

Citation for Judge Albie Sachs, former judge of the constitutional court of South Africa, on receipt of the Ulysses medal on Thursday March 27 2014.

It is not really possible to encapsulate what is the extraordinary life of Judge Albie Sachs – the word career seems too small – a human rights activist whose work straddles advocacy, prison, exile, academia, constitution drafting and the vital formative years of a new constitutional court. The best I can do is explore three inter-related themes in this life work. These are books, the body, and building.

Judge Sachs spent 11 years studying and lecturing law in England and 11 years as a law professor and legal researcher in Mozambique. He also spent 15 years on the Constitutional court of South Africa. These 37 years of scholarship and judging led to a dozen books including several biographical works, two of which were dramatised by the Royal Shakespeare Company and filmed for the BBC. The award winning 2009 work: *The Strange Alchemy of Life and Law* is a powerful insight into judging. Powerful, because the author almost incidentally displays his clear command of the law and because this is married to a willingness to reflect openly on the complexity and messiness of the law and its relationship with justice. In short, in his written work we hear a rare judicial voice - that of the self-described former outlaw, who understands the power the law can have as a force for good, as a space where conflicts can be resolved, and as a means through which to articulate and understand conflict because he had experienced the law as an instrument of oppression – torture, solitary confinement without trial and attempted assassination all being part of his own experience.

Several of Judge Sach's books are autobiographical in nature. *The Soft Vengeance of a Freedom Fighter*, is an account of the journey to recovery and acceptance following the 1988 car bomb attack in Mozambique that resulted in the loss of his right arm and the sight in one eye. This unflinching account of the challenges of acceptance of a new self and a new way of being is also marked by optimism and humour. One of the very first research seminars I attended at the start of my academic career was given by Judge Sachs in Warwick University in 1989. There was an unusually good crowd – Judge Sachs wryly noted that when he had previously given a seminar few people attended so it was clear there was nothing like a car bomb to draw people in. Like his written work, he was unflinching as a truth sayer even in that often deeply impersonal environment that is the university.

Having been one of the key architects of the South African constitution and as one of the judges on the first Constitutional Court bench, Judge Sachs was, as he put it in one talk, given responsibility for décor. In other words, he led the project to design the new constitutional court. And what an inspiration this building is – located on the site of a notorious high security prison in Johannesburg, with bricks from the prison used in its construction, it set out to reflect the values of the new democracy with the words human dignity, equality and freedom written in the beams in the hand writing of the first judges, including Judge Sachs. These values are reflected in the use of space with a deliberately welcoming, light-filled foyer. The judges walk to the court chamber, to walk towards the deliberation of justice and giving of judgment being seen as symbolically important in the design. The building, in the words of Judge Sachs, is about dreams, methods and ideas all linked by a process defined by relationship.

Today Judge Sachs we confer on you the highest honour that UCD can bestow, the Ulysses medal. The name comes from James Joyce our most famous alumnus and his creative, exuberant and

unconventional brilliance. With this medal we honour those whose work has made an outstanding global contribution. This you have done in the dark days of apartheid when you were a soldier for liberation – as your father had wished for you as a small child, when recovering from a botched but devastating car bomb, when whistling in solitary confinement and hearing your tune completed for you by another prisoner elsewhere within those prison walls. You did not lose sight of the promise of law, and, have now with creative brilliance given expression to that through the constitution, the court and its building. To honour you here, in our own new building, reminds us as a law community to remember the promise of law and to embrace that strange alchemy of life and law.

Imelda Maher