

NOT JUST POTTERING AROUND

BEING CREATIVE PARTNERS IN LIFE, LOVE AND WORK IS AN ART INDEED

BY JULIA LLOYD



BUKKENBURG, a gracious town farmhouse in Swellendam, had me completely fooled. The green-and-gold 19th century homestead, a gorgeous example of Cape Victorian architecture, sat under huge oaks in a state of repose, giving not an inkling of the activity beyond her walls.

Through her open gate, on either side of a wide driveway that curved to an unseen destination, an abundant garden beckoned. Obviously the soil was rich and fruitful, perhaps because the land was once the veggie garden of what is now the Drosty Museum next door, when it was owned by the Dutch

East India Company hundreds of years ago. Maybe, though, it was just due to run-off from the mighty Clock Peaks that loom overhead. Either way, there didn't seem to be too much complaining from the plants.

All was quiet with not a soul to be seen, the only sounds the drip-drip from a lazy fountain outside the showroom that was once a barn, and a breeze in the leaves. Inside, shelves were stacked with a huge selection of the high-temperature, reduction-fired Bukkenburg porcelain and stoneware that is sold throughout the country and abroad. Huge platters, casserole dishes, vases,

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urns, tea sets, dinner services and bowls had their finely finished designs and glazes shown to best effect under beautiful lighting.

I was beginning to wonder if everyone was out of town when, unexpectedly, I came upon a couple working in the studio at the back. Bent over their wheels, David throwing an urn and Felicity sweeping delicate strokes of reddish brown oxide onto a plate.

the introduction he gave them to the meaningful way of life that was possible through this medium of expression. “That’s something we’ve carried with us always,” he said, “and that’s what all this is about now. We will always focus on our pottery, but it is time to give the same attention to other interests. What we wanted when we moved here was to include our art in a broader lifestyle and, because we were well-established in Johannesburg and beyond, we felt secure in being able to move to the country and continue to sell our work. So the time was ideal for us to spread our passion into other areas and make for ourselves a real country lifestyle. This is the culmination of a lot of dreams and, far from being retirement, is simply a new beginning.”



neither noticed me enter. As I watched from my corner, what struck me most, indeed what startled me throughout the day, was the extraordinary synergy between the two of them that allowed such effectiveness in all aspects of their lives.

David Schlapobersky and Felicity Potter have been producing their distinctive range of work for over 30 years since starting out by acquiring the demanding art, discipline and traditions of high-temperature studio pottery under the late master potter and artist, Tim Morris. David, however, is adamant that what was most important about their time with Tim was not just his expertise, but

OPPOSITE: GIANT POTS HAVE USES BOTH INDOORS AND OUT.

ABOVE: FELICITY'S DELICIOUS GARDEN WITH A BACKDROP OF THE TOWERING CLOCK PEAKS.

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Certainly, in their relatively short time in Swellendam they've managed to go a long way towards achieving their goal. From the back of the studio, where huge pots queue up for the kiln, their land has one last empty patch waiting to be tilled before every inch of space on the 0,6-hectare property is fully utilized.

"It's like a self-contained village within a village," Felicity told me as she showed me around the large veggie garden, beyond which grazed nine sheep in an orchard of apricots, quinces, olives and lemons. "We grow just about everything. All the herbs and most of the vegetables, as well as spanspek and watermelons, and we stock up our larder before selling the surplus to shops, restaurants and local residents."

Everything is grown as naturally as possible, with lashings of manure and homemade compost, as well as plentiful leaf mould from the old oak trees. While they're fattened up for a supply of mutton, the sheep sleep on wood shavings that are recycled as mulch and, if it weren't for the Jack Russells, Sky, Max and Lucy, chickens would be supplying eggs.

"When we moved here the garden was a dustbowl," said Felicity, as we wandered through her garden, "but I had no problem with starting from scratch, particularly as the giant oaks and our view over Mayville next door to the Clock Peaks offered such a fabulous framework. All that was needed was a backbone of shrubs and perennials before I planted annuals that self-sow and see to themselves."

In the Bukkenburg household during the busy autumn daytime, talking can only be done while harvesting. "It's a time of non-stop picking and cooking, and we've been really lucky with the weather this year so there's an awful lot to do," Felicity added, collecting jalapeno and cayenne chillies and basil.

With laden crates and baskets she and David showed me their newly established nursery where rows of lavender plants grow next to a greenhouse of little clivias. "I am in such wonderment and awe of all garden plants," Felicity said as she began dead-heading the lavender. "Always have been. I'll never forget, as a little girl, collecting paraffin tins cut in half and making holes in them and filling them with cuttings. I would rush home from school each day, my first thought being to water my plants."

Back in the studio, David had finished a large vase and he and his assistant, Flip Jacobs, were tinkering around with an old power-driven cultivator, recently bought from a farmer and now in perfect working order. Felicity returned to painting a top shade of oxide on her plate and explained that, although she and David both trained as potters, they decided it would be far more productive if she stuck to painting and design, leaving the creation from clay to David.

"Before our stint with Tim Morris, I studied commercial art and fabric design and our studio just works better with David throwing and me designing," she said. "Both of us have also been



very influenced by my mother, Ruth Wolff, who was an interior designer and landscaper in Johannesburg."

Just seeing the two of them working together, it all made sense. No fuss, no bother, no clash of wills or artistic temperament. They seemed to have it all worked out in unspoken code. In any event, it was quite obvious that David was fascinated with raw materials, be it mixing the clay or preparing the soil. Perhaps it was the influence of his early life, growing up on a farm in Swaziland. "It's the mystery of the idea in my mind and then the doing of it," he told me. "The materials and the thought that moves from head to hand as I work are as important as the final piece. The process is everything."

On the other hand, Felicity seemed to revel in the end decoration and design, and, it appeared, the finishing off in all facets of their life. I watched her deftly painting and working towards the final piece, and thought of the pleasure she said she found in picking and cooking their crops, turning their garden harvests into what townfolk had told me were gourmet meals. Apart from their regular open days, when the public are invited to visit the studio, enjoy the garden and nursery and indulge in Felicity's tea and cakes, she also caters for small functions and dinner parties, inviting the host to select a menu before she prepares and serves it on the patio or in the large kitchen/dining room that was recently added on. "I serve uncomplicated food," she said. "It is seasonal and complements the environment."



A full-time aspect of their lives has been caring for Felicity's son, James, now 45 years old, who was severely brain-damaged in an accident when he was four. James's care has always been central to her and David's life together, and they have devoted themselves to creating an environment in which they can live and work and have him with them. After Felicity's marriage ended she was lucky enough to find in David the same empathy and need to give hands-on care, and it was their love for James that led them, prior to their time with Tim Morris, to Cresset House, a Camphill School for children in need of special care outside Johannesburg. There they were house parents and ran the pottery, farm and bakery for a number of years. "It was in this setting that our teaching interests in pottery, painting, gardening and cooking were stimulated and developed," said David, "and here, in new surroundings, these are still our main activities and interests."

Over tea in the garden, I learned of their lifelong involvement in various aspects of community work and development. Apart from their years at Cresset House during the early 70s, both were instrumental in establishing the Alexandra Art Centre near Johannesburg, in the 80s.

Since moving to Swellendam they have been active in the establishment and promotion of a community tourism initiative, but now, with their workshop regaining momentum, they are looking forward to giving more focus to their work and home environment. They'd also dearly like to hold a number of

workshops in all aspects of high-temperature, reduction-fired pottery, and devote more time to expanding their nursery.

With just the two of them and Flip Jacobs on a smallholding that, indeed, seems more like a village, anyone should be forgiven for wondering how they manage to accomplish what they do in a day. As I drove away, David's explanation that it was easy because it was all part of a much-loved and integrated lifestyle, wasn't quite good enough for me. I think a better reason is the couple's understanding and unspoken agreement. The finding of that balance and harmony which can, so often, be elusive. I'm sure that's their secret. 🐑

OPPOSITE TOP: BUKKENBURG, A RENOVATED AND RESTORED "TOWN" FARMHOUSE, WAS RECENTLY DECLARED A NATIONAL MONUMENT.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: A SIMPLE SYNERGY: FELICITY PAINTS AND DAVID THROWS A POT IN THEIR PEACEFUL GARDEN STUDIO.

ABOVE: EVERY SUNRISE FINDS DAVID THE SHEPHERD FEEDING HIS FLOCK OF NINE IN THE ORCHARD.

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