

An ode to a dissident

Woodstock woman embarks on a creative journey filming a documentary about a South African poetry legend

CARL COLLISON

Recounting how, a few years ago, film-maker and Woodstock resident Shelley Barry approached poet James Matthews with her idea to do a documentary on him, Ms Barry remembers: "When I told him about my idea, he said: 'A few people have asked me this and I always told them to f**k off, but I trust you'."

Years later, the documentary, *Diaries of a Dissident Poet*, will be screened as part of this year's Encounters Film Festival.

As to the reasons behind her choosing Mr Matthews, who she describes as "this naughty, irreverent, wicked, eccentric and funny guy", as the subject for her latest creative outing, Ms Barry says: "I've known James for about 20 years now. I always found him to be an interesting, fascinating person. And of course, I've always loved his work. Because I was a young writer at the time I got to know him, he was sort of a role model.

"In my work, my interest has

moved towards artists because I find them interesting. I want to find out how their minds work. They also usually lead very colourful lives. But it was a bit overwhelming making a film about someone as larger-than-life as he is."

Born in District Six, the now 85-year-old had his first collection of poetry, *Cry Rage* published in 1972. The collection went on to hold the dubious title of being the first collection of poetry to be banned by the apartheid government.

Mr Matthews laughs as he says: "They were discussing this book in parliament then, and I don't think they could decide whether what they were looking at was a petrol bomb or book or poetry.

"So I think they decided to play it safe and ban it."

Continued subsequent banning of his work was followed by Mr Matthews being detained in 1976.

Says Ms Barry: "There is a part in the documentary where he speaks about how, while he was impris-



■ Iconic poet James Matthews has not only recently released a collection of poetry, but is also the subject of a documentary to be screened as part of the Encounters Documentary Film Festival.

PICTURE: SUPPLIED BY SHELLEY BARRY

oned, he would write poetry and when his daughter came to visit with his grandchild, they would smuggle the poetry out in the child's nappies. And that was how the *Poems from a Prison Cell* collection came to be."

Says Mr Matthews: "At that stage, all my poetry looked into the polit-

ical situation."

His latest collection of works, *Age is a Beautiful Phase (2nd ed)*, however, sees him changing tack.

"When I was 79, I brought out the first collection, called *Age is a Beautiful Phase/Face*. So with this collection, I wanted to continue paying homage to senior citizens,

because you just don't find poetry that relates to people of my age."

The collection was launched yesterday, Wednesday June 11, at UCT's Hiddingh Hall Campus.

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