – to the eventual gain of Afrikaans cultural heritage.

TO Honiball, arguably the most celebrated cartoonist and comic strip artist of this country, started drawing caricatures of teachers and fellow learners at Paul Roos Gimnasium, proclaiming his preference for combining humour and his natural drawing skill at an early age. In 1926 he enrolled for a degree in architecture at the University of Cape Town, but felt restricted by the technical nature of the subject. In 1927 Honiball travelled to the United States, where he was introduced to American newspaper comics. Eventually he completed a drawing course and landed a job at an advertising agency. There Honiball received a sound technical foundation as an artist, and resolved to “create the first indigenous comic strip” – in Afrikaans, no less.

After Honiball returned to Cape Town in 1930, the Great Depression was in full swing. In 1936 he was fortunate to be appointed on the staff of *Die Burger* as an illustrator. He was on the payroll from 1 April (perhaps appropriate for a pictorial humourist) at £40 per month. In 1978 he would retire with a monthly pension of R200 – for Honiball it was never about the money, but even so, it was nothing





T.O. Honiball busy drawing a cartoon. He always used a fine brush even for his black and white line work.



Lights! Action! Honiball was a very acute observer of human nature, but then expressed human qualities in his animal characters. His series of stand-alone drawings of baboon musicians and singers is still a great favourite.

but a disgrace, especially when compared to contemporaries like Charles Monroe Schultz, the creator of *Peanuts*, who earned approximately \$40 million per annum from spinoffs like dolls, coffee mugs and the like. According to Honiball's letter of appointment, he was prohibited from doing any freelance work, including anything resembling comic strips, caricatures or cartoons. How then did it come about that Honiball is today revered as "the father of comics in South Africa"? The short answer would be: not easily.

In 1941 the internationally known political cartoonist Daniel Cornelius Boonzaier, father of the celebrated artist Gregoire, left the mouthpiece of the National Party, *Die Burger*. Honiball had big boots to fill indeed, for DC Boonzaier was known as the man who destroyed the political career of Louis Botha, toppling him as premier of South Africa by means of an almost cruel lampooning campaign. Honiball, a gentle soul by comparison, initially tried to continue in Boonzaier's style of cartooning, making use of the Jewish capitalist character Hoggenheimer that Boonzaier had created and used to great effect. But not for long. Honiball had no love for politics, but he was an artist with his own very distinctive creative style. While his predecessor was feared but respected, Honiball was respected, yet never quite feared – nor hated. His unassuming nature and seemingly harmless slapstick-like caricatures belied the substantial impact of his "pictorial shorthand" – as political cartooning is known in journalistic circles. Indeed, Honiball was so effective as an opinion former, that Piet Cillié, his long-time editor, professed Honiball's cartoons to wield more power than the best editorials ever written by Cillié himself.



Eventually Honiball surpassed the devastating Boonzaier, though this fact was never publicly acknowledged. Honiball not only regularly made a fool of the generally respected Opposition leader Sir de Villiers Graaff, but played a leading role in belittling Field Marshall Jan Smuts, a statesman of international stature at the time. It was believed that Honiball helped the National Party to gain power in 1948, by rallying Afrikaners to “awaken and go to the polls”.

It cannot be denied that TO Honiball made his mark in political journalism, even though he definitely was a reluctant hero (for some, and villain for others). Ironically, it will not be Honiball the political juggernaut that will be remembered longest. If asked today who TO Honiball was, people will probably answer: “Oh yes, the guy who drew those funny baboons?”

Baboons indeed. Honiball had to wait until 1939 before his first comic strip was published – the epitome of the Boer braggart (*grootliegkarakter*) Oom Kaspas or Uncle Casper. Afrikaners readers readily identified with this “Oom,” his typical rural milieu, doing typical platteland things, such as milking cows, hunting lion, repairing farm implements and playing rugby. Everything in overdrive of course – and falling flat on his face at the end of each (usually six panelled) strip.

The strip series *Oom Kaspas* was so popular that it is hard to believe that *Die Huisgenoot*, still the biggest selling Afrikaners magazine today, turned the strip down. In the editor’s infamous words: “Honiball, if I



Honiball was an accomplished copper- and silversmith, but even in this hobby his humour was evident!

want to change *Die Huisgenoot* into a comic book, I will let you know.”

By 1942 Oom Kaspas was so well-loved that Truida Pohl, later the wife of famous poet N P van Wyk Louw, asked Honiball to create a strip with the characters Jackal and Wolf (*Jakkals en Wolf*) for the Afrikaners children’s magazine *Die Jongspan*. While Honiball capitalised on the long established tradition of telling Baron von Münchhausen-like tall tales with *Oom Kaspas*, *Jakkals en Wolf* was based on a combination of African and European animal fables. The legend of Reynard the Fox were adapted by Khoi (later “Cape Coloured”) storytellers and retold to Afrikaners children like Honiball himself. *Jakkals en Wolf* started out as strip versions of the oral tradition until Honiball ran out of stories and made up his own, adding characters as he went along until 1969, when *Die Jongspan* folded.

In 1948 the editorial staff of *Die Huisgenoot* finally asked Honiball to create a comic strip for them. Honiball duly responded by creating *Adoons-hulle* (“Adonis and Company”), a satirical strip which commented mostly on Afrikaans society. To camouflage his intentions, Honiball used baboons as characters instead of people, who could be recognised. In spite of this many people recognised themselves (or believed that they did) and complained – to the amusement of their compatriots.

Honiball drew other strips, now mostly forgotten, like *Die onnutsige apie* (“The mischievous little ape”) for *Die Jongspan* in 1941 and *Faan Brand*, an adventure strip for teenagers, also for *Die Jongspan* (1944). *Kalie Skietebok* was a family strip which appeared in *Die Burger* in 1951-52. *Caltex-kaskenades* (*Die Burger*, 1948) was about peculiar characters living in a small town, but for this series Honiball did not write the text himself. What these strips lacked, were the typically Afrikaners humour of Honiball’s other work. This gentle humour that taught people to laugh at themselves, is the real legacy of TO Honiball. Therefore, a century after his birth (and 15 years after his death), TO Honiball is remembered not for his ego-shattering political cartoons, but rather for his hilarious comic strip characters, like the pompous “Dutch” baboon Kaas Windvogel and his “Afrikaners” counterpart, the downtrodden Adoons. ■

Illustrations and photographs courtesy of Mrs Essie and Mr Theo Honiball.



Oom Kaspas – the Afrikaners Baron von Münchhausen – telling Nefie another tall tale.