

Lillian Cingo.

Ever since railways, in search of diamonds and gold, went racing into the interior from Cape Town, Durban and other harbour towns they have been part of the muscle of South Africa's industrial revolution. For migrant workers going to the mines; for students getting to boarding school or university the railways in South Africa have been a fundamental part of their experience. Small wonder then, that they are etched in the national consciousness of our literature whether in Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali's poem of the *Amagoduka* at Glencoe station¹, or Hugh Masakela's song of *Stimela*, or A.C. Jordan's students heading off to Lovedale and Fort Hare from the depths of the rural Transkei in *Inqumbo Yeminyana*.² But none of this prepared the country for the wonderfully new idea of the Phelophela Train--- meaning good, clean health--- which first hit the tracks in 1993

Imagine for a moment a railway siding in one of the remote dorps of the Karoo or in some deep rural part of Limpopo Province. Into the siding one evening, shunts a long 16-carriage train complete with a generator able to power half a town. Riding on those steel wheels is all the capital equipment needed to equip a complete primary health care hospital plus over 50 people, many of them young, but highly skilled to make it all work. The train is going to stay a week and perhaps 1000 local people will get treatment. And others will be trained to do further health care work.

This amazing train which excites all those who see, or even simply hear about, it has been managed for 14 years now by the woman who stands before us. She is about to turn 70 in a few days time but who shows no signs whatever of slowing down. But this is part of the New South African tradition: Madiba himself had not even left prison when he turned 70 and had a life-time's work ahead of him.

Lillian Cingo comes from that great nursing tradition which started in South Africa at the beginning of the 20th century in Mission hospitals which, until apartheid destroyed them, trained so many wonderful women to be nurses, starting with Cecilia Makiwane & Mina Calani who graduated from the Victoria Hospital in Lovedale in 1903 under Neil Macvicar & Mary Balmer. Lillian Cingo herself received her primary training as a registered general nurse at the Moroka Mission Hospital in Thaba 'Nchu in the Free State.[1956-1959] From there she went to McCords Zulu Hospital in Durban where she trained as a midwife. For five years she then worked as a Senior Staff nurse at first Rietfontein and then Baragwanath hospitals.

But then, in 1966, she decided that if she was to progress further she must go into exile. The apartheid State at the time was hostile to the very idea of African women being in town let alone acquiring qualifications. In London she trained in neurosurgical and neurological nursing and accepted a position as a specialist nurse in neurosurgery which she held for 30 years. In 1975 she was presented to the Queen as Best Neurosurgical Nurse Specialist and was invited to start a Regional Neurosurgical Unit at the Royal Free Hospital in London which she managed for the next 15 years. No need to move. She was at the top of her profession in the nursing capital of the world. But Lillian Cingo had not taken a one-way ticket to Exile. She would return and she wanted to be properly prepared. In 1991 she did a Masters degree in Counselling Psychology through the Tavistock Institute and acquired a

¹ In Wole Soyinke (ed.) *Poems of Black Africa*, Heinemann, London, 1975 pp.182-185

² A.C.Jordan, *Wrath of the Ancestors*, New edition, Ad Donker, Johannesburg, 2004.

certificate in HIV/AIDS counselling. With this formidable training and yet more formidable experience behind her Lillian Cingo returned home to a free South Africa determined to contribute where she could.

Fortune, says Louis Pasteur, favours the prepared mind. No less, it would seem, the prepared person for just as Lillian Cingo was returning home the person in charge of Transnet's Corporate Social Investment department, Lynette Coetzee, was wondering about starting some sort of health train. India had its Lifeline Express and the Optometry Unit at RAU wanted to do something imaginative. So in 1993 a small, two-coach clinic on wheels began to open people's eyes all around the country.

In 1995 Lillian Cingo & Lynette Coetzee were appointed joint managers of the Phelophela Health Train: Cingo on the train for field operations; and Coetzee based in Johannesburg. By 1996 the train had 16 coaches including a dental clinic. This rolling hospital has a staff of 19 plus 36 final year medical students on two-week stints. It treats up to 45 000 patients a year, some of whom may walk as much as 30 kms. to get there. Whilst the student interns contribute greatly they also learn much from the experience, not least from seeing close-up the deep poverty of rural marginalised people in the country.

But the success of the Phelophela train really lies in the sensitive care with which the whole process has been thought through. The train goes only to where it has been invited and plans are made months in advance. Local leaders are asked to nominate three persons to lead the preparations plus a further 15 to constitute a Phelophela steering committee. In addition 16 people must be nominated to complete a 5-day course in basic health and hygiene whilst the train is there. "We put the community in charge", says Lillian Cingo, "That is why it works".

Clearly there is much more to the Phelophela process than medical treatment of individuals. When she was at the Tavistock Clinic in London Lillian Cingo shocked everybody by saying, one day, that two-thirds of her country were mentally handicapped. She was driving home the importance of education and the consequences of illiteracy. She is conscious of the destruction wrought by Bantu Education: "Outsiders say to us, 'You've been free for nine years now, why aren't things better?' They don't realise how poor our educational system was under the old regime. Even our teachers were under-educated, even our leaders, those in high positions now. People have forgotten this was a nation almost completely destroyed by the former government. We're trying to rebuild it now—but we mustn't get impatient with South Africa." ³

We are all impatient. But Lillian Cingo & the Phelophela train are an inspiring example of what can be done not by one person but by a whole team, thinking strategically, backed by necessary resources and brilliantly led.

³ Guardian Education. 18 March, 2003