

Paul Ash meets men with a magnificent obsession: keeping mechanical marvels alive for the world to ride



# STEAM DREAMS

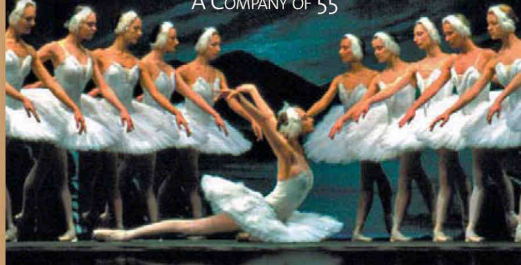
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**T**HIS is a love story. Here are two men. Their overalls and hands are thick with grease and engine oil, their skin ingrained with grime and soot. Their hands are nicked and scarred from countless battles with stubborn iron and steel so hot it will sear flesh faster than a steak on a griddle. Look at the heartlines on their palms and you will see long, black threads that never fade, no matter how hard they scrub.

All men need distractions. For some it's a red sports car. Others find solace in expensive whisky or lust for the golf game that they wish would improve. Many men — owners or punters — blow their money on racehorses. And some take mistresses.

Shaun Ackerman and Jeandre Gordon's mistresses are their magnificent obsession: a pair of attention-seeking 100-ton steam locomotives — needy, high-maintenance and running to fat, but in a voluptuous, heavy metal sort of way.

They have expensive tastes too: thousands of gallons of water, a few tons of coal and a constant supply of lubricating oil every time they go out — and that's the easy part.

Back home at the Reefsteamers depot in the old SAR engine shed in Germiston, the work to keep them fit for the road is constant. There is always some small repair job that needs doing, bolts to be tightened after a trip, or fixing something that broke. Some people say that's why steam locomotives are like horses — they pant and tremble, they cost money to keep, and they always want fettleing.

Ackerman and Gordon do not mind, nor do the handful of volunteers who pull on their greasy overalls on a Saturday morning and head over to Germiston to get even dirtier.

Gordon, the 21-year-old engineering apprentice, spends six days a week at the depot, working on the engines.

Ackerman, Reefsteamers' engineering director, stops by a few days a week to see how Gordon is getting on, and puts in a full day at the shed on Saturdays.

"It's an obsessed hobby," says Ackerman, noting that he is lucky to have an understanding boss. "And every Saturday my wife and family know that's my day for Reefsteamers."

To call it a hobby belies the reality of the work. Reefsteamers is a private steam club with half a dozen locomotives in its care. The engines belong to



Transnet's heritage arm and are on loan, along with the depot, to the club. The club's business is running excursion trains to Magaliesburg. When the trains are full, they pay Gordon's wages and the rent, and keep the engines in oil, water and coal.

The team has been busier than usual in recent weeks preparing for Reefsteamers' annual open day when they fire up the locomotives and invite the general public into the depot for a glimpse of the magic — the sights and smells and sounds — of a





**TICKET TO RIDE:** left, Jeandre Gordon and Shaun Ackerman. Below, Gordon shines a locomotive, and above, volunteers taking loving care of their 'mistresses'



Pictures: PAUL ASH

steam locomotive with a fire in its belly.

The visitors will also see some of the love that goes into keeping the dream alive. It can only be love that would drag a man out of bed before sunrise on a freezing morning to go to work all day in a Dickensian workshop full of hoists and gantries, crouched in a pit under a locomotive, wrestling stubborn bolts with a supersized spanner. Every tool in the workshop looks like it comes from Brobdingnag and you sweat just picking them up.

"A lot of the work is heavy and there are always dangers," says Ackerman.

"You're climbing up on the locos when you're working on them and you could slip and fall off, or things could fall on you. So we do everything by the book."

After money, their biggest challenge is manpower. "We don't have enough volunteers," says Ackerman. A repair job that would have taken a couple of days back in the steam era now takes months and sometimes years.

At its peak in the '70s, Germiston was home to more than 100 steam

## The feeling of being on a loco, on the footplate, with that puff and that fire ...

locomotives, which were looked after by an army of drivers, firemen, fitters and cleaners.

"I've heard stories of there being about 150 fitters here who would cover everything," says Ackerman. "They could do a full overhaul on a loco in about three weeks, but then you had 20 or 30 guys working on it five days a week."

Gordon's apprenticeship, then, seems like an anachronism in the 21st century when the age of the steam locomotive is all but done. Except that there is something about a steam engine that will stop even the bitterest cynic in his tracks. It's a feeling that even steam enthusiasts struggle to articulate and yet one which will guarantee its survival as long as there are people with a shred of romance in their hearts.

"There's just something that draws you to it," says Ackerman. "It's the satisfaction not just to ride on them but also to physically fix them and then the glory of being able to operate them."

Gordon, who is working hard to qualify as a steam locomotive fireman, is more effusive. "Ag, the feeling of being on a steam loco, on the footplate, with that puff and that fire, the heart pumping and the motion — left-right, you can feel it in the cab — that's just amazing," he says. "I would do this for the rest of my life."


• The Reefsteamers depot will be open to the public on Saturday July 27, with a steam shuttle from Park Station to the depot. Tickets are R150 (children 4 to 12 R100). To book call 011 888 1154/5 or see [www.reefsteamers.com](http://www.reefsteamers.com).

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