

Acting as Survival: The Plays of Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona

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Abstract

Athol Fugard has always had an obsessive concern with the actor and his performance; he regards the complete text as only a half way stage to the living performance and its particular definition of space and silence. This paper attempts to show that *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1973) and *The Island* (1974) use acting and meta-theatre as a strategy of resistance to apartheid and as a means of survival. It also sheds light on performance criticism as a product of postcolonial theory which is basically concerned with cultural identity.

Introduction

Athol Fugard has always had an obsessive concern with the actor and his performance; he regards the complete text as only a half way stage to the living performance and its particular definition of space and silence. This paper attempts to show that *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1973) and *The Island* (1974) use acting and meta-theatre as a strategy of resistance to apartheid and as a means of survival. It also sheds light on performance criticism as a product of Postcolonial theory which is basically concerned with cultural identity. Richard Schechner describes the structural and functional links between performance, community and culture in a variety of societies, and the admirable inclusiveness of this ambition which leads to a fundamental tenet of performance. He defines performance as 'The whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that takes place in/among performers and audience the first time the spectator enters the field of performance – to the time the last spectator leaves' (1988: 39). Meta-theatre, on the other hand 'occurs in theatre pieces about life seen as

already theatricalised' (Abel, 1963: 4), is an important concern of performance criticism. In fact, performance critics regularly scrutinize the text of the play for whatever directives it gives about what is to be seen on stage. This is underlined by Baz Kershaw's view that "Performance is 'about' the transaction of meaning, a continuous negotiation between stage and auditorium to establish the significance of the signs and conventions through which they interact" (1992: 16-17). In spite of the fact that many of the topics that appear in 'literary criticism' - for example, diction and metaphor, versification and syntax, rhythms and structures of entire speeches - reappear in performance criticism, in the latter these elements are clues to breathing, stress, tempo, gesture, and physical comportment (Makaryk, 1997: 134). Hence, the actor who performs a fictional identity is at the heart of theatre's discussion of identity and the self. Leach believes that the actor's own body as his instrument leads to paradoxes. Actually, the paradox may stem partly from the fact that the actor is always quoting, never doing something for 'real'. If the actor's body is the centre of the experience of performance, it is a body which in its movements, poses, gestures, is only 'pretentious'; in this way, it is always a metaphor for something else. Robert Leach further explains as his instrument, the actor's own body presents a fictional body that constantly has a problematic relationship capable of raising acute questions of identity (Leach, 2009: 52). Furthermore, through the actor's body, questions of gendered identity or race are raised. The question of how far actors merely 'pretend' or live their parts - and how far they should attempt one or the other of these courses - has been central to debates about acting and performance. For instance, Julian Hilton avers that:

Performers state by their actions that what they are performing is simultaneously real and not real, is in effect simply 'possible'. The audience in these terms do not test the performance as such, over which they have little control, but rather test the validity of its perceived meanings within the wider context of culture as a whole. (1987: 133)

Elizabeth Burns in her book, *Theatricality*, provides a useful proto-semiotic analysis of theatrical duality when she describes the interaction between performers and spectators and the interaction between characters in the play. She believes that:

Between actors and spectators there is an implicit agreement that the actors will be allowed to conjure up a fictitious world... This agreement underwrites the devices of exposition that enable the audience to understand the play. These conventions... can be described as rhetorical. They

are the means by which the audience is persuaded to accept characters and situations whose validity is ephemeral and bound to the theatre. (1972: 31)

Fugard, in an interview with Lloyd Richards, explains that acting has made the writer realise what actors need up there on stage to make a moment work. He says:

I often think of my plays as written with three characters sitting at the desk: the writer himself; and then behind his left shoulder is the actor, watching as he writes and nudging his arm; and then behind him the other shoulder is the director who's eventually going to be responsible for the staging of it. There is a triple psychology that functions when I write a play. (1985: No. 8)

In spite of the major themes of oppression and apartheid evident in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island*, the presence of the theme of identity depends on performance and meta-theatre, a strategy adopted by Fugard. Performance and meta-theatre enhance the plays' effectiveness since they can be related to different universal themes such as survival, identity, life and death. Critics and scholars have always observed that *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* contains elements of absurdism, especially its sparse settings and surreal subject matter. Brink, for example, describes it as a response by a group of artists who perform in order to challenge the socio-political situation and to survive (1993: 2). The play dramatizes the poor conditions of three black men - Styles, Sizwe Bansi and Buntu - who tell the pitiable stories of hopelessness in their country. While many critics focused on the play's theme of segregation and apartheid in South Africa, Fugard's aim is to embody the crisis of survival as a universal theme through the acting strategy adopted by Styles. The play begins with Styles who had worked six years for Ford Motors, a multinational company owned by an American family. It is the oppressive policy of Ford Motors which dictates that an employee who retires after twenty five years of service is only entitled to a gold-wrist watch that leads Styles to describe himself as a fool if he continues to work for them. He decides to establish his own business, the photographic studio, which in the course of the play becomes a beehive of activities for the long suppressed black community looking for an opportunity to express themselves, albeit temporarily, by having their photograph taken in Style's studio. Interestingly, it is not the usual studio where people come just because they need photographs; it is a 'strong-room of dreams' (p. 159), as Styles describes it. The studio is a resolution of his crisis of survival and identity. Starting

his own business (the studio) is his method to free himself from the humiliation and exploitation that he had experienced for six years while working for Ford.

Something you mustn't do is interfere with a man's dream. If he wants to do it standing, let him stand. If he wants to sit, let him sit. Do exactly what they want! (*Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, p.160)

Style's photographic skills provide the black people with the much needed environment which would enable them to express themselves. As well as mimicking several events he recalls in his monologue, Styles records the lives and experiences of common people in his studio. He explains that there are two types of knocks that he experiences: the solemn knock and the energetic knock. The solemn knock symbolises the mourners who are for the funeral parlour next door while the energetic knock symbolises the happy people who want to be photographed (in his studio) as a way of recording their desire to survive. In the stage directions, the dramatists note that Styles 'Folds his arms as he acts out his part to the imaginary figures crouched on the floor' (p. 152). In the same scene, Styles states:

Gentlemen, old Bradley says this Mr Ford is a big bastard. He owns everything in this building, which means you as well.'

A voice came out of the crowd:
'Is he a bigger fool than Bradley?'
'They're asking, sir, is he bigger than you?'
(*Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, p.153)

Through Styles' photographic studio, Fugard underlines the black people's need for a 'photograph' to replace their lost identity in an oppressive society. People come in to 'act out' and live their fantasies of things they cannot achieve in real life. Hence, the photographic studio is not the usual one where people just come because they need new photographs; as Styles explains in one monologue, it is a 'strong-room of dreams' (p. 159). The studio resolves the crisis of survival, which Sizwe Bansi faces. By marking his passbook, the agents of apartheid have denied him the right to live and work in Port Elizabeth. Fortunately, Buntu, his friend, swaps Sizwe Bansi's marked passbook with that of a dead man, Robert Zwelinzima. Sizwe Bansi walks into the studio to take a photograph and when he is asked for his name, he hesitatingly calls himself Robert Zwelinzima. He tells Styles that he is sending his picture to his wife, Nowetu in King Williams Town.

STYLES. Right. Sit down.

[Robert hesitates.]

Sit down!

[Styles fetches a vase with plastic flowers, dust them off, and places them on the table. Robert holds up his plastic bag.]

What you got there?

[Out comes the hat.]

Aha! Stetson. Put it on, my friend.

[Robert handles it shyly.]

(Sizwe Bansi is Dead, p.165)

By the time Styles gets him in position for the picture he is a changed man; Sizwe Bansi thinks of his family and his children who are registered in school under his name, the loss of identity and the pride associated with his name. In fact, the title of the play embodies what the black people had to face in South Africa during the period of Apartheid.

[As he finishes the letter, Sizwe returns to the pose of the photo. Styles' Photographic Studio. Styles is behind the camera.]

STYLES. Hold it, Robert. Hold it just like that. Just one more. Now smile, Robert.... Smile...Smile.

[Camera flashes and blackout]

(Sizwe Bansi is Dead, p.192)

Fugard, Kani and Ntshona use Style's photographic studio to record the experience of the common people and their means of survival in an oppressive society, especially in a condition when they lose not only their name in order to become anonymised, but also lose their entire identity as a people. This is from the general meaning of the play, 'the entire nation is dead'. And not only does the play's title suggests that the apartheid policy has destroyed the identity of the nation, the new name taken by Sizwe anonymises him by acknowledging that survival in South Africa is difficult. 'Robert' is a common name and 'Zwelinzima' means 'difficult world'.

In *The Island* (1974), the connection between the play within the play – Antigone's trial- and apartheid in South Africa is clear. As it is 'play acting', such a gesture as a form of protest against authority will not be taken seriously. Undeniably, as Nkashama suggests,

[T]hrough the power of its own law, theatre can confer upon itself the authority to attack social hierarchies, challenge established rules, and contest political power without anyone else being able to intervene or

condemn its pertinence. (2004: 243)

The Island could be considered as one of the best examples of the post-colonial theatre forms - the prison theatre. In its treatment of trial and punishment, discipline and judgement it focuses on the methods of the dictatorial system. According to Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, 'prisons perform, among other things, a situation of colonization in miniature; the warden rules the prison just as the ultimate authority of the state manages the imperial enterprise' (1996: 27). As a prison drama devised by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, *The Island* uses acting and meta-theatre to symbolise resistance to, and survival of, the apartheid system.

In the opening scene, the stage set is a prison cell on Robben Island and two prisoners are sleeping on the floor. There is one blanket, a bucket and two tin mugs. The first sound that is heard is the whistle, a metaphor of the omnipresent authority. The prisoners rise immediately and go about their work. Their reaction to the whistle indicates that the body is disciplined and is ready to be put to use. As Grayling states, 'authority tends to be arrogated by the strong, protections against its abuse prove hard to come by, as history very painfully shows'. (1997: 312) In fact, the scene is presented in mime. The two actors John and Winston (who retain their names in the play) act themselves. They mime the digging of sand. This action, mimed by the two prisoners creates a complete visual image of apartheid for the audience. The process of digging sand relates to the prisoners' struggles against apartheid laws of oppression. The action could signify the fact that the struggle to survive oppression is impossible. And as Wertheim says, 'the two prisoners engage in a Sisyphean labour of pointlessly digging sand, filling a wheelbarrow with it, pushing the wheelbarrow to another side of the stage and emptying the sand'. (1997: 244) While this performance foregrounds the black body revealing it as controlled, battered and bent, as Gilbert and Tompkins observe, it serves as 'a means of protest against the system' (1997: 167).

After what seems as an endless period, a whistle is heard. In this context, the whistle represents the unseen force which conditions the reflexes of the prisoners. They stop their labour and mime the action of being handcuffed together, shackled, and running while being beaten by an unseen group of prison guards. Mime or acting can go further, self-consciously exploring other theatrical conventions such as the play-within-play. Although the mime exposes the dreadful conditions and brutality to which the two prisoners are subjected, it also embodies their reciprocity. This raises the question of the complexity of performance which has driven some drama critics to a kind of critical reification which

claims that only individual interpretations are ultimately possible. As Martin Esslin writes:

Any attempt to predict what 'meaning' the *performance* as such contains, is bound to be doomed to failure simply because that meaning must be different for each individual member of the audience. (1987: 21)

The mime shows the inhumanity they are subjected to as well as their mutual relationship in one cell. As prisoners return to their cell, the '*dumb-show*' ends and cries of rage and pain are heard. Winston cleans John's bloodied ear with '*his shirt-tail*' (p. 48). During this scene, they declare their brotherhood with the utterance, '*Nyana we Sizwe!*' (p. 48).

The play resonates with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* where the monotony of man's existence is expressed in the form of waiting. Nonetheless, waiting is also a form of coercion. Similar to Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, John and Winston must wait, either to be reprieved or to be condemned to life imprisonment or a living death. (2000: 96) Again, similar to the Beckettian characters, John and Winston while away their time: they improvise games and entertain themselves as a means of survival. As Erving Goffman explains, the performance of a play is a play. It provides experiences, emotions, ideas in other words it enriches our means of survival. He argues that 'Because performance images the world, it enables us to explore our identities without serious consequences' (1969: 17).

In *The Island*, the prisoners are accustomed to perform several roles. For example, since it is a custom in the cell to go to the movies, John and Winston have produced bioscopes creating cinema through a combination of imagination and acting. This make-belief is echoed in *Sizwe Bansi* where Styles' studio represents a fantasy world where people can survive through acting different roles. John, in *The Island*, re-enacts a scene from the film, *Fastest Gun in the West*. He '[w] hips out a six shooter and guns down a few bad men'. (*The Island*, p. 56) As play acting, such a gesture will not be taken seriously as a form of protest against authority because it is merely entertainment. Following this scene, he holds the tin mug like a telephone receiver and dials the number of The Shop, a favourite hangout of John, Winston and their friends in the outside world. He draws Winston into his game by improvising a conversation with his old friends and Winston:

How are the chaps keeping, Sky? Winston? ... All right, man. He's here next to me. No, fine, man, fine, man...small accident today when he collided with Hodoshe, but nothing to moan about. His right eye bruised,

that's all. (*The Island*, p. 57)

Thus, as an indirect protest against the cruel conditions they live in, the two prisoners reach out to the audience by acting beyond the prison wall through rhetoric and gesture. Notably, the unseen guard does not take their statement seriously. In this context, acting is a means whereby they can overcome the bestiality of the prison warders.

John and Winston rehearse *Antigone's* trial scene for the prison concert. John is eager to put on the play because he can see its relevance to their situation. The choice of *Antigone* is significant. As Steiner states concerning the reinterpretation and re-evaluation of this classical text, 'it dramatizes the conflict between nation-state and family, between the rights of the living, and those of the dead, and it is in Sophocles' *Antigone* that these conflicts are primordially, set forth' (1984: 27-28). John can see the similarity between *Antigone* and their predicament. It parallels their situation; the conflict between state laws and the rights of citizens. In his enthusiasm to put on the play, he has created Antigone's necklace out of a bunch of rusty nails and a wig out of some ropes; however, he is reluctant to memorize the plot. While Winston does not share his enthusiasm, John fully comprehends the power of acting and role-playing as a strategy of resistance and survival. In building the connections between ancient myths and modern history, Fugard relates the plights of Sisyphus and Antigone to those of the prisoners. However, according to Wertheim, *The Island* has other dimensions that include the transformation of the theatre audience into a prison audience and the actors' names. Fugard's actors and co-dramatists, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, themselves black South Africans, pointedly retain their first names indicating that:

This play in which they act like Antigone, the play in which the two prisoners John and Winston act - is a metaphor. *The Island* is not merely Robben Island but South Africa itself, an absurd prison with absurd rules enforced by absurd officials. South Africa's citizens, be they non-white or white, are as much immured and imprisoned as either the heroine in Sophocles play or the prisoners in Fugard. (Wertheim, 2000:96)

The Island, through the technique of meta-theatre and acting, raises the question of identity. Performance is a particular way of reflecting on identity. As Leach explains,

theatrical performance, like playing can offer alternative realities... in this sense theatre performance is an on-going metaphor for life... it is a flow of images which we should go along with as they clash, fade into one another, exit in parallel, complement and contradict each other. (Leach, 2009: 16)

Thus, *Antigone* as a metaphor exposes the injustice and the oppression practiced by the apartheid system. It explores the prisoners' pain and their ability to survive.

Notably, through the radical deconstruction of *Antigone*, Fugard's belief in imagination and acting that has theatrical and political significance has contributed to the introduction of a new form of African tragedy. By presenting the two prisoners playing the role of Antigone and Creon, Fugard exploded the conventions of a well-made play. The radical deconstruction of *Antigone* made it an overt symbol of the liberation movement, while the subtle and spare deployment of African story-telling conventions decolonized South African drama, providing a new form of 'protest' theatre that influenced South African dramatists.

The final scene of the play presents the prison entertainment, a play within a play, which 'disperses the centre of visual focus to at least two locations so that the viewer's gaze is both split and multiplied' (Gilbert and Tompkins, 1996: 250). Only John and Winston are seen onstage performing to an audience of unseen prisoners and guards. Fugard stages the scene cleverly and subversively such that the auditorium becomes a prison and the members of the paying audience are addressed as if they are an audience of guards and prisoners. Thus, 'the connection between the Antigone story and the story of South Africa, between the stage and life is made immediately and simultaneously clear' (Wertheim: 2000:96). John gives them an idea about his version of *Antigone*:

Captain Prinsloo, Hodoshe, Warders ... and Gentlemen! Two brothers of the house of Labdacus found themselves on opposite sides in battle, the one defending the state, the other attacking it. They both died on the battlefield. King Creon, Head of the State, decided that the one who had defended the State would be buried with all religious rites due to the noble dead. But the other one, the traitor Polynices, [...] was to have no grave [...]. But Antigone, their Sister, defied the law and buried the body of her brother Polynices. She was caught and arrested. That is why tonight the Hodoshe Span, Cell Forty-two, presents for your entertainment: 'The Trial and Punishment of Antigone'. (*The Island*, p. 73)

The significant words 'caught and arrested' which describe Antigone's situation draw a parallel situation for those who resist oppression in South Africa as she embodies the rights of the oppressed prisoners. Winston as Antigone defends her case by saying,

What lay on the battlefield waiting for Hodoshe to turn rotten, belonged to God. You are only a man, Creon. Even as there are laws made by men, so too there are others that come from God. (*The Island*, p. 75)

Winston representing Antigone defies the laws of apartheid. Within the play, he knows the consequences of his deeds when he defies Creon's authority: 'Your threat is nothing to me'. (p. 76) Winston, by admitting defying the law knows people would agree that what he did was honourable but 'no one dares tell you so'. (p. 76) Fugard's objectives of using Antigone to address the injustices, endemic within the apartheid system, is immediately observed immediately through the merging of the personal and political as a way of calling into question the privileging of the state above family relationships and private conscience.

Cross-dressing is significant in the play; it allows Winston to subvert the panoptic look of a faceless authority. Hodoshe is too busy laughing at him to take him seriously. When Winston goes to be immured, he says to the audience:

I must leave the light of day forever, for the Island, strange and cold, to be lost between life and death. So, to my grave, my everlasting prison, condemned alive to solitary death. (*The Island*, p. 77)

These words give new significance to the digging of sand in the opening scene, specifically in their reference to the burial of living persons. Steiner refers to the motif of entombment of living persons as 'codifying an awareness of judicial power' (1984:18). Fugard, Kani and Ntshona want to bring home the injustice of apartheid laws. Winston then confronts the audience as himself, tearing off his wig.

God of our Fathers! My Land! My Home!
Time waits no longer. I go now to my living death, because I honoured those nothings to which honour belongs.
(*The Island*, p. 77)

Winston renewed disobedience once more goes unnoticed by Hodoshe; here, having had the courage to stand up to a law higher than the South African law, he returns to his pointless existence. The

connection between the play within the play and apartheid in South Africa is clear. As Durbach explains, 'the play within the play suddenly coincides with the play proper, myth and history fusing into Winston's final cry of defiance – not as the legendary heroine, but as himself speaking Sophocles' words in their timeless applicability'. (1984: 262) It is significant that the play ends the way it begins - in mime. The two prisoners take off their costumes and they mime being handcuffed and shackled. A siren wails signalling them back to their cells. Styles' studio in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island* subvert the dominant image of the prison and of oppression panoptically as a means of coercion and control into a site of survival of, and resistance against, apartheid. Both plays provide a specific manifestation of oppression however they address universal truths.

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