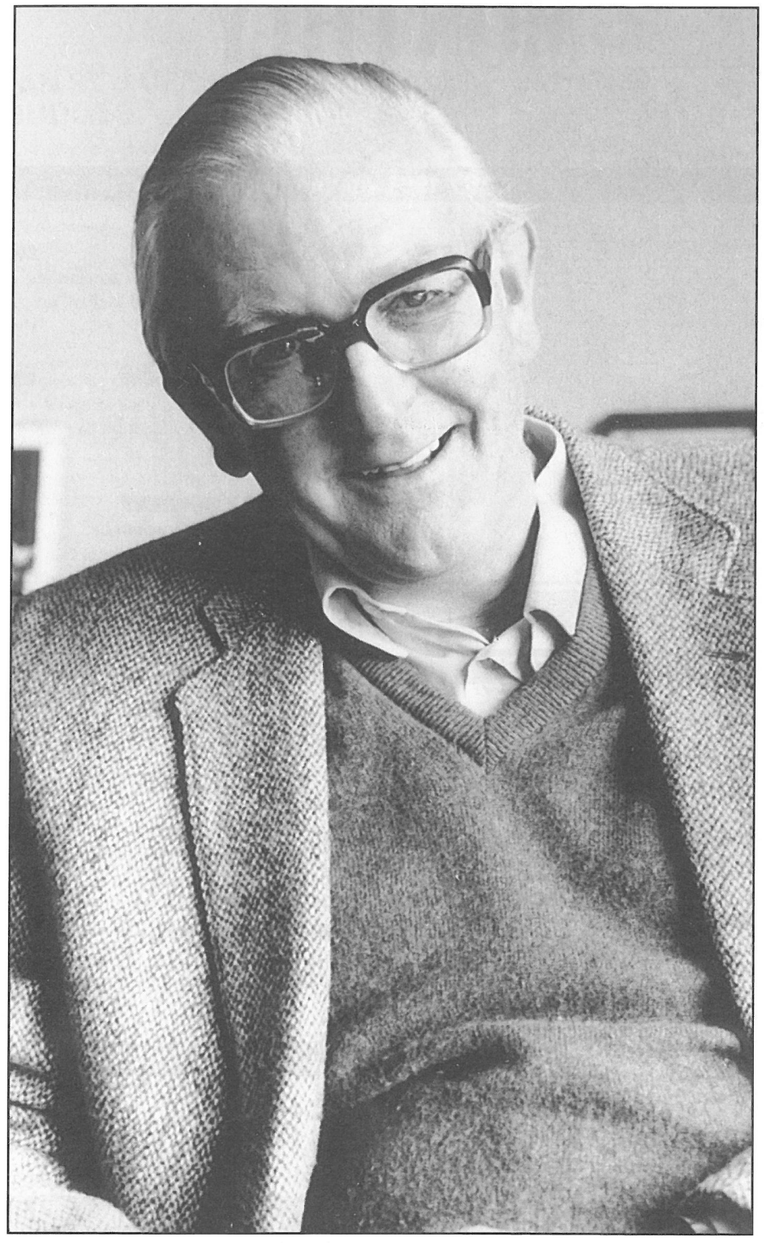
WILT HE OR WON'T HE?



Tom Sharpe

bestselling novelist, satirist and humorist, comes out of hibernation to speak to Kay Parris.

They wolfed down *Wilt on High* in 1984, swallowed, stuck their tongues out and panted for more. Two years, they had waited for this the 11th course of Tom Sharpe's rollicking fictional feast which began serving in 1971, one bawdy book after another almost at yearly intervals. But it was 1987 before excited rumours hailed the imminent arrival of frolic number 12. Another four years, and several TV adaptations later they were still waiting. What had happened to Britain's most successful living farceur and his 12th novel?

They'd stopped taking one another seriously.

Not only has Tom Sharpe formed in recent years an unwilling, highly distracting addiction to his computer, moved house twice and suffered heart trouble (now hopefully past), he appears also to have undergone a fundamental change in attitude, both towards himself as a writer — "maybe I've forgotten how" — and towards the role of novel writing itself.

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"I mean, if you want to communicate," he begins to explain, peering forbiddingly at me over a copy of WM with a look that confirms I have not been a welcome interruption to his gardening, "if you really want to communicate." I nod encouragingly, but he bursts out laughing and points at an author-interview in the magazine; he's only been taking the mickey.

"I think we take ourselves a bit too seriously, us writers. It's become the new religion in a way — people looking to writers to tell them the meaning of the world and all that sort of stuff."

Not at all what Tom Sharpe has been in the business for all these years, give or take the odd outrageous satire like his first two novels *Riotous Assembly* ('71) and *Indecent Exposure* ('73), which you will still find dedicated to the South African police. Weirdly enough, it was amidst the compulsion to convey his eye witness impression of the horrors of black oppression in '50s Soweto that the serious young writer first discovered he was in fact a closet comedian. But WM readers will be encouraged to know that many years of unrewarded graft were to precede this realization, and its success.

Sharpe wrote nine serious plays about apartheid, unnoticed by anyone except, perhaps, the government censors, before finally being deported from South Africa. He then began in Cambridge a new life remarkably similar to that of his most celebrated character, Henry Wilt, as a teacher at the local tech.

"There again it was rather farcical. I thought I was going to teach English but when I turned up for the interview I was offered 18th century history. I explained that I'd be happy to do it only I knew nothing about 18th century history. The interviewer thought I was joking. He roared with laughter and told me I'd got the job. I never worked so hard in my life."

At this point Sharpe was unpublished and broke. He never went out but spent his evenings slaving over text books to keep himself ever one lesson away from exposure. Somehow he managed to complete another doomed play, but most of his writing dreams had extrapolated into a pile of history notes. Ten years the *Wilt*-forming experience lasted. Then one day ....

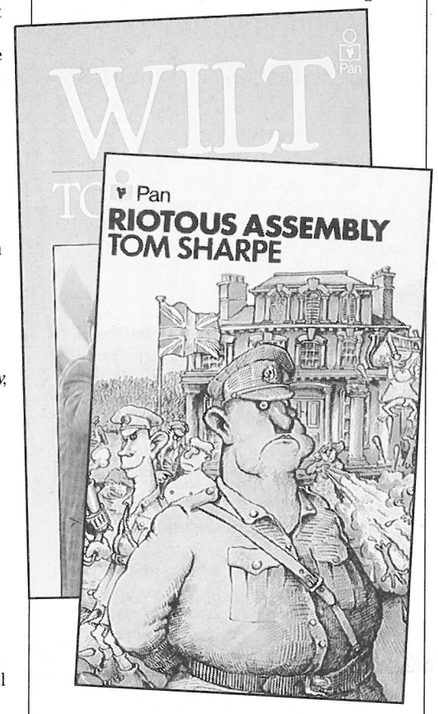
"I set out to write a true short story, yet again about my experiences in South Africa, and suddenly I found that it ceased to be serious, or rather that it was serious in a different way. It became hysterical, there was an awful tension, and suddenly I'd start laughing. A woman phones the police and unequivocally confesses to murdering her black cook. The cop insists 'you can't have done' — and we're off into the realms of fantasy. But we're not. It was based on fact."

The story turned into *Riotous Assembly*, Sharpe's first novel and a huge bestseller when it was eventually published. It took him only three weeks of manic typing and giggling to get down the first draft. "People tell me I visited them during those three weeks. I don't remember anything about it. All I remember is sitting at that desk. It was such a flow. I was just hanging onto its tails thinking, 'What on earth is Konstabel Els (the novel's psychopathic anti-hero, based on a real South African policeman) going to do next?'"

After some encouraging noises, Michael Joseph rejected the script, and lived to regret it. Agents Curtis Brown took on *Riotous Assembly* confident that it would sell. After another rejection from Cape, Secker and Warburg published the first of Tom Sharpe's 11 international bestsellers to date. It turned out that the influential reader who turned down *Riotous Assembly* at Michael Joseph, and subsequently had Messrs Joseph to answer to, is now a famous American novelist herself, though Sharpe wouldn't name her.

Riotous Assembly didn't change the tech teacher's life overnight. He took a year's unpaid leave to write *Indecent Exposure* but couldn't afford to continue that way. Eventually the head of Secker commissioned Sharpe the equivalent of his salary, £3,000, for each of three more novels. At last he had an income from his writing. It wasn't riches yet, not until six books later when the royalties started flooding in. But it meant he could write full time, and that was all that mattered.

Problems? Plenty. Not every new story was to write itself like the first. "That's only ever happened twice. It takes a lot to convince yourself you can actually get the stuff down, that it isn't rubbish. I start writing without a strategy, without any real clue, but I have an image in my mind. Take *Blott on the Landscape* ('75, his joke at the expense of rural England). "I'd had a fascination for some time with people who make concrete garden gnomes, which strike me as rather puzzling objects. That was my starting point and I wrote three or four chapters but it didn't work, the tone was wrong.



"I laboured over it for several months before I suddenly thought of introducing a corrupt politician, who married a woman, who he considered very ugly, for her money and title — happens often enough. Then the book started to take shape, and Blott the gardener appeared on the scene. That was my fourth book and it was a real sweat."

Sharpe writes a lot of notes for his books, but he argues adamantly against research, insisting that fiction is fiction, a process of invention. My contention that his varied life experiences have amounted to research are brushed aside, and he boasts about the time he deliberately got the details of an actual army regiment wrong, "because I knew some old buffoon would finally write and complain. It took 14 years but he did in the end. And I wrote back saying, well, I've been casting a fly over that particular stretch of water for some time now and you finally leapt up and grabbed it."

The intellectually frustrated, downtrodden, conservative Henry Wilt and his manically houseproud, flighty, dissatisfied but ultimately loyal wife are, inevitably somehow, Sharpe's favourite characters. Having inspired three novels (and one cinema film) so far, I believe we'll be lucky enough to meet them again some day.

Certainly I tried to do my bit for the Wilt Appreciation Society, via some gentle probing: what gave the original Wilt the potential for sequels?

"I understand him so well, I've shared so many experiences — even with class Meat One — and reacted in the same ways."

Theoretically then, could there be endless Wilts?

"There could be, yes, but I haven't written any others." A pregnant pause. "Oh, I suppose I ought to; I'd better write something hadn't I, instead of sitting in that shed pottering away."

We look across the lawn towards Sharpe's small shabby wooden office where yellowing curtains hang limply at the windows. He has been writing in sheds for many years, liking the feeling of 'going out to work'. And he does still write as avidly as ever though he's easily distracted. "I look out the window, I pull the curtain up, and then I pull the curtain down."

I know that most writers, however successful, have moments of self doubt, but it's hard to explain how gratifying it is to find that a phenomenally successful novelist, whose every word is by now virtually guaranteed a worldwide readership, has not liked his work enough to let anyone publish it for six years, has not felt that he deserved it.

There's certainly no trace of false modesty. Sharpe accepts that, "Comedy was my gift, you can't take something like that for granted." He's not into analysing what makes good comedy — "different people laugh at different things" — but believes that, like anything else, humorous writing improves with practice.

On the morning of my visit, he had been sitting in his shed reconsidering that boycotted 12th novel, actually a sequel to *Porterhouse Blue* ('74), the once critically acclaimed mockery of Cambridge University life.

Another *Wilt*, another *Porterhouse*, what'll it be then Tom? Possibly, he muses as he drives me to the station, a scathing reflection on the Thatcher years, "now that we've finally got rid of her".