

Luminaries hold forth at Shakespeare and Company

PARIS

The storied bookshop organizes 3-day festival of authors and poets

BY TARA MULHOLLAND

The sound of South Africa has, for most people over the past month, been that of the vuvuzela, those brightly-colored, plastic horns whose drone has provided an incessant backdrop to the World Cup.

Not so in Paris last weekend, where, on a gray Sunday morning sitting in a tent in the tiny square René Vivand overlooking Notre Dame, the sound was that of the low voice of Breyten Breytenbach, the South African political activist and writer, as he read from his collection of essays "Notes from the Middle World" and, later, talked about his relationship with his older brother, Jan, who was a commander in the South African Special Forces Brigade at the time Mr. Breytenbach was in prison there for his anti-apartheid activities.

The talk was part of a three-day festival entitled "Storytelling and Politics" that saw a parade of global literary luminaries briefly descend upon the French capital and drew crowds of French and English-speakers in the hundreds to huddle around the white tent where the talks took place despite biting winds and intermittent downpours. There was Will Self, hollow-cheeked and fiery-eyed, discussing gay rights; Fatima Bhutto, witty and self-assured, exploring women's rights in Pakistan while two bodyguards hovered outside keeping an eye on the crowd; Martin Amis, compulsively rolling cigarettes and explaining why he now considers himself a "millenarian feminist"; Philip Pullman exploring the strengths and limitations of theorizing; and, even, in a nod to the World Cup, a panel on what that event means for South Africa chaired by the South African writer Mark Gevisser, with Mr. Breytenbach, the South African writer Njabulo Ndebele and the Zimbabwean writer Petina Gappah.

The events were part of the fourth festival organized by Shakespeare and Company, the two-story independent

bookstore in Paris's Latin Quarter that has, in comparison to its size, an impressively wide-spread reputation, with tourists filing through daily to gaze at its shelves overstuffed with books; its beds, tucked between sections, where travelers can sleep for free for a few nights in return for helping out in the store; and its nook-and-cranny-filled library upstairs.

The story of Shakespeare and Company is a well-documented one, which has, over the years, entered into legend, with all the exaggerations and distortions that myths entail. To touch on it briefly, the bookshop, set in a 17th-century building by the Seine, was founded by George Whitman, an American from Salem, Massachusetts, in 1951 and, over the next decade or so, bore witness to writers from Allen Ginsberg, Henry Miller and Anais Nin to Lawrence Durrell passing through for tea and to read the books that Mr. Whitman had filled it with after giving up on his previous library on a barge (the books had gotten too damp there, he says.)

Originally called Le Mistral, in the early 1960s Mr. Whitman changed the

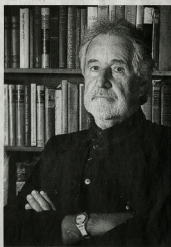
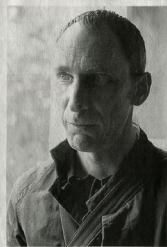


Sylvia Whitman, 29, manager of Shakespeare and Company since her father and the shop's founder, George Whitman, now 96, retired.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRUNO PÉROL

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store's name to Shakespeare and Company as a homage to the American bookseller Sylvia Beach, whose Paris bookstore of that name famously published Joyce's "Ulysses" in 1922. (The store is not otherwise connected to Beach's bookshop — nor to Shakespeare himself, nor to the poet Sylvia Plath, both of whom I overheard customers excitedly telling friends were associated with the store when I worked there as a bookseller for two years while a post-graduate student in Paris in the early 2000s.) The store is now run by Sylvia Whitman, Mr. Whitman's 29-year-old daughter, while Mr. Whitman, now retired at 96, still lives in the third-floor apartment above the store.

It was Ms. Whitman who came up with the idea for a Shakespeare and Company festival. When she started working at the bookstore in 2002, after graduating from University College London, the bookstore, having been a literary hub in the 1960s, had slid somewhat into being more of a relic, a charming literary tourist spot, where young

Brits and Americans would pass Bohemian summers staying at the shop, reading, and helping Mr. Whitman play host at meandering Sunday tea parties at his apartment upstairs, or setting out chairs for intermittent "weekly" readings. Ms. Whitman decided that it was time to put the bookstore back on the map and in 2003 held "Lost, Beat and New," a festival celebrating three generations of writers in Paris. In the interest of full disclosure, I was working at the bookstore at that time and helped on that event with Ms. Whitman and three other co-organizers.

All of us were in our early twenties and ludicrously inexperienced in large-scale event organization, but the lineup eventually included such heavyweights as Jung Chang, Alan Sillitoe, Harry Mathews and Claire Messud.

Intended to be a biennial, it was three years before the next festival, "Travel in Words," took place, and by 2009 the set-up was sleeker and the program tighter, with an impressive selection of travel writers, including William Dalrymple, Dervla Murphy, Geoff Dyer



and Colin Thuhron, holding forth.

On the heels of that event, word started to get out that the bookstore was again making waves in the literary world. Under Ms. Whitman's management the shop had been re-organized, and, while retaining its much-vaunted higgledy-piggledy charm, health and safety regulations — including restructuring the ankle-twisting stairway to the first-floor library — were underway, and the now-regular Monday evening readings at the bookstore were increasingly attracting notable authors. Potential sponsors began taking note and, by



Top left, festivalgoers at "Storytelling and Politics" spilling out of the tent in the René Viviani square next to Shakespeare and Company bookstore. The festival included, clockwise from above left, the writers Will Self and Bryon Breytenbach; a panel with (from left) Mr. Breytenbach, Mark Gervetter and Fern Gappah; Martin Amis.

2009, The New York Review of Books, The Times Literary Supplement, the French Ministry of Culture, Roederer Champagne and Montblanc were among the supporters of "Real Lives: Exploring Memoir and Biography," an event that included readings from Paul Auster, Siri Hustvedt, Amélie Nothomb and Marjane Satrapi.

This year the French newspaper Libération joined the festival sponsors and French journalists lined the front-row seats (nearly half of the events at the festival were simultaneously translated into French), indicating that the book-

store — perhaps before considered more of an expatriate enclave — is also gaining increasing credibility in the French literary world; the festivals and readings ensuring that, as Jeanette Winterson, who participated in the festival this year and in 2008, wrote in The Guardian last year: "the values, the ethos and hospitality don't change, but the shop goes forward with the times."

"Stories are made of events," said Philip Pullman at his talk at the festival on Saturday, "and the more convincing and compelling the events, the more authority the story will hold over us."