

The Research, Development and Production History of *The Robben Island Shakespeare*

Matthew Hahn
St Mary's University, Twickenham, UK



Figure 1: Front, Spine and Back Cover
of Sonny Venkatrathnam's 'Robben Island Bible'

This essay discusses the research, development and performances to date of the play, *The Robben Island Shakespeare* (formerly known as *The Robben Island Bible*), which is to be published by Bloomsbury Methuen in

March 2017. I first heard about the copy of the ‘Complete Works of William Shakespeare’ known as the ‘Robben Island Bible’ when my friend and theatre director, Mark Griffin, was reading Anthony Sampson’s wonderful biography on Nelson Mandela in 2002. In the biography, Mandela tells the story of a copy of the ‘Complete Works’ that was on the island during his time there.



Figure 2: Sonny Venkatrathnam, 2008

The owner of the ‘Complete Works’, South African Sonny Venkatrathnam, was a political prisoner on Robben Island from 1972 to 1978. He asked his wife, Theresa, to send it to him during a time when the prisoners were briefly allowed to have one book, other than a religious text, with them.

This book’s ‘fame’ resides in the fact that Venkatrathnam passed it to a number of his fellow political prisoners in the single cells. Each of them marked his favourite passage in the ‘Complete Works’ and signed it with the date. The book contains thirty-two signatures, including those of Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada and Mac Maharaj, all luminaries in the struggle for a democratic South Africa.

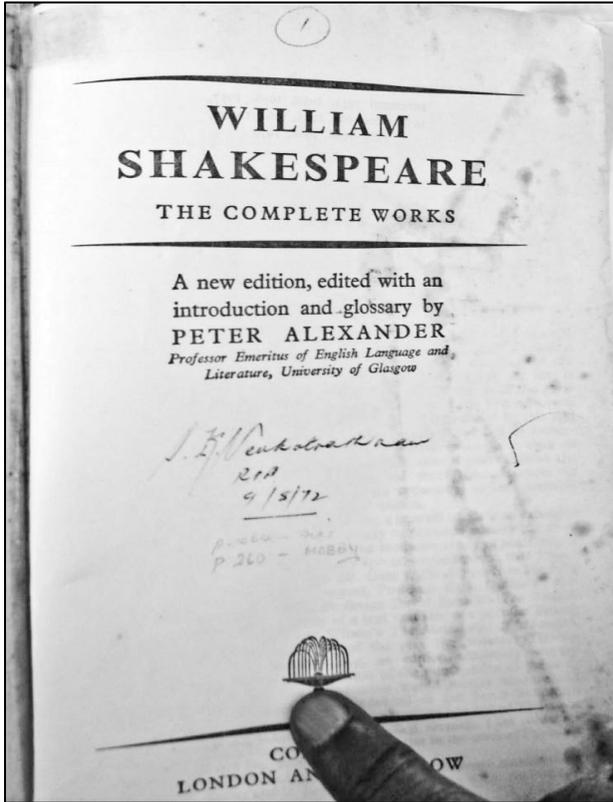


Figure 3: First page of the 'Complete Works'

Venkatrathnam calls it his 'Bible' because, when he lost his book privilege due to a minor infraction, he cleverly disguised it as a holy book with pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses from greeting cards he received from his parents. This copy of the 'Complete Works of William Shakespeare' then became his Bible and it was never harassed by the guards again because, as Venkatrathnam puts it, prison warders are scared of two things: God and Authority.

These men on Robben Island signed passages which they found particularly moving, meaningful and profound. As an artist, I find that their selection of text provides fascinating insights into the minds, thinking and soul of those political prisoners who fought for the transformation of South Africa. It also speaks to the power of Shakespeare's resonance with the human spirit regardless of place or time. But, as Venkatrathnam explains, he just wanted a 'souvenir' of his time in the Leadership Section of Robben Island. The play is an intertwining of the primary interviews

conducted in 2008 and 2010 with eight of these former political prisoners who signed the book and their chosen Shakespearian texts. It is an honour to have had the opportunity to spend time with these most gentle of men – each one a lion in the fight against apartheid. They opened their homes to me, a complete stranger, for a couple of hours and shared what their lives were like under an oppressive regime as well as their thoughts on the current state of affairs within South Africa.

Ahmed Kathrada, who was imprisoned from 1963 to 1990 on Robben Island, put his signature and date next to a passage from *Henry the Fifth*. He told me that after being locked up for all of these years, when he gets a chance to speak to someone who is interested in his story, he finds it hard to keep quiet.



Figure 4: Detail of deities taken from Deepavali cards disguising ‘Complete Works’

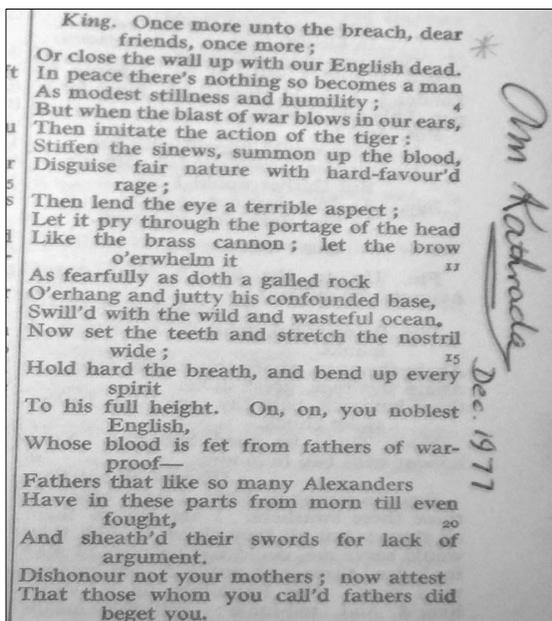


Figure 5: Ahmed Kathrada's name next to his chosen text

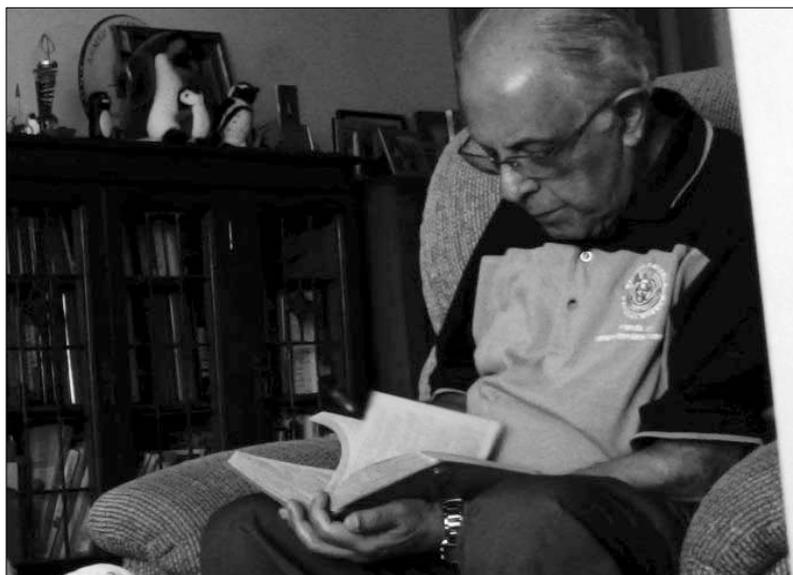


Figure 6: Ahmed Kathrada, 2008

He told me about how Apartheid determined basic needs on Robben Island. He said,

Apartheid was applied in gradations – on top of the ladder was the whites, with privileges and rights, but the whites were not with us on the island. Immediately under them were the Indians and Coloured and at the bottom of the ladder were the Africans or blacks. So, in every respect, they had the worst of it – outside and inside of prison. When we arrived on Robben Island [in 1963], I was the only Indian and the youngest of the seven. They brought us by plane and when we landed, we were chained and shackled. I was shackled to [Govan] Mbeki. He was 20 years my senior. When we had to change into prison clothes, because he was an African, he had to wear short trousers and no socks. I was given long trousers and socks. The rationale behind short trousers is ‘All Africans, regardless of age, were ‘boys’ or ‘girls’. So, you had little children talking about ‘My garden boy’. ‘My kitchen girl’. Regardless of age. And boys wear short trousers. So all of our leaders, because they were African, were ‘boys’. About the food, Africans were not given bread. Indians were given bread. The meat, the fish – ours was a little more than theirs. That’s how... I don’t know, the minds that invented this type of thing [interview with author, 2008].



Figure 7: Sonny Venkatrathnam, 2008

In an interview, Venkatrathnam reflected on the choices the men made,

Honestly I think, a lot of the people who chose particular lines very deliberately would today find it very difficult to identify themselves with that particular line or passage. I always associated people's political philosophy with their own ideology and their vision of tomorrow. Most of the thinking people on Robben Island were leftish, they leaned towards the left – there were the Nationalists, but the Left always carried the Nationalists along. Like Nelson was a Nationalist, but the Mbekis, the Mac Maharajs – I'm talking within the ANC itself. All of these Leftish people were very powerful within the ANC and they carried the ANC with them. So, they dictated ANC ideological standpoint – similarly when the ANC was in exile, same thing – that was then. But, if you look at the Freedom Charter and you look at ANC National policy today, this *can't* be the same organisation. They are *totally* different. So what I am saying is that a lot of people that I thought would never change – ideologically – have switched horses. Yesterday's Communists are today's biggest Capitalists. I find that very difficult to reconcile. Very, very difficult. I'm not saying that they mustn't adapt and all of that, but to become so *virulently* Capitalist... that to me is, I don't think acceptable [interview with author, 2008].

This observation ran through several of the interviews when reflecting on the Struggle. Eddie Daniels, who was on Robben Island from 1964 to 1979 and chose the 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' monologue from *Macbeth*, states,

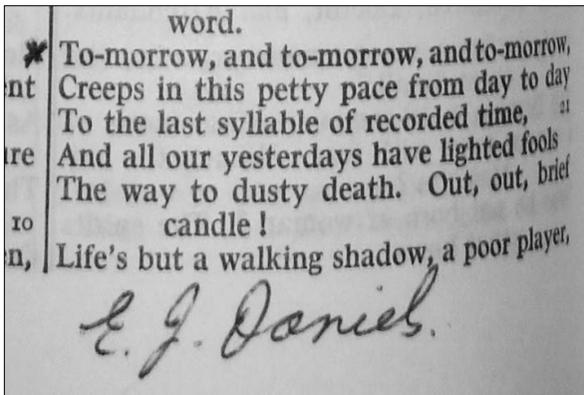


Figure 8: Eddie Daniels's name next to his chosen quote.

We in the Struggle, we fought for what we believed in. For idealism. For peace. For reconciliation. We fought for dignity, we fought for respect.

We fought for integrity. We had no thought of enriching ourselves. I did not think I would survive. But we did. Those were our values. Not values of self-enrichment. Not values of greed. Our values were good. Today, that cannot be said the same for everybody else. There are good people, yes, very good people, but there are also bad people. And those bad people have cast a shadow on the efforts of those who had died to bring about change in South Africa [interview with author, 2010].

I was, and continue to be, fascinated by the resonance of the chosen texts and the men’s biographies – how life imitates art and how great art, like holy books, seems to give strength to the oppressed. When reading these texts, I often have to disassociate my knowledge of the play and read the choices through the prism of Apartheid South Africa. This project shines a new light on the works of William Shakespeare in regards to how the plays were interpreted then, in 1970’s Apartheid South Africa, and today.



Figure 9: John Kani performing an early draft of the play at the Richmond Theatre 2008.

In an interview, actor John Kani tells a heart-rending story of one of the political prisoners, Wilton Mkwayi, who went into prison just before he married his fiancé:

Wilton Mkwayi went to prison just before he got married to his wonderful beautiful lady. He waited for over twenty-three years on Robben

Island. Finally to stand in front of the pastor to be married. He got married after he was released, so they were perpetually engaged for over twenty years. They did visit. Once a month, once every three months. A visit was so irregular. They were not meant to make the prisoner comfortable. Sometimes the boat would arrive and the men would be ready and the boat would turn back and that's why, in *The Island* John says, 'I saw big men cry that night. I saw big men cry that night.' Men would come, take a look at their wife and march back to their cells without talking, so I saw big men cry that night [interview with author, 2009].

Wilton Mkwayi was arrested in 1964 charged with helping to organise *uMkhonto we Sizwe* ["Spear of the Nation", the armed wing of the African National Congress] and sentenced to life in prison on Robben Island. He was released from Robben Island in 1989. He chose Malvolio from *Twelfth Night*:

If this fall into thy hand, revolve. In my stars I am above thee; but be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. Thy Fates open their hands; let thy blood and spirit embrace them; and to inure thyself to what thou art like to be, cast thy humble slough, and appear fresh. Be opposite with a kinsman, surly with servants; let thy tongue tang arguments of state; put thyself into the trick of singularity. She thus advises thee that sighs for thee. Remember who commended thy yellow stockings, and wished to see thee ever cross-gartered: I say, remember. Go to, thou art made, if thou desirest to be so; if not, let me see thee a steward still, the fellow of servants, and not worthy to touch Fortune's fingers. Farewell. She that would alter services with thee.

THE FORTUNATE-UNHAPPY [*Twelfth Night*, Act 2, Scene 5].

This choice, taken out of context of the play and placed in context of a Liberation activist who spent twenty-five years on Robben Island, reveals another aspect of the play that has never been explored.

Walter Sisulu, who was sentenced to life imprisonment for sabotage during the Rivonia Trial and sent to Robben Island from 1964 to 1989, chose *Merchant of Venice*, Act 1 Scene 3:

Signor Antonio, many a time and oft In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances;
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For suff'rance is the badge of all out tribe...

[*Merchant of Venice*, Act 1 Scene 3]

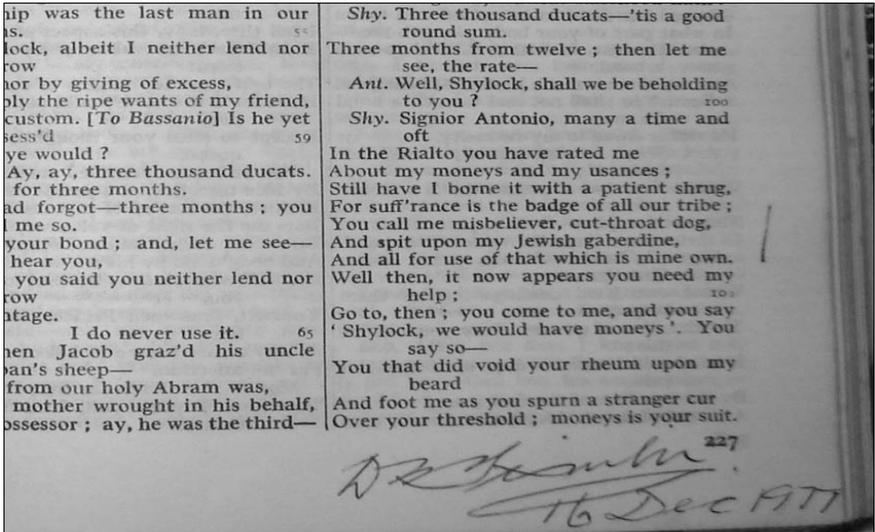


Figure 10: Walter Sisulu's name next to his chosen quote.

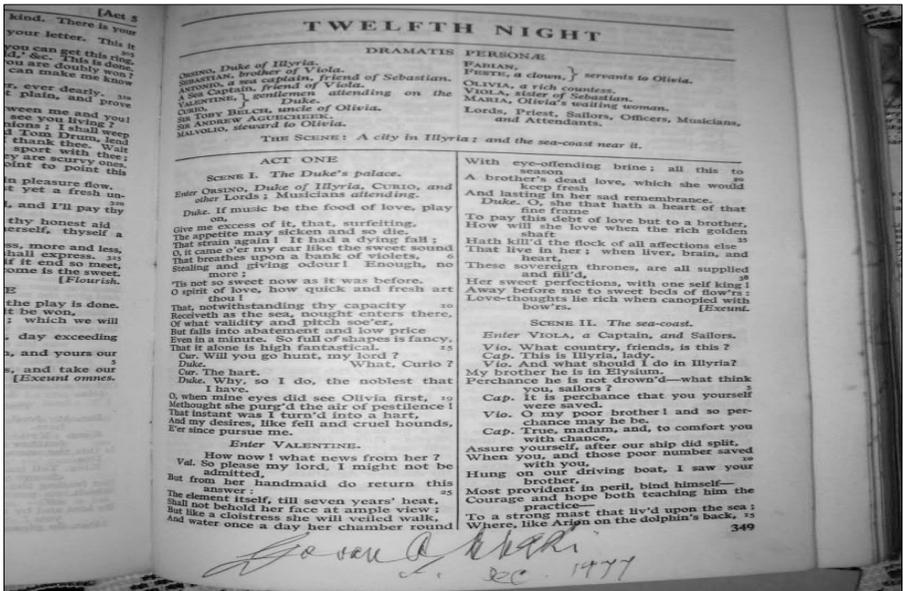


Figure 11: Govan Mbeki's name next to his chosen quote.

Govan Mbeki, also imprisoned for life at the Rivonia Trial, chose *Twelfth Night*, Act 1, Scene 1:

If music be the food of love, play on,
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken and so die.
That strain again! It had a dying fall;
O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour!

Venkatrathnam tells the story of how Mbeki, a 'hardcore' Communist, would walk up and down the corridor in the Leadership Section reciting "If music be the food of love, play on...." to great laughter for the benefit of the other political prisoners. Venkatrathnam was greatly surprised by his choice given his strong political leanings [interview with author, 2008].

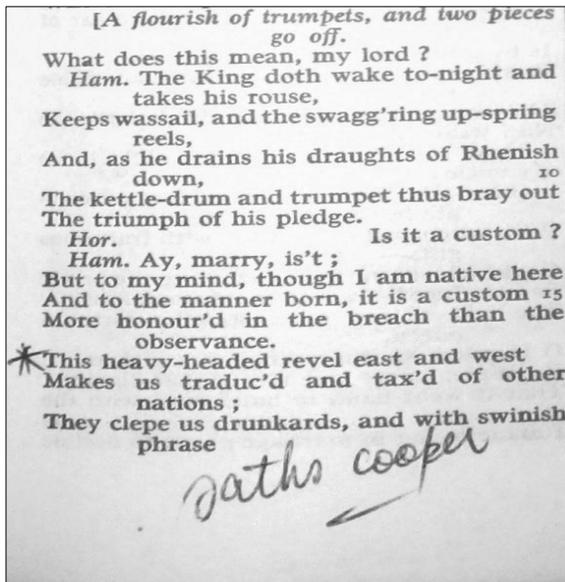


Figure 12. Saths Cooper's name next to his chosen quote.

Saths Cooper, a founding member of the Black Consciousness Movement, was on Robben Island from 1976 to 1982. He chose *Hamlet* Act 1, Scene 4:

This heavy-headed revel east and west
Makes us traduc'd and tax'd of other nations;
They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase
Soil our addition; and indeed, it takes
From our achievements...

[Hamlet Act 1, scene 4]

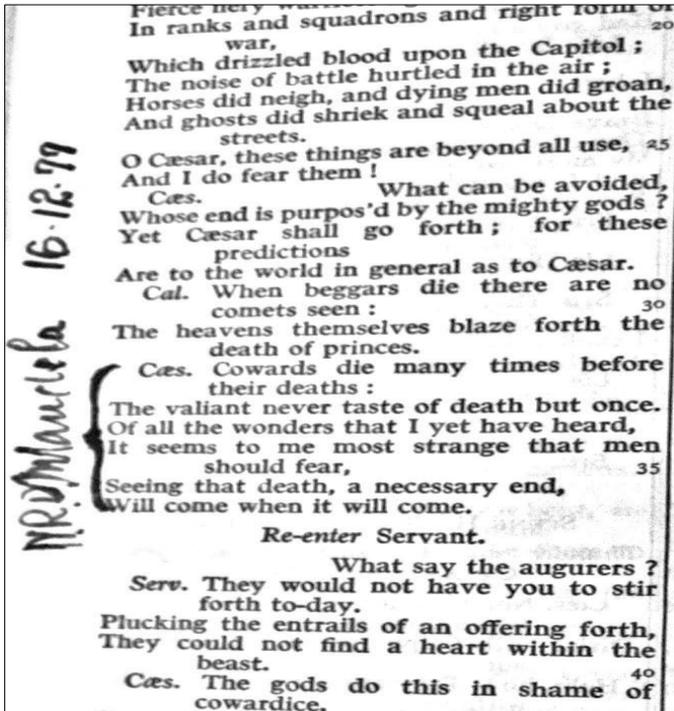


Figure 13: Nelson Mandela's name next to his chosen quote.

Nelson Mandela, another Rivonia Trialist who spent 27 years on Robben Island, chose *Julius Caesar*, Act 2, Scene 2:

Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once.
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear;
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come

[*Julius Caesar*, Act 2, Scene 2].

This choice mirrors his famous Rivonia Trial speech made from the court dock on the 20th of April 1964:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die [Mandela, 1964].

The genesis of the questioning was to ascertain why the former political prisoners chose the passages they marked in the book. This included revisiting the time when Sonny shared *The Complete Works* with his fellow prisoners, which many had forgotten they had ever signed. But for others it was like yesterday.



Figure 14: Saths Cooper 2008.

Saths Cooper vividly recalls when Sonny passed him the book which he considered to be a nuisance. But Sonny persisted and eventually won him around:

I saw this 'Bible' as an irritation, initially. But, then Sonny (Venkatrathnam) insisted. So I looked through the book to see who had marked what passages and then I said, 'Okay, that passage is gone, this one is too close physically to another's choice and so on. I restricted myself to works that I had read. Also, I focused on the more serious works rather than the comedies because this was a political prison. I eventually chose *Hamlet* Act 1, Scene 4 because it speaks to the betrayal issue between older and younger generations. This betrayal of the older generation was something that left our generation rudderless. We had to do it on our own. It is true: you are an accident of nature. But what you make of it is important [interview with author, 2008].

This project has, for the first time on stage, united the words of William Shakespeare to the thoughts, hopes, resistance, struggle and resilience of the political prisoners held on Robben Island between 1961 and 1991 in South Africa. The play uses the interviews of the former political prisoners and their chosen Shakespearian texts to construct a piece of theatre that aims to inform and entertain a wide-reaching audience about life under the Apartheid regime and, more importantly, to comment on the current state of affairs within South Africa.

There have been numerous performances of the play, including the Artscape Theatre [Cape Town, 2016]; the Robben Island Museum [Cape Town, 2016]; Alvin Ailey Theatre [New York City, 2016]; Barbican Theatre [2014]; Cape Town Shakespeare Society [2014]; Mitchell Library, Glasgow, Scotland; Montana Shakespeare Festival [2014]; South Africa House, London [April & June 2014]; Oxford University [2014]; Folger Shakespeare Library [Washington, DC June 2013]; the British Museum [2012]; the Purcell Room, Southbank Centre [London, UK 2012]; the Market Theatre [Johannesburg, SA 2010]; the Richmond Theatre [2009]; and the Robben Island Museum [Cape Town, 2008].

The key objective of the research, development and performance of this play has always been to maintain the integrity and authenticity of the contributors. It is the mission of the play to make the names of Sonny Venkatrathnam, Saths Cooper, Theo Cholo and so many others as well known to the world as is the name of Nelson Mandela. Mandela often says that it was not just him but thousands of men and women who contributed to the liberation of South Africa. Today, however, many of the men I interviewed expressed great disappointment in the current affairs of South Africa. When I met again with Venkatrathnam in May 2013, he told me that he no longer tells people he was on Robben Island because of the shame and anger he feels at the current state of affairs in South Africa. He spoke to me about a lack of ethical leadership in today's South Africa.

As inspirational as many of the chosen quotes were about leadership, according to Venkatrathnam, many of the men who chose these quotes whilst in prison and who are now currently in politics or business within South Africa have not lived up to such inspiration and have caused great harm to this young democratic country; too many world leaders are driven by short-term goals, xenophobia and personal wealth creation rather than true – *ethical* – leadership.



Figure 15: Students from the South West Gauteng College participating in the Ethical Leadership Workshop 2014.

That is why in August 2014, I piloted an interactive theatre workshop to examine ethical leadership with students from the South West Gauteng College in Soweto, South Africa. The ‘Ethical Leadership Workshop’ was based on the play and utilized the excerpts from Sonny’s ‘Bible’ as well as a selection of interviews which I conducted with the former political prisoners. It ran over two weeks and delivered a performance of Shakespeare, monologues based on the former political prisoners’ interviews, as well as new pieces of writing created by the college students. Within the workshops, the students examined the current leadership situation on a personal, local and national level. They also examined and reflected on

their responsibility as young leaders as well as future leaders within South Africa. As a pilot, it is hoped that this workshop can be scaled up and delivered in the United Kingdom, United States and South Africa.

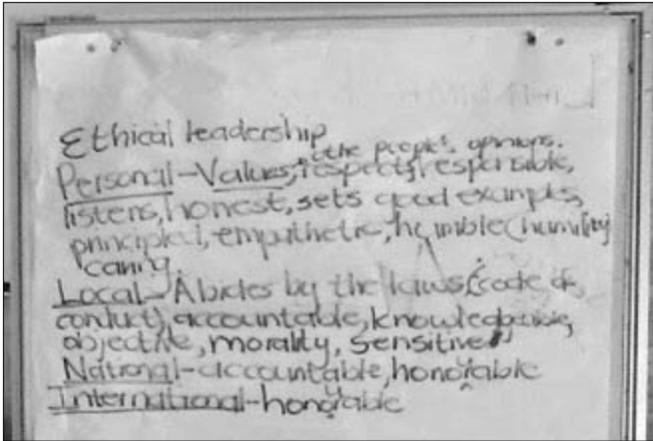


Figure 16: Ethical Leadership Workshop 2014.



Figure 17: Students from the South West Gauteng College facilitate a drama workshop on Communication & Behaviour Change at a new community arts centre in Maboneng, Johannesburg.

The aim of the workshop is to inspire students to be better leaders through the words of Shakespeare and the former political prisoners and, in the long term, to create a pathway to future leadership.

It was an eye opening experience for me as well as for the students as the group began to see themselves as young leaders who have a responsibility not only to themselves and their families but also to their country. We examined current behaviour around leadership and how we can change our own behaviour to become truly ethical leaders.

A key component of the 'Ethical Leadership Workshop' is sustainability. To that end, three students who participated and trained as facilitators in the 'Ethical Leadership Workshop' pilot delivered a drama workshop on communication skills the following week to young men from the age of 9 to 18 who are currently experiencing homelessness. For these college students, it was another eye opening experience to see some young people their age are struggling just to survive in Johannesburg. It is my hope that these workshops become a regular part of these young people's lives.

It has been an honour to be associated with this South African treasure. As an artist and social activist, I have met people who have humbled me with their stories. Working on this play for so long, I am pleased to see that the names of these men are finally getting known by the public. There are thousands of heroes, men and women, of the Struggle who are unsung. This is a shame and something, in my very small way, I want to change.

But, I will leave the last words to Saths Cooper and Sonny Venkatrathnam, former political prisoners on Robben Island who sacrificed their lives for a liberated South Africa, as taken from the last moment in the play:

Saths: I got involved in the Struggle because there was no alternative. For many of us, that was the thing you had to do. The alternative would have been devastating. Intellectually, emotionally, it would have made us lesser people, lesser beings if we didn't get involved. And I think we didn't involve ourselves knowing that in many years' time, we would now tend to exploit the system because we would now claim payback.

Venkatrathnam: Twenty years ago, this change was supposed to be *for* the people; now I think the change is only for the people who have it. The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer. You don't even have to use statistics; you just have to look around. Look at the lifestyle of the upper and middle classes, both black and white. A lot of blacks are moving up, but those stuck in the bottom are stuck. There is no hope in hell for them to pull out. Nothing. I think a lot of people, and I am not talking about just the people who went to Robben Island, a lot of people who made fantastic sacrifices were the people living in townships and

people who lived in shacks. *(pause)* And are still living there. That is the terrible thing. That is what makes my heart so sore, that very little is being done to alleviate their suffering. That is not what we fought for.

Photo Credits: Matthew Hahn, St. Mary's University

Transcripts and audio and video recordings of the interviews are held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford University and are available upon request.