

Lives

modern romance

Nelson Mandela's new love, Graça Machel of Mozambique, has a political future of her own.

by Mark Gevisser



LOVE AND DIPLOMACY: NELSON MANDELA AND GRAÇA MACHEL VISIT SINGAPORE'S BOTANICAL GARDENS.

Winnie Mandela knows how to make an entrance. She is usually late, always surrounded by a phalanx of bodyguards and attendants. So everybody noticed her the morning she arrived at the crowded schoolyard in Soweto. The event—a launch of a national education campaign—was already under way, the choir singing a welcome to the day's special guest, President Nelson Mandela. Up on the platform, in one of his more iridescent paisley shirts, the old man was moving his shoulders to the rhythm, a signature expression of ease. Next to him sat Graça Machel, his new beloved, quiet and composed. Although they had been seen together several times before in Johannesburg, here in Soweto the adored “Madiba” (his African clan name) was introducing her for the first time.

His ex-wife's unexpected arrival caused a slight panic: Nelson Mandela has divorced Winnie and has dropped her from his cabinet for insubordination, but Soweto is her home turf and she is a leader in her own right. So another chair was hoisted onto the platform. Winnie took the stage beaming and gave the crowd a power salute. She pointedly did not look in the direction of her ex-husband. Four seats away, a scrim passed over his face.

But Graça Machel nodded to Winnie and, once everyone was settled, engaged the president in quiet conversation. It took only a minute for the scrim to lift again: For the rest of the event, the two were utterly immersed in each other. At times their intimacy seemed gloriously inappropriate, as if new love had caused even Nelson Mandela, that most studied of statesmen, to forget where he was. Mandela, though, has a sixth sense for image, and perhaps the effect was exactly as intended: that his people would see he was no longer a lonely old man, and that his new companion was

worthy of his—and their—affections.

The romance between Nelson Mandela and Graça Machel began some three years ago, but until recently they kept it quiet. Shortly after the event in Soweto, she accompanied him on a state visit to Southeast Asia. And they have just bought a house together in the old-money Johannesburg suburb of Houghton, around the corner from his current residence. Yet marriage does not seem imminent; she has her own public life—as a senior United Nations official and as a figure of considerable political influence in her own country, neighboring Mozambique. Their schedules allow them only two weeks a month together.

There is something truly liberated about this relationship. Nelson Mandela is 78 and Graça Machel 51. Both have led difficult lives, encompassing war, deep love, and intense personal tragedy. Both are virtual immortals to their people; they have snatched love—such a fragile, mortal thing—from the jaws of lonely immortality.

Just over a decade ago, in 1986, Nelson Mandela was in prison and Winnie was under house arrest in Soweto when the plane of Mozambican president Samora Machel, Graça's husband, plowed into a South African hillside, killing him and 34 others on board. Machel had been an African Che Guevara of sorts, a hyperactive visionary whose Mozambique liberation front (FRELIMO) had freed his country from the Portuguese in 1975. After attempting one of the world's most audacious socialist experiments, he had then watched his land collapse, in the vise of a brutal South African-sponsored insurgency that claimed the lives of a million people. To this day, the cause of his plane crash is unclear: Many suspect the apartheid-era South African government of sabotage.

From their respective “imprisonments,” the Mandelas *lives* ▶ 138

wrote to Graça—Machel's widow and Mozambique's minister of education—expressing regret that “we were prevented from being present with you today to share your sorrow, to weep with you, to lighten your grief, to hold you very close. . . . We must believe that his death will strengthen both your and our resolve to be finally free.”

Graça responded with an impassioned letter to Winnie: “In this painful hour I look for inspiration in your example. Those who have locked up your husband are the same who killed mine. They think that by cutting down the tallest trees they can destroy the forest. But history will never forget the names of Samora Machel and Nelson Mandela. The just cause of these two men will triumph, for the greater glory of Africa and the dignity of mankind.”

She finally met Nelson Mandela when he visited Maputo, Mozambique's capital, with Winnie, shortly after his release in 1990. When African National Congress leader Oliver Tambo died in 1993, Graça asked Mandela to take on Tambo's ceremonial role as godfather to her children. The younger ones, schooling in South Africa, spent more and more time in his household. Even before his messy divorce from Winnie in 1995, he and Graça developed a close bond. Her UN office was in Pretoria, and the two of them spent time together when she was in town.

Today, ten years after her husband's death, Graça Machel seems, perhaps not in the way the Mandelas originally intended, “to be finally free.” In the markets and taverns of Maputo, they now call her “2M”—the name of Mozambique's leading beer—for her relationships with Machel and Mandela. But although her life has been strung between these two “tallest trees” of African liberation, she no longer seems to define herself in relation to either of them.

Maputo, designed as a grand colonial Rio in Africa, was devastated by two decades of war and poverty. The little glamour that remains is to be found in Sommerschild, a bourgeois oasis upon a bluff over Maputo bay, where Graça Machel has her villa. With views across a marbled terrace out to the Indian Ocean, her home is conspicuously opulent in this, one of the world's poorest nations. It is, though, quite unlike the overupholstered African baroque favored by this continent's elite; a chic duotone, rather, of white marble and dark tropical wood, much of it in the form of Mozambican sculpture. On the day I visit, the living room contains only one splash of color: the vase of anthuriums—waxy tropical lilies in hot pinks and bloodreds—that Graça Machel is arranging.

Old photos of Graça the revolutionary reveal a young woman at ease with her beauty; a simple, stylish dresser whose unpainted face was topped with a serious Afro. Now she braids extensions into her hair. She will often wear a tailored blouse, perhaps silk, tucked into a capulana, the brightly colored cloth that Mozambican peasant women tie around their hips. A long-boned and light-skinned woman, she has the qualities of a large antelope, a sable or a roan, in her: that same combination of caution, gangly enthusiasm, and sudden grace. Today, a Saturday, she is in Maputo to attend to the affairs of her Foundation for Community Development, the country's pioneering not-for-profit organization, and (although she does not tell me this herself) to play host to Nelson Mandela, who is arriving for a week's holiday. The house has just been fumigated, and the white-overalled staff are burnishing every available surface.

She greets me with polite but unapologetic grumpiness: “I'm not

in a good mood today. I don't like the media—I'm only seeing you because you are so persistent.” She speaks a perfect, hyperfluent English, inflected more with an African-American drawl than with the nasal Portuguese twang of Mozambique. She has, previously, expressed irritation that her own work is overshadowed by her connection to Mandela, and she makes it clear that she will not answer any “private questions.” But either the grumpiness is a ploy or it is soon forgotten. She introduces Mandela into the conversation herself, no more than 20 minutes later, in response to a question about Mozambique's poor-neighbor association with South Africa: “That's the complication of our relationship!”

Long before her liaison with Mandela became known, Graça Machel had gained immense currency in the rather vaporous world of international diplomacy. She is active in the worldwide campaign to ban land mines, and for the past two years, she has been the UN's head of the commission on the impact of armed conflict on children. So impressive has her work been that there is talk of nominating her for the position of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, even of grooming her to be the first woman secretary-general. Meanwhile, she is Mozambique's favorite public figure. There is a strong lobby for her to run for the presidency in 1999. If she were to accept and win, she would become the first African woman head of state.

Graça Machel is adamant, though, that she will not go back into politics. Nor will she leave Mozambique to become a permanent fixture in Geneva, or marry Nelson Mandela. She is not uncalculating: There are political reasons for all these decisions. At the core of them, though, is something deeply emotional: At 51, after a difficult life that has encompassed two wars, one terrible tragedy, and crushing responsibility, she has discovered the joys of doing things for herself.

The glory of her relationship with Nelson Mandela is that it seems to allow her to. If Samora Machel was the demanding patriarch obsessed with order and control (“He would tell her what shoes to wear!” one source close to the presidency tells me), then Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in jail, seems happy to let her get on with her own life. A man who even now maintains a level of physical isolation, who still gets up at four o'clock every morning and makes his own bed, he does not want all-consuming marriage. What he does want, she tells me, is public affirmation of their relationship. “That was the only thing he missed. Now he is proud to appear to his country and say, ‘I'm no longer a lonely man as you knew me; I have a partner, and I'm happy with her.’”

Mandela deflects queries about the relationship with characteristic old-world formality. He described their relationship for me, in writing, this way: “Friendship and companionship enrich one's life, and add the warmth that all human beings need in their existence.” Asked to describe her, he wrote, “Anyone who has had some dealings with Mrs. Machel would have been struck by her intelligence, rationality, and informed judgments about social and political matters over a wide terrain. At the same time she exudes a warmth and an interest in people. All of this she combines with a correctness of manner and conduct.”

If the world were ready for a partnership of equals, in which love without marriage was allowed and separate careers valued, then Nelson Mandela and Graça Machel could become the very model of a modern African couple. But tradition puts their relationship in a dilemma: On the one hand, even Mandela's free-spirited *lives* ▶140

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friend Archbishop Desmond Tutu has publicly urged the couple to take vows; on the other, African tradition dictates that a woman moves into her husband's tribe when she weds. "If she marries him," one old friend in Maputo says, "she will be seen, here, as a South African."

And although Graça has become popular with the South African public, there is not a little resistance to her in the corridors of government power. There is a feeling among many that she inveigled her way into the heart of their Tata ("father") and thus into matters of South African state. For her part, Graça pays attention to her own country's ambivalence: "Some Mozambicans are happy about me and Madiba, because they have followed the grief I went through when my husband was killed. He is probably the only person they would accept in Samora's place. But others are genuinely concerned that something is being stolen from them."

That "something" is the legacy of Samora Machel. Pride of place in Graça's living room belongs to a four-foot gold-framed portrait of her late husband, so lifelike you can almost see the moisture glisten in his eyes. Although many blame Mozambique's current poverty on Machel's socialism, Graça is a fierce custodian of his flame: "FRELIMO was victorious, and our economy was booming in the 1970s, under socialism. We were beginning to wipe out illiteracy. But there were forces who couldn't tolerate our success, so they destabilized us, and they now call us the world's poorest country, the world's beggars. This is humiliating. For me, preserving Samora's legacy means empowering Mozambicans to define themselves."

There's something about her passion in making this argument that speaks to her own struggle for self-definition. We often forget how radically African life has changed, for some, in just one generation: Graça Simbine was born in a mud-and-grass hut, the youngest of six children, to illiterate parents in a Methodist village 100 miles north of Maputo, where there were no schools, no clinics, no running water. Her father, a migrant laborer who worked in the South African gold mines, died 20 days before her birth, but by virtue of the fact that he was a lay preacher, Graça attained a scholarship to a Methodist boarding school.

She became one of the few blacks in colonial Mozambique to make it to secondary school (even the brilliant Samora did not finish school). In 1968, through another scholarship, she went to Lisbon University to study languages. There she became part of a clandestine FRELIMO cell and fled to Tanzania with several others, in 1973, at the height of the guerrilla movement's war against the Portuguese regime. Her relationship with Machel started almost immediately: His second wife, Josina, a heroine of the struggle, had died two years previously. Graça did the obligatory military training and became a teacher at the FRELIMO secondary school. When the Portuguese abandoned Mozambique in 1975, she was appointed, at age 29, minister of education—in a country with a 93 percent illiteracy rate and almost no schools.

"When I was told I was to be minister," she recalls, "I went white. I actually took to my bed and wept for days. If I failed, they'd all say, 'You see what happens when you give a woman responsibility.' So I declined. But of course Samora, being Samo-

ra, said he wouldn't hear of it." She shrugs, laughs. "What could I do? I dried my tears. I took the job."

A few months later, she and Machel married, their wedding the embodiment of the era's euphoria. They became the youthful pater- and materfamilias of the brave new society. She had two children and became mother to his six children from three previous liaisons. She was

expected to run her ministry, act as First Lady, and manage this large household. It was often too much for her; she would take to her bed with nervous exhaustion.

She was also a fighter, though. Pamela dos Santos, a close family friend, recalls that "she would sometimes contradict Samora. He would refuse to back down even when she was obviously right, until eventually she would storm off. Later she learned to control herself or to divert him skillfully. He was an extreme personality, and she exerted a powerful moderating influence over him."

In her first five years as minister of education, school attendance rose fourfold, and illiteracy dropped to around 65 percent. But once the anti-FRELIMO insurgency began in the 1980s, Graça Machel's work—like Mozambique—fell

apart. The RENAMO guerrillas targeted the country's schools, destroying more than half of them and murdering 400 teachers.

In the midst of this, Samora Machel was killed, and Graça went into a deep depression, reverting, in a way that shocked her family and friends, to the traditional postures of mourning. She wore black for five years and withdrew from public life.

A key influence on her recovery was Peggy Dulany, daughter of David Rockefeller, who had met and become friends with Graça in Mozambique in 1984. Dulany helped Graça set up her nonprofit foundation and made the introductions that led to her appointment as the UN's special expert on children and warfare.

"One of the first places I went to was Rwanda," she remembers. "It was 1994, at the peak of the genocide. When I came back, my son saw how disturbed I was and consoled me by saying, 'You'll be all right. You're used to dealing with children traumatized by war.' When I looked blank, he explained, 'Us.'"

Graça's intense personal understanding of war's effect on children has powered her work at the UN. Kimberly Gamble-Payne, an American UNICEF official who works closely with her, recalls a joint visit they made to a Rwandan prison: "They were seven, eight, nine years old, emaciated, malnourished, sick, dehumanized. When Graça was introduced, as Madame Machel, to one little boy, his eyes lit up. 'Samora!' he cried. Everything just clicked. She keeps alive the hope that Samora Machel represents, even to a little boy in a Rwandan jail. She has found her own place within his mythical legend."

Graça Machel's love for Nelson Mandela is palpable. When one friend told her she looked ten years younger, she replied, "My dear, I'm in love!" She has spoken, previously, of how lucky she has been to find love twice in a lifetime, particularly one that has been filled with such sorrow. One gets the sense that she has found her own place, not only within the mythical legend of her first love but alongside the living legend of her second. □



A WEDDING-ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION FOR GRAÇA AND SAMORA MACHEL, THE LATE MOZAMBIKAN PRESIDENT