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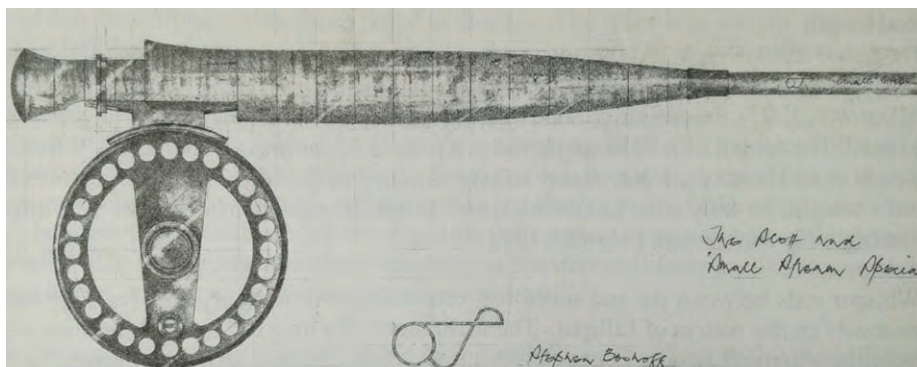


By Crai



craftsman

g Thom



WHEN one meets Stephen Boshoff for the first time one gets the impression of an absent-minded professor or an eccentric millionaire. His hair is usually tousled and in public he wears a jacket as well as a faraway look if he's not engaged with anyone. But this belies his intellect which is as sharp as sword. When you get onto a subject that interests him his bushy eyebrows go up as his face opens up and his eyes light up like stars. If you make him laugh those eyes brim with tears.

Stephen is essentially a creative, questioning person, whether working as a planner/urban designer or creating something with his hands. A craftsman of the old school, he does not limit himself to one area in craft; he uses his hands successfully and can thoughtfully apply his mind to any project, coming up with a proportioned work with great lines.

"Working with my hands, I think of myself as exploring craft mostly, not as a rod maker. My medium of choice is wood — which I grew up with — and bamboo, although it is a 'grass' rather than wood," he says.

Stephen has little time for poor workmanship, especially sloppy workmanship caused by being hasty. As a mentor to me, I often heard him say, "Slow down Mr Thom." He believes that "a good rod exhibits excellence in different dimensions —material, matching to purpose, careful lay-out and planning, and excellent fitting of

components and finish."

Copying is anathema to him. "We should study and practice the technique and ways of work of others, not to copy, but rather to improve," Stephen comments. He also admires anyone who perseveres in making a bamboo rod from a raw culm.

The influence of Stephen's father can be seen in his work, his neat habits and his work ethic. From the elder Boshoff Stephen learned many things related to work, fishing and life. His father also instilled in him a deep respect for nature and all living things, past and present. Stephen says,

"His priority for me was to play, firmly believing that I would find something worthwhile in work after days of boyhood."

Importantly, from an early age he was trusted with unfettered access to everything in the workshop, including the lathe. Spending time fiddling with tackle and refurbishing rods — even those that did not need it — stood him in good stead for the time when he discovered some bamboo culms in a local furniture factory and built his first rod.

Stephen's influences and inspiration come from many sources — from people he knows and has worked with, to people he knows through their books. James Krenov is his wood muse and Tom Moran, bamboo. He especially values Tom's attention to detail. Locally he's inspired by Jay Smit (the "elder" of SA flyfishing



craft), Stephen Dugmore (the function and form of his rods) and Derek Smith (best rod finishes).

"I have seen enough bamboo rods and handmade nets and reels to know that Nicholas Hughes and Shaun Futter rate among the best in the world, even though they're relatively young," says Stephen.

"What you buy from a South African maker — specifically in bamboo and wood — is truly comparable to the work of revered makers from elsewhere, at a fraction of the price."

At the moment Stephen is taken with the idea of the TAG (Touch and Go) Hook, which was manufactured by Partridge some years ago. The pointed hook is replaced by a curled end, so you can "hook" a fish, but as soon as you give it slack it can release itself. This brings a new dimension to catch and release, ensuring no injury to the fish, and obviating the need for handling. Sadly these are no longer available.

When I asked Stephen what appeals most to him about craft, he replied that in bamboo rod making he's fascinated by the history of the craft, the people involved — past and present — and the journey of transformation of each culm from its growing, through many hands, to his work bench and the user.

"My rod making also provides a 'private' space away from my work as urbanist," he explained. "As a rod maker I can create without interference, and the process is largely within my control. In my urban planning work the

context is inherently political, and the client or beneficiary base extremely diverse. The associated compromise required in work necessitates engaging in some private, controllable creative activity.

"Satisfied users make me happy. At the recent expo it was very special to see casters like Korrie Broos and Gareth Jones laying out a full line with ease on my new 6-wt."

Stephen started rock and surf fishing with his father in the George area around the age of seven, using a one piece 12ft bamboo "dip-stok". Later he honed his skills on the Gouritz estuary, becoming proficient at fishing a drifting prawn to steenbras and grunter, using a little Mitchell 308 and base model ABU solid glass spinning rod. It is likely he still has these with his collection of fishing reels which he is gradually reducing in line with his gentle policy of Döstädning (Swedish Death Cleaning) — it's worth looking up!

After moving to Somerset West, he heard about trout in the Lourens and started pursuing them in the area from Radloff Park upwards. Without a mentor it took him a season or so to land his first trout on a fly (a Coch-Y-Bondhu). Later at university, he fished the Eerste River and the Steenbras dams. By that stage he had an old seven foot bamboo English rod with a bad set bought from Mr Harrison at the CPS for R5.00, matched with a used Hardy Perfect. This was topped with a used tweed jacket, emulating





On the Jan du Toit River with a homemade backpack.



Trying out a Morgan hand mill. He wasn't enamored with it, preferring the normal method of shaping culm sections.

BIO

Stephen was born in Montagu but his family moved to Blanco before he started school; they spent most weekends on the family farm near Calitzdorp. After matriculating in Somerset West, he completed a Masters in Urban and Regional Planning at Stellenbosch University. Later, he studied at Rutgers University on a Fellowship. Half of his working life was with the City of Cape Town, and he became the Executive Director of Strategy and Development while quite young. He currently works as a consultant urbanist, "assisting the young owners of our practice to build a consultancy focused on increasing life opportunity for ordinary citizens."

Neil Patterson's style.

The first decent rod he bought was a R99.00 Sage 8'6" 6-wt in glass, but he regrets not having bought a shorter 4-wt. The most revered rod in Stephen's collection is a 6'9" 3-wt graphite and glass rod made for Ed Herbst by Henry Haneda some 30 years ago. According to Stephen, Haneda "revolutionised rod making in composites, developed unique tapers and used different materials in various sections of a rod to achieve the desired actions." To this day, Stephen believes that his rod finish is unsurpassed.

Nowadays you will find Stephen fishing a selection of rods, including some made by him. On the smaller streams he will be wielding a tenkara rod which suits his minimalist style. He is never without his kettle and his latest stove, stopping regularly along the river to make tea. This aspect alone makes him a pleasure to fish with!

Stephen likes hiking up into the mountains, particularly to a tiny little stream where he overnights once or twice a year, but which he regards as too special to fish. Careful planning goes into his overnight trips; everything is weighed, weight is reduced, and anything superfluous is left behind. He is a study in ultra light backpacking.

Besides Cape streams, he loves to fish the Gariep. "Its larger pools must have given rise to much myth and story-telling. Last year, the section we fished was chalk stream-like and I really enjoyed sight fishing to smallmouth yellows lining up in channels between the weeds," he told me.

As for stillwaters, he particularly likes Lakenvlei, "probably more for the company of friends than the fishing. I have never cared much for stripping back sunk flies, but absolutely love casting a DDD to cruising fish."

Stephen's dream retirement includes reasonable health, a quiet fully "unplugged" workshop, and an occasional meal and glass of red with friends. He would also enjoy more frequent overnight hiking and fishing trips, "making three to five rods of the highest standard in function and form per year, along with occasional teaching or consulting on planning and urban design that serves the public interest."

This message I received from Stephen a while ago sums him up perfectly: "If I meander towards wanting more than my friends, a little trip to the Orange, simple food, working meaningfully with my head and hands, a glass of red, to be heard at times, three books a month, and warmth, remind me please."