

{ COMIX }

Comix guru Andy Mason is opening a gallery in the wake of his wild new graphic novel, writes **Carlos Amato**

THERE are advantages to being a comic-strip character," says Andy Mason, the underground cartoonist and comix guru, aka ND Mazin.

"You can inhabit parallel narratives, which is handy: you can be a hero in one and a zero in another. And you can interact with a lot more people than real people can. But if you're authored by someone else, how much freedom do you have? Comix characters do have a certain amount of autonomy, but they're also in the dark about why they exist, in the same way that people are."

Mason's characters have better working conditions than most. They enjoy unusual freedom to meander and evolve, to take long holidays and to defy his creative authority.

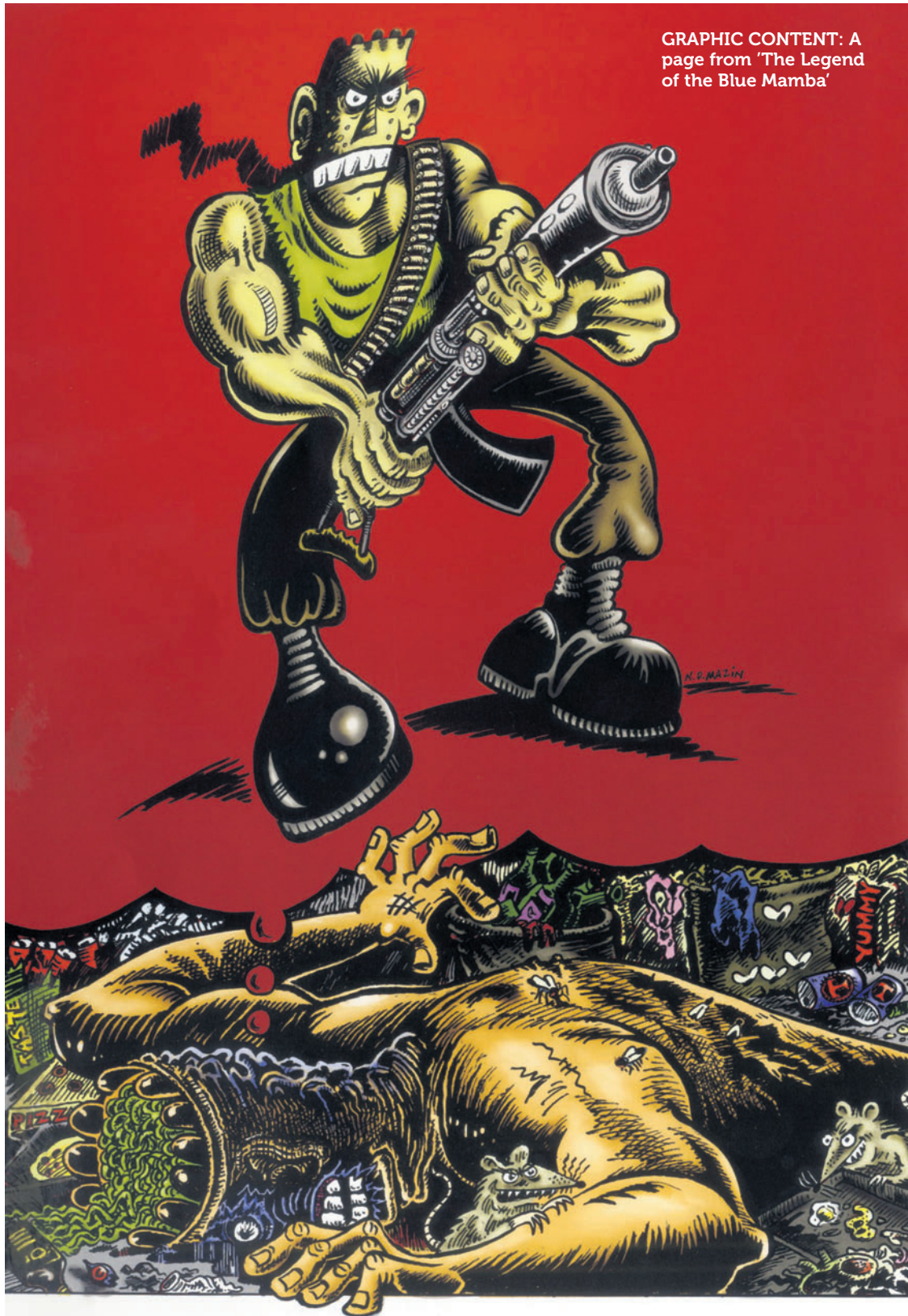
But recently he imposed some order by publishing *The Legend of Blue Mamba*, the epic tale of an enigmatic soul surfer and revolutionary warrior, a character he first sketched back in 1995.

And next Friday, Mason opens a new comix gallery at Alive Cafe in Muizenberg — the Azania Mania Art Kolektiv (AMAK) — along with a cartooning festival called Parallel Lives.

Blue Mamba is a hell of a trip: a zigzagging compendium of apocalyptic drama, mystical detours and comical interludes, all framed by reflexive riffs on the nature of storytelling.

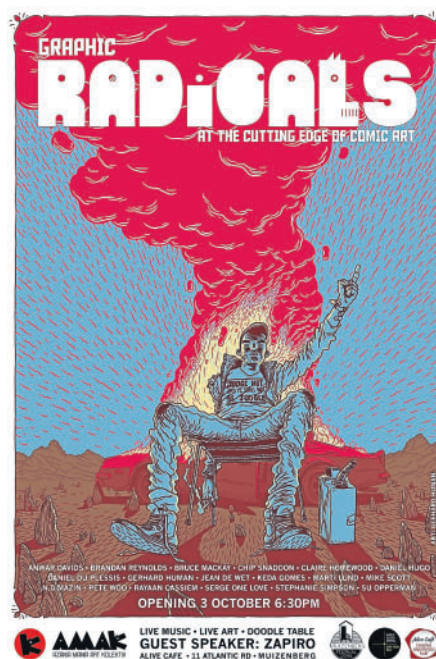
The cast includes the journalist and "disgruntled struggle ballie" Poynton Shute, the Mephistophelian surf tycoon YT Shark, and the pointy-schnozzed Durban hippie couple that Mason created in lefty student zines in the 1970s — Pori Vittoke and Alison Wonderland.

On the cover is an enigmatic figure, hovering over a beachscape: its head is a duiker's skull, and it sports a kingfisher's wings, a human torso and a fish's tail. This serene creature carries the stricken body of Blue



GRAPHIC CONTENT: A page from 'The Legend of the Blue Mamba'

A luta cartoonua



JUNG AND RESTLESS: Andy Mason (ND Mazin) works on a surfboard painting about the Lwandle evictions in June. The work appears in the group exhibition 'Graffiti: Urban Interiors' at the Youngblood Gallery, Cape Town. It will also be exhibited at Mason's new comic art gallery in Muizenberg, the Azania Mania Art Kolektiv, from October 3. Right, the poster for AMAK's first exhibition

Mamba, in a Pieta pose.

This is the Mystic Duiker, a character sparked by a tiny duiker skull that Mason found near his favourite surfing spot, Verlorenvlei on the West Coast.

He first painted the Duiker on a surfboard, but later, in an epiphanic moment, it intervened to resolve the *Blue Mamba* book's stalled plotline.

"In the middle of the night at Verlorenvlei, drawing in a frenzy by the light of a paraffin lamp, I had this luminous vision of myself moving through the apocalyptic scene of New Babylon, past prostitutes, funeral parlours, sex shops, rats scurrying about.

"And I came across this naked, discarded figure, and it was Blue Mamba. And I asked him, 'Are you OK?' It was a stupid question: his brain matter was leaking out, and he had no face. He got up on his elbow and stared blankly — he had no idea who I was. I sat there feeling like a complete failure as an author, because he could have been this revolutionary hero who tore down the walls of Toxacor, but he was lying in the gutter of new Babylon.

"And then suddenly this vagina appeared in the sky, and metamorphosed into a portal, and out of the portal popped this creature, this Jungian emblem. The Mystic Duiker is a kind of incarnation of Jung's Philemon archetype. And as he appears, with him comes the phrase: 'Only the Mystic Duiker can save us from what we have become.' Only by incorporating all these different animal forms, symbolising the totality of life on Earth, can we confront the crisis we're in, as a species hurtling towards its doom."

Mason is not nearly as goofballish as this account might suggest. He gets plenty done, and like many former struggle activists and artists, he is hunting for new ways to grasp and combat the betrayal of South Africa's liberation moment in the wake of Marikana.

Cartooning is a potent, cheap and digitally transmissible medium of struggle and self-expression — and nobody is promoting and documenting the form in South Africa with more energy and passion than Mason.

His history of South African cartooning, *What's So Funny?* (Double Storey, 2010), is the definitive book on the subject — a rigorous but rollicking survey from Cruikshank to Bittercomix to Zapiro — and puts out a stream of provocative comix events and anthologies.

Mason's radicalism is going nowhere, and he wants AMAK to be a home for real graphic resistance.

"As it turns out, genuine classless utopianism is still a way off, and, by definition, will probably never be achieved," he says. "That doesn't matter. We still want to use our art practice to reclaim the future we seem to have missed out on.

"Quite frankly, we're tired of the discourses of disillusionment and the narratives of dysfunction in which this country — and too many of our cartoonists — seem trapped. We are more interested in using our artistic talent to reinvent a future that's more to our liking."

• Got a toon or two in you? Get to the Parallel Lives cartooning festival, from October 3 to 12 at Alive Cafe in Muizenberg.

Events include workshops on political cartooning by Brandon Reynolds, on storyboarding by Chip Snaddon and visual journaling by Andy Mason. Book at 021 788 9010. AMAK's first exhibition *Graphic Radicals: At the Cutting Edge of Comic Art*, opens at Alive Cafe at 6.30pm on Friday.