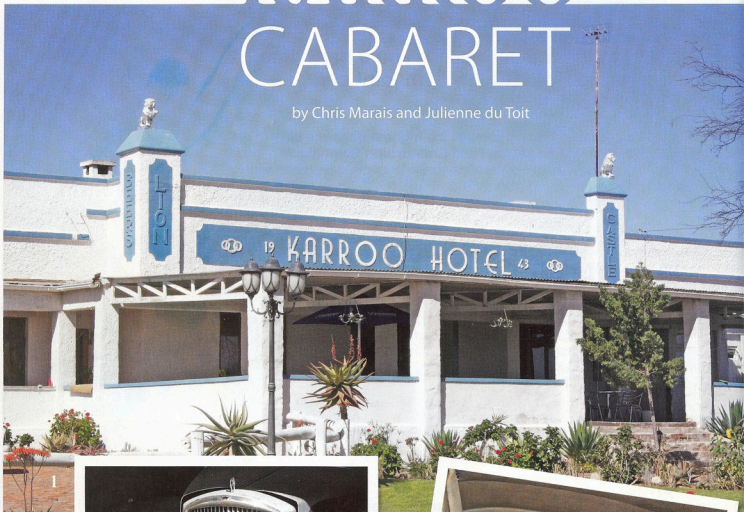


KARROO CABARET

by Chris Marais and Julienne du Toit



The Karroo Hotel outside Steytlerville has had many incarnations. Its latest revamp – as the Karroo Theatrical Hotel – is an eccentric traveller's delight



Giving new life to a derelict hotel

Where Steytleville

Map reference F2 (see inside back cover)

Who Mark Hinds and Jacques Rabie

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LIKE most small towns in the Karoo, Steytleville used to have a Royal Hotel. Everyone liked a party at the Royal, especially the wayward son of one of the local church councillors. In a bid to end the young man's rip-snorting ways, his father convinced the church council not to renew the Royal's liquor licence once it expired. This move ushered in a half-century of temperance for the town.

In 1943, however, the Karoo Hotel was built just outside Steytleville's boundaries. Its style was decidedly Rancharo Art Deco. The brandies and Cokes flowed once more until 2002, when the outlaw establishment went into liquidation.

Enter Mark Hinds and Jacques Rabie. Mark is a concert pianist and cabaret player. Jacques is his singer and life partner. They'd moved from Cape Town to the little Western Cape town of Tulbagh, but somehow they could not find their "mojo" there. "Eventually we just ended up sitting on our stoep, counting cows," says Jacques.

- 1 The Karoo Theatrical Hotel – like an Art Deco ice-cream cake in the desert.
- 2 Princess Betty, a true old aristocrat.
- 3 No paparazzi! Mark and Jacques hamming it up in Princess Betty.
- 4 The revamped dining room.
- 5 The Karoo Theatrical Hotel cabaret show in action.

One day Mark spotted an advertisement for a hotel for sale at auction in the Eastern Cape, at Steytleville to be precise.

"But where's Steytleville?" asked Jacques.

"Does it matter? Let's call the agent," replied Mark. He already had a feeling that their destiny (or part thereof) would lie in the Deep Karoo.

The agent told them the hotel in question was "American Deco; a little bit of Arizona, a little bit of Mexico." It sounded like just the ticket.

"We drove up on the Willowmore road," says Jacques. "Suddenly, on the horizon, we saw the Steytleville church steeple and then, to the left, what looked like a hacienda."

Nice from far, but far from nice. The old Karoo Hotel had not served a drink for many years. Everything of value had been either ripped out or vandalised. "Squatters had moved in," says Mark. "The filth was knee high. The only bit of usable furnishing left was the foot rail at the bar."

But the derelict shell consisted of 13 rooms, three bars, a sumptuous dining space, a dance hall and a squash court. The two men looked into the future and visualised what could be. Where others might have seen irredeemable ruins, they saw the makings of the world's first "theatrical hotel", a place of weekend murder mysteries followed by plush Viennese balls. Out here in SA's version of New Mexico: the vast dry khaki Karoo.

"I'd been having this recurring dream that I was on the verge of acquiring a large dilapidated property with many doors," says Mark.

"We fell madly in love with the place," adds Jacques.

The sheriff of the court told them to come back in a week when the hotel would be auctioned off. For Mark and Jacques it was a nervous seven days, especially when a busload of people arrived just before the auction and began measuring the place for occupancy. Speedy action was needed. "So we did a direct deal, offering R185 000 cash, which was accepted," says Mark.

They were now hoteliers. They drove into Steytlerville to buy a double bed to sleep on and local eyebrows were raised ever so slightly. Then a journalist friend of theirs did a story on their new venture for a weekend newspaper and the bookings began flowing in.

"Eight weeks after moving in we had our first function," says Jacques.

"I prepared Malaysian curry and rice for 80 people – on a two-plate stove."

They take us on a tour of the establishment. At Oscar's Bar, Soetie, a black cat, leaps up onto a stool and demands attention. She's a Steytlerville stray who has her own chair, an air of imperiousness and a special growl for anyone looking for a bar fight. A kind of kitty bouncer.

We learn that although Jacques is a singer, he started life completely deaf. This changed when his parents sold a lot of their belongings to pay for the experimental insert of a mechanical device that would enable him to hear. The minute Jacques could hear, he dove into the world of music.

Four years ago Mark was doing a recital. During the supper break he heard a heavenly rendition of Sinatra's *My Way* wafting from the kitchen. It was Jacques, washing dishes and singing in perfect pitch.

"Until then I'd always had problems finding a singing partner," says Mark, "but Jacques was perfect. He has no ego and because of his amazing hearing device he even picks up the inner harmonics of the notes – not just the fundamentals."

The device works almost too well, however. "I pick up all the frequencies of cellphones around me and it drives me crazy," says Jacques. "That's why I love the quiet out here so much."

The Karoo Theatrical Hotel is a place of pianos. They have five pianos dotted around the place and are considering putting another on the steep.

Ambling about the hotel, we find Fort Kaktus. Consisting of a courtyard, bunk beds, a braai area, a basic bathroom and a kitchen equipped with unbreakable utensils, it's for the Brandewyn Brigade – the rough fellows who like to carouse after a particularly good hunt.

They show us Princess Betty, an aristocratic old Austin Van den Plas limousine, the fourth in a limited production run of 1 500. She was handmade and christened upon her departure from the factory, being destined for diplomats and royals. Now, with a mere 60 000 miles on a clock, she's still a relatively fresh young thing.

The hotel even has a gym that's remarkably well equipped. "We call it Active Virgin," quips Jacques.


It's time for our mid-afternoon concert. Mark, immaculate in sequined dinner jacket, parks behind the grand piano. He begins to play, a sweet segue between classics and showtunes. Jacques enters, wearing a glittering gold waistcoat and black trilby hat and singing, oh yes, *My Way*.

Occasionally we hear the triumphant cluck of one of the hotel hens laying an egg outside. Tiger, the marmalade cat, enters during *Send In The Clowns*, warbles in harmony (sort of) and hops up on a stool next to Mark.

As the light softens, we take a drive to Steytlerville with Jacques and Mark. The little town has oxwagon-wide streets and the major families in the area have their crests up on special plaques running down the centre of the main avenue.

We visit Jacques's mom, Marie Rabie, who runs the Koppie Koffie spot in town. She's famous for her wicked milk tarts.

At the NG church, we slip inside. It's a huge, grand old place of worship. Mark steps up to the great organ and starts playing Bach's *Fugue In D-Minor*, followed by something wonderful from Grieg.

Up the road, at the snug little Anglican church that dates back to 1900 and is illuminated by paraffin lamps, Mark lets us have a little more Bach on the hand-pumped organ. We are mesmerised by the music and the exquisite stained-glass windows, where Jesus stands and the legend reads: "It is I. Be not afraid." 

I prepared curry and rice for 80 people – on a two-plate stove

- 1 The old way of listening to your tunes.
- 2 Oscar's Bar, where a stray cat rules.
- 3 An intimate guest bedroom.
- 4 Jacques and Mark, serving up at Oscar's Bar.



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