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Words: Vivian Attwood Photography: Sally Chance

In the manicured environs of Umhlanga Rocks, Hennie Boshoff's home is something of an anomaly. Amid stuccoed ice-cream palaces and soaring Tuscan edifices ringed by bland security walls and impossibly green lawns, the house seems to be thumbing its nose at convention.



(Left: A sybarite's paradise in monochrome: glamorous mosaics by Jane du Rand are a perfect match to the window treatments of old X-ray scans.)

Ablaze with colour, festooned with ornamentation and reflecting light from a myriad mirrored surfaces and suspended crystals, it's an insouciant interloper in moneyed suburbia.

The quirkily landscaped indigenous garden reveals fresh surprises at every turn. Monolithic sculptures overlook an intricate mosaic swimming pool.

Painted ostrich eggs clink companionably against CDs that have metamorphosed into wind chimes. Beaded curtains send

prisms across pathways. A bronze serpent rears from an ornamental pond, its coils laved by flashy tangerine Koi.

The interior of the house offers yet more surprises. Hundreds of hours have been dedicated to creating a masterpiece even the great Russian jeweller Fabergé would have been proud to claim as his own.

A team of artists, both local and foreign, spent seven years applying their skills to make Hennie's home a one-of-a-kind wonderland. It comes as no surprise to

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learn that local artists have fittingly dubbed the house Umuzi Wemilingo, or 'Magic House.'

Stained-glass doors in glowing colours drench the entrance hall in ruby, amethyst and cobalt. A wall of hand-painted tiles in impressionistic swirls reveals, on closer inspection, that each is a one-off artwork. Charged eroticism fuses with a sophisticated aesthetic. Antique Ghanaian, Nigerian and Cameroonian artifacts brood enigmatically against riotously coloured interior walls.

The open-plan bathroom and dressing suite features a floor-to-ceiling masterpiece in black and white and mirrored tiles, the work of leading KwaZulu-Natal mosaic artists, Su Knight and Jane du Rand. No part of The Magic House bows to convention, and attention has been paid to every detail. Exterior gutters, windows, light switches, air-conditioners and even filing cabinets have all been transformed into decorative objets.



(Left: Hennie gives a relaxed spin to Gaultier couture on a favourite chair bought in Paris.)

Sensory overload is inevitable on a first visit to this extraordinary home-as-gallery. Subsequent visits reveal fresh treasures as The Magic House, Salomé-like, sheds its diaphanous veils. The tarot has been a creative preoccupation of Hennie's for many years, and it provides a strong thematic link between the house and garden.

The juxtaposition of light and dark, damnation and salvation, is at the core of the mystique surrounding the house. A female Christ droops from a crucifix in a painting that is at once sensual

and agonised.

The work is by Venezuelan artist Roser Oduber. Flames consume the unrighteous in a garden-wall frieze titled Oordeelsdag (Judgment Day). A dreadlocked God presides over a fresco of plump black cherubim. A juggler, Le Batteleur, by French sculptor Laurent Belloni is frozen in the act of catching a ball, and a splendidly sequined mermaid emerges from the lush garden greenery.

Hennie, the enigmatic visionary behind The Magic House, is an internationally respected arts consultant, writer and artist. Despite his close links with the beau monde of Britain and Europe, he remains a reluctant public figure.

Born into what he refers to as a 'poor white Afrikaner railway family,' he fled the Calvinistic community of his childhood to settle in London in the swinging sixties. Intoxicated by the city's psychedelic vibrancy, he vowed never to return to his roots.

'Suddenly everything that had been taboo back home was celebrated. Anything seemed possible,' he recounts. In the seventies, his travels to India exerted a significant creative and spiritual influence.

He published two books during that period: Guide to the East, and a much translated children's book on reincarnation, The Bird who was an Elephant. A decade later, deciding it was time for a reincarnation of his own, he packed up and relocated to rural France.



(Left: The pool at The Magic House is a superb example of mosaic artist Jane du Rand's work. The shimmering water reflects a kaleidoscopic garden embellished by art from three

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continents.)

'Ostensibly to pursue the quiet life and start writing my memoirs, but that plan was shelved when I accepted the offer of an American philanthropist to establish a not-for-profit arts foundation, The Azazel Institute.'

Hennie based himself in the Chateau Pauligne, outside the medieval city of Carcassonne. Here he showcased his own and others' creativity. He later spent some time in Japan, becoming increasingly enthralled by Zen minimalism and Eastern philosophy.

All idylls come to an end. Afrikanerdom might have been anathema – he had entirely forgotten his mother tongue after almost four decades on foreign soil – but the pull of his roots could no longer be denied.

'I still had a love/hate relationship with South Africa, and in some senses the thought of returning appalled me, but I finally conceded that it would be easier to return than to continue living with the dichotomy,' he explains.

'It was definitely a painful transition but one of the highlights for me was relearning Afrikaans. It was like unearthing buried memory, opening a door on the past. I was instantly transported back to childhood, learning the descriptive beauty of words like katjepiering (gardenias), gesiggies (pansies) and trapsuutjies (chameleons).

'And the vulgarity of Afrikaans! It's delicious. There are some terms you simply cannot translate!' Jean Paul Gaultier may dominate Hennie's wardrobe but, he claims, he can still vloek (swear) with the volk's finest.

Ambiguity and duality are the lifelong obsessions of a man who describes his childhood as living 'cuckoo-like, in the wrong nest.' He adds: 'As a child of seven I received an award for art – a certificate decorated with the Greek tragic/comic masks. I became obsessed with them, drawing them over and over again... I work constantly with the masks we all wear.'



(Left: A swathe of fresco along the driveway was painted by Laleleni Mbhele and Khehla Ngobese. Hennie designed the panels to represent the African tarot.)

Returning to the many complexities and dualities of the tarot, Hennie outlines its genesis in his work. 'With the artist Rosetta Woolff, who has been my close collaborator for 25 years, I designed a version of the tarot in the early eighties. A progression on the theme was the creation of a Tarot Garden at Chateau Pauligne. Sculptures were commissioned to depict the 22 archetypes of the Major Arcana.

'The ordinary playing deck had been banned from my childhood home, as it was held to be duiwelse speelgoed (toys of the Devil). I should not have been surprised, therefore, to learn that the limited-edition packs of my own tarot cards I had sent to South Africa as gifts for relatives had been burnt.'

As a means, perhaps, of assuaging the early pain of personal and creative rejection, Hennie celebrated his return to the country of his birth by the 'heretical' act of creating an Afrikaans tarot. The Magic House abounds with representations of the translated tarot.

In terms of the exuberant use of colour and ornamentation at The Magic House, Hennie explains that he 'didn't completely throw minimalism out with the bath

water.

It is still a part of the mix, alongside local motifs like Zulu symbols and the “over-the-top-ness” of Bollywood. I find that modern art and traditional African and Indian pieces work superbly together.’

Discussing art and architecture subsequent to his return to South Africa, Hennie expresses a degree of disappointment.

‘I became aware that a great many South African homes are really replicas of what you’ll find in Europe. Few give a sense of the fact that we live on a very colourful, bright, dramatic continent.

‘I think that style, like much else, is a little confused in South Africa right now. There is an identity crisis underway. The most obvious examples are homes designed and named after Mediterranean or Caribbean villas .

‘A frequent complaint by tourists visiting South African hotels is that they don’t reflect the African continent. They are pale replicas of elsewhere. As Dr Johnson so succinctly said: “Absurdity starts when you imitate what you are not.”

‘We are, in the main, conservative. “What about resale value?” we ask ourselves. I’m aware that, should I sell one day, my home is likely to appeal to a minority. The bottom line is I should enjoy living in the house. It’s sad when people start buying properties and art solely for their potential resale value.’

The ‘runaway railway child’ has come full circle. He might live in Umhlanga, not a blue-collar city suburb, but he’s still not averse to hauling out his kettie and aiming a few pot-shots at the diehard traditionalists...

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