

Famed farmer-author faces his own 'modern classic'

Ja-nee - now it's O Locustfontein!

Jaap Boekkooi

AUTHOR Etienne Leroux, one of the famed Afrikaans "Sestigers", has been admitted to the rarified ranks of Penguin immortals as a "Modern Classic" writer whose trilogy of translated novels under the title "To a Dubious Salvation" will now remain forever in print.

But when the happy news reached the writer on his 20 000-ha family farm, not far from where the remaining lights of ghost town Koffiefontein blink emptily into the night, he was battling with his very own "modern classic" problem — the worst locust invasion in 15 years.

The endless veld of his southern Free State khaki koppie country, in which the Leroux farmstead "Ja-nee" lies like a cool and green oasis in a baked desert racked by dust-storms, is acrawl with the hungry hoppers, about to reach the "pedestrian" stage.

They are stripping the veld as thoroughly as the Oracle of Koffiefontein has long peeled off man's pretensions, leaving not a blade of grass for some 10 000 bleating merinos who help to subsidise the mystical

outpourings of the country's most phantasmagorical yarn-spinner.

So while he makes notes for a new book — the first in six years because with more work on the farm his writing tempo is slowing down — government spraying teams are leaving a carpet of dead hoppers in their millions as they criss-cross "Ja-nee".

Leroux is now the best-known Sestiger, who is in his sixties himself (the other is Jan Rabie), but as a phenomenon, of course, the Sestigers are passé. Leroux alone has crystallised as their modern classic, a consistent virtuoso of verbal magic, awash with distinctions that have curiously come in twos.

He has two bannings ("Seven Days at the Silbersteins" and "Magersfontein"), two CNA and two Hertzog prizes, two honorary doctorates, two "Festschriften" in honour of his 60th birthday, but also one Leroux Lexicon. Forty academic theses pick bare the bones of his soul and his work.

Etienne feels honoured by all this attention, never mind those earlier bannings.

"I like to read the theses. Often they throw light on my thought processes of which I myself was not aware," he says, comparing this with the different works of a composer which sometimes "accidental-

ly" counterpoint as a duet.

For the seeker of pat solutions, trite statements or political engagements, Leroux remains teasingly and troublingly elusive.

Part of this is the remarkable other-worldliness of this section of the Free State's subservience belt. At the farm, where Etienne's late father, Agriculture Minister Stephen le Roux, is remembered as "die oubaas", visitors to "die kleinbaas" are addressed in the third person as "die baas" and are waited on hand and foot.

While the whole country has smoke in its nostrils, not a single petrol bomb has been thrown in anger at Koffiefontein and wife Elizabeth's biggest role is still that "of marriage counsellor to all the blacks on the farm".

It is known that Etienne has expressed the belief that the present rulers offer the greatest chance of change, though Elizabeth, forever vivacious and outspoken, regrets "there has not been a Prog candidate to vote for here within 500 km".

Leroux's vision of the future is often prophetic but elliptical. On his Free State he said: "Here you race through a beloved Afrikaner legend — you race through a world which will be different tomorrow."

In more practical terms he describes the whole Afrikaner Establishment as "my beloved

enemy: I can attack them much better than most writers in this country because I can reach that sensitive area".

From the outset Leroux was a sensitive area himself. His first novel ("Die Eerste Lewe van Colet") was dubbed "a novel of decadence" by Die Transvaler. After another, Dr Andries Treurnicht wrote in frustration: "What does this writer want?"

That's the kind of question a Gemini like Etienne — who believes "that the real great writers are like the Wandering Jew ... not bound by the passing of time" — would find difficult to answer. On the surface he is just planning his book for 1988 and hoping the wool price stays up while the rand is down. Otherwise the steady routine of his life remains.

It is all part of the cocktail of contradictions presented by the first contemporary Afrikaans novelist to win a sizeable cosmopolitan readership: the epic artist of the imagination toiling in the heart of the master-servant belt, the prober of the human psyche amid the bleating of sheep, a long-time Nederduitse Gereformeerde church deacon who caused "skok" across the platteland for dabbling in the pagan and satanic, the satirist who at present laughs painfully because he fell over his pet dog and cracked some ribs.

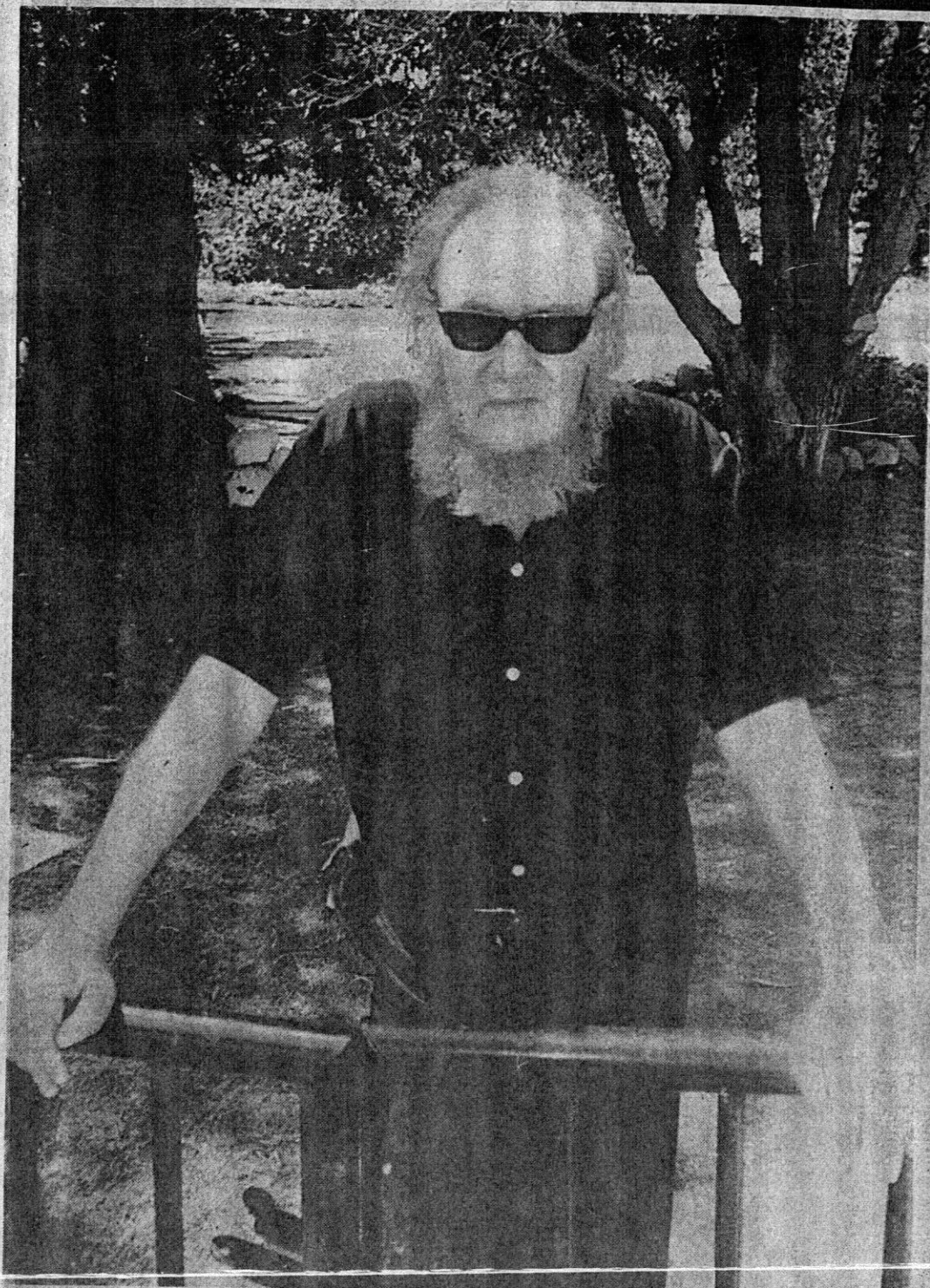
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ETIENNE LEROUX AT HOME ... "Here you race through a beloved Afrikaner legend — you race through a world which will be different tomorrow."