



Yes, South Africa can

By John Carlin

It's been a spectacular success. Everything according to plan, smooth as silk; South Africa successfully re-branded; no unpleasant surprises, and plenty of pleasant ones.

Not a cheep, for example, out of the ludicrous Julius Malema, who the ANC wisely locked up in the attic, as you do with the mad live-in relative when important guests come around.

No reports of any new Zuma off-spring, or even wife. As for the bigger and far more important picture, the games all started on time and were broadcast live around the world without a hitch (though I gather there were some power-cut problems in England "mercifully, perhaps" during one of their national team's relentlessly hapless displays). No massacres of foreign visitors, either, as long advertised in the foreign press.

Crime generally seems to have sunk to Swiss levels of innocuousness during South Africa's four-week World Cup honeymoon.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously declared on April 27, 1994, the day all South Africans went to vote for the first time: "It's like falling in love!" Well, 16 years later, it was a renewal of the marriage vows; it was South Africa falling in love with itself all over again.

All those stories, promoted by Fifa, among others, about this being Invictus II, about 2010 being the 1995 rugby World Cup all over again, about healing racial wounds, uniting the fractured nation and so forth, were off the mark. It was much, much better than that.

What we saw was just how united and racially healed South Africa really is, how far we've advanced since the nervy Nineties 1990s. The word for what we have seen in these past few weeks is consolidation. Nothing new, these past years, to anyone who has walked about South Africa, done ordinary everyday things, in seeing black and white people getting along just fine.

All the racial tension stories that surfaced after the death of Eugene Terre'Blanche ("South Africa on the brink of racial war" etc), have been shown to be, as a British friend of mine who knows the country well, succinctly put it the other day, "just so much bollocks".

I've been to watch loads of games at the stadiums, but by far the best memory I take away from the World Cup was the atmosphere at Melrose Arch, in Joburg, during the South Africa-France game. From what I saw there, and from reports of friends and fellow journalists who have taken part in identically joyous events of this kind up and down the country, I'd like to ask a question: "If South Africa is not a united country, then what country is?"

As I have written in these pages before, the thousands gathered before a big screen at Melrose to watch Bafana Bafana's heroic exit from the competition knew in their hearts that it was a lost cause, that their team would not make it to the second round of the competition. But the solidarity was absolute. People of all colours and religions, in what until not very long ago had been an exclusively white residential area, heaving and swaying and singing, celebrating their common

South Africanness with proud, unforced energy: what a blow for the legion of dismal sceptics that flood the opinion pages of this country's newspapers!

Never mind black and white, there were a number of Jewish people with yarmulkes on their heads at Melrose and a number of Muslim men with long beards and Muslim women wearing veils on their heads. Where else in the world would you see such people mingling without tension, their national identities trumping ancient religious divides? Not too many places, believe me.

And the great thing is that the world has got to see all this the rebranding really has kicked in.

Via 15 000 fellow journalists that have descended on this country (please, don't anyone tell me ever again that the World Cup was a waste of money!), the entire planet has got to see South Africa's best face - in my prejudiced view, the best face in the world.

I have spoken in the past four weeks to journalists from Mexico, El Salvador, the USA US, China, India, Britain, Germany, Spain - you name it. The first thing that has surprised them has been the total absence of racial friction. Most of them being white, or white-ish, they concurred that the contacts they had had with black South Africans had been consistently civil, cordial, respectful, good-humoured, even fun.

As for the the panic in their hearts at the prospect of murderous hordes chasing them down dark alleys, the predominant sensation among those who acknowledged they had succumbed to these terrors was embarrassment.

I did a bit of work early on in the competition for a big US television channel, some on-air punditry about South African politics and society. The recording studio was at Nelson Mandela Square in Sandton, just above the big statue of the great man. About 100m away was the television station's tented base of operations.

I and an American producer walked from the studio to the base camp and back half a dozen times. Our trajectory was through a crowded mall. The only potential peril I was aware of was that we might trip on the mechanical escalators and bang our heads.

But you know what? The television station's rules required that on each of these strolls we should be accompanied by a beefy security guard - a dark-suited Nigerian, in this case. The producer I was with honourably squirmed at the timorousness of his employers. The Nigerian kept a poker-face, but inside he was laughing, all the way to the bank.

Worse was the case of the English journalists covering the England camp. The bus they travelled in always had one security escort in front and one behind; four Afrikaner former police officers or soldiers kept watch on them everywhere they went.

At first the journalists were not displeased to have them around. I heard that before the World Cup the bosses of one major British newspaper (won't tell which, but it wrote about the looming racial bloodbath following Terre'Blanche's death) had the brilliant idea, in these troubled economic times, of hiring a security consultant to address the South Africa-bound troops.

A man with a briefcase appeared (presumably working for the same outfit that would later provide the detachment in South Africa) and rattled off the figures for violent crime in the purportedly benighted country, for murder, for rape - not excluding male rape. He put the fear of God into the poor journalists. Four weeks later what they feel is deeply embarrassed.

Talking of journalists, on a less foolish note, the way Fifa and the Local Organising Committee set up the bureaucracy of accreditation and general facilities was a dream.

Cleverly aware of how critical we often unsavoury characters would prove in the marketing of South Africa, they set up a wonderfully smooth operation.

Getting your tickets for games was straightforward and the staff were as cheerful as they were efficient. At the stadium media centres and the press seats the internet connections (journalists' lifeblood these days) were excellent, whether you were in Rustenburg, Bloemfontein or Joburg's Soccer City.

I covered the World Cup in Japan in 2002: this was incomparably more hassle-free. I heard the same from journalists who covered the World Cup in Germany four years ago.

Oh, and let's not forget the Fan Walk in Cape Town, a two and a half kilometre 2.5km vaudeville show from the centre of town to that beautifully elegant Coco Chanel hat of a stadium, along which the massed hordes, thousands of children included, were bursting with bonhomie - so much so that for the semi-final on Saturday the love in the air breathed unexpected life into the sails of old Holland.

The long-buried historical connection with the Dutch (Jan van Who?) suddenly surfaced in the Mother City in a riot of orange. I went up to one orangeman and woman after another, a number flying Dutch flags, and, to my astonishment, all the ones I spoke to turned out to be South Africans.

They were happy Holland won, not least because they avenged Uruguay's unspeakably cruel victory over Ghana. But what they were happiest about was, I think, that they had reclaimed the streets. Save for the odd case of pickpocketing (you get them in Vienna), nothing to fear.

I have a theory - I actually had it, rather more wishfully, before the World Cup - that the criminal classes would go on a patriotic strike during the tournament, doing their bit for Brand SA.

Whether that was it, or whether it was a pragmatic calculation that what with the emergence of these swift and severe World Cup courts and the flooding of World Cup venues with the men and women in blue it might be best to keep their heads down, the fact is that the country has been more relaxed and at peace than it has been for a long time - maybe ever.

Actually, to be serious, huge credit has to be given to the police. I came across loads all over the country and they were, without exception, polite and efficient, oozing civic responsibility. One that I met off duty in a bar in Bloemfontein sang me a symphony of racial brotherhood, banging on - in his cups, a little - about how South Africa was a piano. The black and white keys had to play together, he said, or not at all.

Obviously we'll have to see if all this lasts after the World Cup is over. Enough people have vented their views on this already and there is not much more to add.

Though it will be intriguing to see if the police turn out to be as assiduous in protecting the foreign Africans here, against whom murder and mayhem is threatened (especially in jolly old Cape Town), after the final whistle blows on Sunday night, as they have been in keeping the rather more welcome World Cup visitors safe. We'll have a test case right there of whether it's all been a dream or not.

Which brings us to the first lesson of this World Cup: the primary purpose of government is to protect its citizens. Well, let's absorb that thought and act on it. Sustain the good work that's been done after the show is over and watch this country go.

The second lesson, not at all unrelated to crime, is that if South Africa really puts its mind to something, it can do it, it can make a plan. Fifa has got a pretty bum rap from people in this country for its autocratic ways, but the Swiss-Germanic rigour that's flowed from Zurich has definitely sharpened up levels of efficiency and organisation round here, not to say - the big South African "d" word - of delivery.

Someone who works high up in the Local Organising Committee told me how at first it had been a big culture shock to work with these Swiss; they did not understand each other at all. But in time they established a rapport and the fusing of African ebullience with old European discipline ended up doing the job admirably.

The big lesson I take away from all this is one that I already knew but had forgotten, amidst the distracting babble we read about in the press and , hear and see in the broadcast media from the political classes, chatterers and newspaper columnists.

South Africa is much better, brighter and bigger-hearted than you'd think from paying attention to all that lot. The society is great, and it is the reason why (never mind the safari parks and the fairest Cape) so many of us foreigners who've spent time here find this country more beguiling than any other on Earth. Ordinary people have so much more wisdom, grit, resilience, invention, courage and generosity than you find in most countries.

And some of these ordinary people are to be found, for sure, in the ANC. Even in the upper reaches of the government, if you look hard enough. There are the looters, the hypocrites and the frauds, too, as we all know. We can just hope that the experience of the World Cup might have awoken their better angels, brought out the good that lurks in many of them, that sparked their commitment to politics in the first place.

Failing that, as a friend here says, let's pray that they remain content with taking just five or 10 percent of the national cake, instead of 30 percent or the full damn monty.

Your Julius Malemas - and I use him as a generic term for all that's rotten and silly about the South African political scene - are best ignored. Or rather, friends in the media, try, if you can resist the temptation, not to publish and broadcast what he says. Delve deep, rather, into what he and his like do.

As for Zuma, he is a nice guy and has many of the best instincts of the best South Africa. The problem is that he lacks gumption and sexual maturity. Not much we can do about the latter, but maybe we can prod him to show a bit of principle and character and lead the ANC back to what it once was, abandoning its lootocratic ways. A leader must not be a jellyfish, said PW Botha. Heed those words, Mr President.

Though, perhaps, he won't. In which case, let's take comfort in the knowledge that the country is, I repeat, bigger and better than the state.

If the state does not get in the way, if it actually helps, as it has done with this World Cup (notably the policing, but also the building of infrastructure) then great.

If not, well, South Africans have it in them to make a plan. The big message from this spectacularly successful staging of the greatest show on Earth is that, yes, South Africa can.

Now, with more confidence and pride and calm than ever before, get on and do it.

- John Carlin was the correspondent for the London Independent in South Africa between 1989 and 1995. He has returned to South Africa frequently since then, including nine times in the past 18 months, chiefly to work on television documentaries. He wrote *Playing the Enemy*, the book on which the Clint Eastwood film, *Invictus*, is based. The book has been translated into 16 languages, including Spanish and Dutch.

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