

Interview

Interview in three parts, by Adam Donaldson Powell (Norway)

INTERVIEW: ALBERT RUSSO Autumn 2012

(Part One)

- Powell: Mr. Russo, you have recently published “Crystals in a shock wave – The works of / Albert Russo / et son oeuvre”, which is a reprint of reviews and commentaries of your work in English, French and Italian from five continents. Please explain to our readers why you took it upon yourself to publish such an unusual book, and what you see as the importance of reviews for authors and readers in today’s fast-changing publishing arena.
- Russo: There are thousands of writers vying for a sunny spot on the Net, some are serious, others think they can write. Internet has democratized the process and that is a very good thing, because it pitches editors against their responsibilities and forces them to admit that they are no longer the sole judges of a literary work, although they still hold some power with the conventional publishers. Anybody nowadays can self-publish work and hope to hit it big, but it’s still a needle in the haystack of millions of online words. The problem here is self-promotion. I have chosen the latter, knowing that the challenge of attracting the attention of literary reviewers and readers is formidable. But as I advance in age, I don’t want to wait for a publisher to decide whether or not he/she would be interested in publishing such a retrospective. Many people of value (professors of literature, reputable authors and other experts) have written about my books, which prompted me to collate their essays and produce a large volume encompassing 40 years of writing, entitled “Crystals in a shock wave”.
- Powell: The various essays, reviews and commentaries regarding your work tell much about you as an author—albeit from the perspective of reviewers, many of whom have followed your work and literary development over the course of several publications. Your novels undoubtedly include many fictionalized personal experiences. You have yet to publish an autobiography. After so many publications, and a lifetime of so many rich experiences, how is it that you have still not chosen to write an autobiography? Or even a book that reflects your views on publishing as a business and your many experiences with publishers, celebrities and other authors?
- Russo: I am incapable of writing an autobiography, for the moment I start projecting words on the screen then on paper, it is poetry or fiction that comes out. The few times I have tried to tackle the genre, I became nauseous, as if I was committing some kind of incest. And contrary to what I sometimes hear from writers, I don’t believe that fiction is a succession of lies. My characters, even when they resemble me or people I know well, tend to take flight and live a life

of their own; it is the mysterious process (most) writers experience. Although I seldom write essays, there are a few of them in which I have described the business side of writing. But I don't feel comfortable doing that, or speaking about the people I have met during my life, whether family or celebrities. It is a pity, for I would have liked to mention my brief encounters with personalities such as Lucchino Visconti, Vittorio de Sica (both famous Italian filmmakers) – when I lived in Italy –, Jackie Kennedy – (during my stay in New York) or some famous French actors and actresses, like Louis de Funès, Suzanne Flon, Jean-Pierre Cassel, etc. (actually I have met at least 2,000 such people within the span of 6 years) to whom I taught English or Italian here in Paris. Writers like Edmund White know how to do that very well – the latter also knows how to be very treacherous (I have experienced it personally, thinking he was a friend).

Powell: You master several languages, and have written books in English, French and Italian. What is the importance – for you, and for today's global literary community – of writing and publishing in several languages, rather than having most of your work translated into other languages? And how does your writing in English differ – for example – from your writing in French? That is to say, how do cultures, sub-cultures and national publishing trends affect your choices regarding which language you employ for any given book, and your approach to the subject matter?

Russo: Where I'm concerned, it is only relatively recently that I have been accepted as a bilingual writer (trilingual? My God, that would be too much for them) by the French critics, and consequently by publishers in Paris – I insist upon the 'consequently'. An eclectic writer, I escape any sort of labelling, which editors find very annoying, if not downright impertinent. So, many decide to ignore me altogether, the more adventurous pay some attention, whilst still keeping a comfortable distance. This lukewarm, noncommittal attitude may explain my propensity to take part in so many literary contests in the US, Britain and France, principally. Garnering prizes for me is an act of defiance, defiance against apriorisms. There is no fairer test than that of being judged anonymously. It is, I'm afraid to say, not at all the case with some of the national contests like the Prix Goncourt or the Prix Renaudot in France, which smack of pre-election scheming and reward, year in and year out – exceptions do occur once in a blue moon – the same three or four publishers, which I call the sacred quartett, for the Prix Goncourt is more a publisher's prize than an author's. So much said for ethical practice. Reverting to the notion of place and language, I have to smile when, having won an award, I'm referred to as an American writer or a French one, depending on the country in which the contest took place – that is, when I don't send my bio stating that I write in three languages. Then there is the instance where the US editor, partially aware of my background, sends me a letter of rejection, with the pretext that my style is too

European, whatever that means. The reverse is true here in France, when I wrote an essay that was published in the International Herald Tribune on literary prizes. «This article was so American», a Sorbonne professor who knows me remarked (in this case, she was not flattering me). My choice of language is often guided by the distance I wish to put between myself and my immediate environment or by the mood I am in the moment I take a pen (when I travel) or sit in front of my computer.

Powell: Many of your novels and short stories take place in colonial and post-colonial Africa – and are a reflection of your life in the Congo while growing up. For many years “colonialism” has been (perhaps) a somewhat politically incorrect theme, almost akin to the word “nigger”. Have you experienced any negativity regarding writing about colonialism in Africa ... especially since you are both Belgian and Caucasian? And what do you see as the particular historical and literary importance of you – Albert Russo – writing about the lives of individuals in the transition from colonialism to post-colonialism?

Russo: Thank goodness, I haven't known any antagonism when writing about colonialism or post-colonialism; I was always well received by my African peers (intellectuals, professors, reviewers). Not only that, but this year the University of Lubumbashi (DR Congo) has received all my books and they are being studied by students of literature and history. A Congolese professor will also write a long essay on my writings. Then too, I have been included in the anthology *Voix du Congo*, in which I am considered 'Congolais de coeur'. Here, in French, is an excerpt of a recent review:

Attachés à leur pays ou arrachés de leur terre natale, les auteurs portent le Congo à travers des textes poétiques. En français, en anglais ou en langues nationales, ils hésitent ou affirment avec force la nostalgie, les regrets, la dénonciation, la rancœur mais aussi la confiance en l'avenir, l'espoir dans les “Congolais de sang ou de coeur”. Ils font l'éloge du kikongo, du lingala, du tshiluba ou du swahili et de leur littérature orale, des rites, des contes, des chants et des croyances qui s'enfuient. Ils soufflent leur fatigue, ils psalmodient leurs prières et susurrent leur amour du Congo.

«Mais personne ne m'empêchera de continuer à rêver de ce qui aurait pu être : un pays démocratique, nommé le bel Kongo, où tous vivraient dans le respect et l'harmonie.» Albert Russo

Powell: In your novels and poems you include some narratives with personal commentary that reflect perspectives on the transition from colonialism to post-colonialism, as well as occasional comments on politics and social issues at that time. How do you look at the Africa that you see today compared with the Africa that you grew up in? What are your personal perspectives on how Belgian, British, French and American political interests and economic influences have influenced the cultural and social developments - for better, or for worse?

Russo: As you may remember I have experienced five 'decolonizations': the former Belgian Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Zimbabwe and South Africa (the fall of apartheid, I also call 'decolonization'). The history of Africa has to be rewritten, by African, European and American historians, and not in the light of ideology, as it is too often done. In my novels I have compared the colonial policies of France, Belgium, Britain, and Portugal – see my novels: *The Black Ancestor*, *Mixed Blood*, *And there was David-Kanza*, as well as my apartheid novel in French *Le Cap des Illusions*, soon to be published in Italian. All is not black and white, there are many factors that led the first four countries mentioned above to the very sad situations we are experiencing nowadays, except for South Africa, which was lucky to have Nelson Mandela as its first democratically elected president. All that can be found in my novels.

Powell: Very interesting! Thank you, Mr. Russo. In Part Two we shall explore your views on literary styles and publishing trends, both in general and regarding your own literary production in particular.

Part Two

Powell: You have signature styles, in both your novels and your prose poetry. Can you tell the readers how your styles of writing have changed over the course of your literary career? Upon reflection, do you feel that your style of writing has been influenced (directly, or indirectly) by any particular authors?

Russo: As you know I have three different styles that correspond to three different genres: my African novels, my gay novels and my humorous Zapinette series, not mentioning my SF and fantasy stories. People who are not acquainted with my writing or just know one of my styles, think that the other two belong to two different writers. And of course I also write poetry – a fourth style?

This eclecticism of mine confuses French publishers and, if interested in one of my novels, they are loath to hear of my other styles. After years of discussing this aspect of my writing, I finally got in touch with a publisher, Editions Hors Commerce, here in Paris (it folded 5 years ago) who understood my literary persona and she took the risk of publishing my work in its entirety, but I won't find easily (or never again) a person with such a broad mind. The authors whom I like and admire are so numerous, it would take me hours to mention them. Suffice it to say that among them are the French, British, American, Russian, German, Italian and Spanish classics in both prose and poetry. Other treasured sources are the Bible, especially the Thorah, Flavius Josephus, the Roman-Jewish historian, the Indian Upanishads and the Mahabharata, the Chinese Tao and Confucius, the 'delicious' 1001 Nights, Masaka Shiki who invented the wonderful Haiku and, finally, my dear African 'griots' who are the masters of oral literature. Then there is a plethora of modern authors from around the world, from Joseph and Philip Roth, to Tagore,

Santosh Kumar, Khaled Hosseini (Afghan novelist), Graham Greene, P.G. Wodehouse, Mafouz (Egyptian writer), Marcel Proust, Albert Camus, Adam Powell, Martin Tucker, David Alexander, Italo Svevo, Alberto Moravia, Pasolini, Amos Oz, Etgar Keret (both Israeli authors), Chinua Achebe, Yasmina Khadra (Algerian novelist) Nadine Gordimer, Basho, Ishiguro, Coetzee, Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers, In Coli Jean Bofane (Congolese novelist), Pavese, Italo Calvino, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Miguel Angel Asturias, Garcia Lorca, Gao Xingjian, Stefan Zweig, Herman Hesse, Hugo Claus, Mikhail Bulgakov, etc... etc... and I keep discovering new authors from the five continents all the time, so that this is a never-ending exercise.

- Powell: For the sake of new authors who are finding their way, would you recommend beginning authors to attempt to mimic the styles of established authors to any degree, or rather to listen to their own “inner voice” and strike out on new paths from the start?
- Russo: Let them read and read and read: classics, definitely, and the contemporary authors they feel attracted to. If they don’t know where to begin, I suggest they buy an anthology of classic writers and several compilations of the ‘best’ contemporary authors.
- Powell: You have a descriptive style of writing, full of sensual imagery ... perhaps rather “classical”. Many readers prefer to read a novel as a complete “passenger”, entirely subject to the lead of the driving author; while some other contemporary authors now experiment with leaving a greater degree of comprehension to the reader’s own intuition and recognition of his/her own personal experiences. How important and relevant is it for you to selectively weight the descriptive passages, and what are the difficulties and challenges with such an endeavor, in your eyes?
- Russo: I write as my innermost being dictates me to write: it can be very classical in the description of African landscapes, sensual – some even find it pornographic (I no longer make any distinction between these two) – when I tackle gay or heterosexual love scenes. Some critics claim that I am a post-modern writer. I’ve never been comfortable with labels or categories. When I want – need – to write about gay sex, I write about gay sex and don’t give myself limits, i.e. when I write for adults.
- Powell: These are difficult questions, I know. And it is also not easy for authors (and often not popular) to explain their work, or their processes. But these questions are quite interesting for many fellow authors (at all stages of literary development and achievement) so please bear with me.
As a novelist, poet and essayist you approach volume and speed of presentation differently, as would be expected. How do you personally ascertain the weighting of literary upbringing up against the rebellion of personal spirit in the creative process?
- Russo: As I have mentioned before, I love to discover new writers but I also go back to the classics regularly. The more I advance in age,

the freer I feel with my writing.

Powell: As an author that has written and published more books than most can dream of, how do you now – looking back – see the influence of publishers and readership upon your styles of writing? Is novel-writing (your primary output in terms of published books) more susceptible to acceptance, rigors and demands of publishers, and feedback/ expectations from readers, than poetry and essays, or do you more or less write what you choose and in the styles that you write ... and prefer to let the “public” catch up when they are ready?

Russo: We all know that novels and nonfiction have a much greater chance of getting the attention of publishers than poetry or short stories. There are times, though, when one is overwhelmed with personal or health problems – a pretty frequent occurrence in my case –, and that is when I write poetry and maybe a very short story. Poetry, as far as I’m concerned, is mostly therapeutic, it is my drug, my cigarette, my whiskey. Thank God for poetry. Whereas fiction requires regular hours and a strict discipline, I can – or feel compelled to – write verse at any time of the day or the night.

Powell: And finally, how is choice of style associated with your choice of theme, genre and literary language, etc.? I realize that much of this is intuitive, but there is also much learning and experience behind these decisions and processes. Please share with our readers your own personal perspectives.

Russo: You said it: most of it is intuitive and depends on the general mood I am in before I tackle a subject. There are periods in which I have to ‘return’ to my African roots – when I am guided by both what happens on the continent right now and by nostalgia (they usually go together). Then there are times where I need to go very far away and create a totally new environment, and that is when I write fantasy or SF. So, it is not true, as in my case, that one should strictly adhere to one’s life to or to what one knows. Look at Kafka, for instance, writing about America, when he never set foot on the NewWorld. Of course, you have to be sure about what you wish to say to your reader, in order to launch yourself into a such a risky adventure.

Powell: Thank you once again, Mr. Russo. In Part Three we shall have a look at the story of your transition from being a heterosexual family man to a gay/bisexual family man, and how that has influenced your literature.

Part Three

Powell: In this third and concluding segment of the interview, I would ask you to tell our readers how you see your transition from being a heterosexual family man (married father of two children) to a gay/bisexual family man, and how that has influenced your literature. Did you begin to publish your books before, during or after this transition; and how long did it take from your first published book until you were to write, and then to publish, books that included gay or bisexual characters and themes?

- Russo: This transition came about quite late in my life, about the time I was getting my second divorce. I did not divorce because of it but because of an incompatibility of characters. Here again I escape any stereotype. In sexual matters I was a late comer, actually I can now say that I belonged to the tiny minority of asexual men. I was neither interested in men nor in women, and homosexuality for me was just a curiosity, like for instance the study of dinosaurs, until the age of 20 when I was 'raped' by a French woman. I then got married a first time and was in love with my wife. The second marriage was not one I had planned. I have two wonderful children who know all about me. I started writing when I was about 20, in English, while I was studying at NYU. I continued writing in Italy, in both French and English and started publishing in US and French magazines in these two languages. It is much later, after my second divorce, that I began to write gay novels.
- Powell: Can you tell us a bit about that process – that is to say, how your “coming out” affected your writing and your need to write; and also how your writing affected your own gay identity in transition? Has writing about gay characters and gay themes enabled you to “break through” with other genres that you work with, *ery lagteor* has your gay writing mostly benefitted from your novels and short stories with heterosexual characters and themes?
- Russo: As I have mentioned before, my transition was so smooth I almost didn't see it coming. This probably has much to do with the fact that It all happened in a big city, Paris, where anonymity allows you a certain freedom. And again, I found no difficulty in writing about gay sex, since I was already writing about heterosexual sex in the past.
- Powell: You have a rather impressive list of literary friends and acquaintances who are public concerning their gay status. Which of these are (in your experience) the most important or most influential in your case?
- Russo: Among the gay writers I like are: EM Foster, Proust, Tennessee Williams, James Baldwin, André Gide, Julien Green (an American who wrote in French), Bukowsky, and the list goes on. The one I have been closest to is ... Adam Powell, a wonderful poet and artist who is as daring in his writings - he has 'the nerve' to create in 4 different languages (*chapeau!* as we say in French) - as he is endearing.
- Powell: How difficult has it been for you to find mainstream publishers for your gay-themed works? Do you see this as having gotten easier now that recognition of gay rights, gay marriage and gay partnership has come about in many European countries? Is there a better “market” for gay-themed books in France than in the USA? Is it easier to publish and sell gay-themed print books or gay-themed e-books, in your opinion?
- Russo: I was very lucky to have known a small French publisher who happens to be bisexual. He published my poetry and my first gay novel '*L'amant de mon Père*' which sold very well, in spite of little

promotion. And then Editions Hors Commerce came about, which published all my other books, including African stories, gay novels and poetry.

Powell: Your Zapinette series is rather cinematographic in style. Do you envision the stories that unfold as a film?

Russo: Of course, but that is a dream many writers have. It would be a 'miracle' if a TV producer got interested in my Zapinette series. Ginkgo, my other French publisher, also sees my African novels in films. But I have no illusion about it ever happening, since I have no connections whatsoever with the movie industry.

Powell: You are also renowned for your numerous art photography books. How has this discipline influenced your novel-writing?

Russo: I like them to interact. Critics have often said that my writing is visual, so photography is a natural with me.

Powell: And finally, Mr. Russo... Will your readers ever experience Zapinette as a mature young woman, or will she forever embody the refreshing childish wisdom in us all?

Russo: I don't think so. She is so cheeky and rambunctious, I want her to remain that way, and further more she allows me to write the most outrageous things that come through my mind, things that I could not write in a different context.

Thank you for your empathy and for your kind patience, Adam (Mr. Powell).

Adam Donaldson Powell (born in 1954 in Buffalo, USA) is a professional visual artist (since 1995) and a writer (since 1987). He has published 8 books, in USA, Norway and India, as well as several short works in literary publications. He has previously authored theatrical works performed onstage in Norway. Adam often combines his interests in community and international issues with art, and he has been quite active in art and cultural debates, with focus on world art.

