



Sydney and Felicia Kentridge Award

At the presentation of the Sydney and Felicia Kentridge Award for Service to Law in Southern Africa from left to right: Jeremy Gauntlett SC, who gave the speech paying tribute to the award-winner, Beatrice Mtetwa, and Patric Mtshaulana SC, chair of the GCB.

Report by Frans Rautenbach, Cape Bar

The Sydney and Felicia Kentridge Award for Service to Law in Southern Africa was presented to the Zimbabwean lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa at a gala dinner at the Castle, Cape Town, on 17 July 2009. The award is presented annually by the GCB to a person who has made an exceptional contribution to the law in Southern Africa.

Beatrice Mtetwa, renowned Zimbabwean human rights lawyer and recipient of the Sydney and Felicia Kentridge Award for Service to Law in Southern Africa in 2009, is one of 48 children. As she drily remarked to Jeremy Gauntlett SC, who gave the speech paying tribute to her on the occasion of the award, 'My father was a firm believer in polygamy.'

The award was bestowed on Beatrice Mtetwa by the chairman of the GCB, Patric Mtshaulana SC, at a memorable dinner held in the Castle in Cape Town on 17 July 2009, attended by a number of dignitaries, including Chief Justice Pius Langa.

In his speech Gauntlett went on to account how Mtetwa rose from difficult circumstances to acquire not only an education and a professional qualification but also to become one of the most effective legal warriors for the people of Zimbabwe against an almost unprecedented onslaught on human rights by government agencies in that country, over many years.

Gauntlett borrowed the words of another great lawyer, after whom the award was named, Sydney Kentridge QC, who, many years ago, had this to say about the dire state of the rule of law in South Africa at the time:

'Is there any hope of restoring what has been lost? It would not be realistic to say so. But realism, however sombre, is not to be confused with silence or acquiescence. "It is not necessary to hope in order to work, and it is not necessary to succeed in order to persevere."'

To illustrate how Beatrice persevered for many years for an ideal that often seemed hopelessly unrealistic, Gauntlett told the story of how she once, after winning a series of court orders against the Zimbabwean police, was arrested on trumped-up charges and assaulted. Besides being yet another sterling example of the brave and brilliant work performed by her in her home country over the years, the incident also had the following amusing upshot, as related by the speaker:

'When Beatrice won the Liberty/Justice Award in 2003, *The Guardian* ran a story about the honour, with a colour photograph of Beatrice's bruised face just after her assault. "Can you imagine, my one time on the front page and they show a photo of me looking my worst! A British lawyer asked someone at *The Guardian* if the black marks around my eyes were tribal markings. I said, Tell them yes: everyone in Zimbabwe is getting markings like that.'"

The generous applause of the guests was fit tribute to another worthy recipient of an award shared by, amongst other illustrious names, former Chief Justice Ismail Mahomed, George Bizos SC and Jules Browde SC. 