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The Relentless Voice of South African Theatre: Athol Fugard.¹

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Athol Fugard, who died on 8 March 2025 at the age of 92 was not only a playwright but a litmus test for the conscience of South Africa and the world (*SA History Online*, 2023). Through more than thirty plays spanning seven decades, Fugard exposed the brutality of apartheid, challenged taboos, and elevated the theatre as a platform for truth and reconciliation (Lunden, 2025). In this tribute, we reflect on his legacy and his contribution to the development of contemporary South African Theatre and we are also offering insights learned of how studying Athol Fugard's work is both a powerful and personal journey. Fugard's plays do not just recount the injustices of apartheid, they bring to life the daily struggles, hopes, and humanity of Black South Africans under a system designed to dehumanize them (Hough & Fugard, 1980).

The Young Athol

Born Harold Athol Lanigan Fugard on 11 June 1932 in the remote village of Middelburg, now located in Mpumalanga province of South Africa, he was the second of three children born to Harold David Lanigan Fugard and Elizabeth Magdalena Katerina Potgieter (*SA History Online*, 2023). As a jazz pianist, his

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father was of English, Irish, and French Huguenot descent, however, he became disabled after an accident and later struggled with alcoholism. His mother was an Afrikaner, whose first language was Afrikaans, and she was a descendant of early European settlers in South Africa. In 1935, when Athol was three, the family moved to Port Elizabeth (now known as Gqeberha) in the Eastern Cape. There, his mother ran the Jubilee Boarding House and, later, the St. George's Park Tea Room; settings that would later influence Fugard's writing, most notably his acclaimed play *Master Harold...and the Boys* (Post, 2008). The family's financial stability depended on his mother's entrepreneurial efforts, as his father's disability and alcoholism limited his ability to provide for the family.

Fugard's upbringing was shaped by the contrasting worldviews of his parents. While his father maintained prejudices prescribed by the apartheid government and benefited from privileges common among white South Africans at the time, his mother rejected the injustices of apartheid and instilled in her son a sense of empathy and an awareness of social wrongs. This moral influence would later become a defining feature of his work as a playwright (Hough & Fugard, 1980; Wertheim, 2000). Fugard's influences extended further than his parents and include significant figures in his childhood such as Sam Semela, a Black man who worked for the family at both the boarding house and the tearoom. Despite the racial barriers of apartheid of the times, young Athol - known as 'Hally' in his youth - and Sam formed a close bond. Their relationship, however, was always shadowed by the realities of South African society, and a painful incident in which Hally spat in Sam's face left a mark of shame that Fugard would later confront in "*Master Harold*" ...*and the Boys* (Post, 2008; Walder, 2000).

The Beginning of his career

In 1951, Fugard enrolled at the University of Cape Town to study Philosophy, Anthropology, Sociology, and French. Recognizing his intellectual promise, his mother made significant sacrifices to enable his studies. Yet, as Fugard later reflected, he found himself "wrestling with Sartre and falling in love with Camus,

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Faulkner and Tolstoy, the writer had begun to stir" (Hough & Fugard, 1980). The existential themes of alienation, defiance, and the search for meaning resonated deeply with him, especially in the political contexts of South Africa (Njoki & Ogogo, 2014). Despite his academic success, Fugard grew restless. In 1953, just months before completing his degree, Fugard left the university with an urge to experience the world first hand and gather the material he believed essential for a writing career (*SA History Online*, 2023).

Falling in Love with Theatre and Writing

After returning from a transformative journey hitchhiking through Central and Northern Africa and working as the only white crew member aboard the SS Graigaur which sailed the Atlantic (Dei, 1993), Fugard settled back in South Africa in 1954. He started as a journalist for the *Evening Post* in Port Elizabeth and later worked for the SABC as a reporter in Cape Town. It was in Cape Town that Fugard met Sheila Meiring, an English born actress who would become his wife and creative partner. Through Sheila, he was introduced to the world of theatre, not just as an observer, but as a participant (Hough & Fugard, 1980). Fugard's earliest experiences as a playwright were marked by experimentation and a search for authenticity. In 1956 with his new actress wife, they founded the Circle Players which allowed him to explore the mechanics of theatre and the power of live performance to provoke thought and emotion. It was in this time that he wrote his first play, *Klaas and the Devil* (1956). It was his time working as a clerk at the Native Commissioner's Court in Johannesburg that truly shaped his dramatic voice. There, he witnessed the daily indignities imposed by the passbook system on Black South Africans, a reality that would become central to his later plays (Walder, 2000; Post, 2008). Fugard's immersion in the vibrant, yet segregated, township life of Sophiatown further broadened his perspective. He became intimately familiar with the struggles, humour, and resilience of people living under apartheid, experiences that would inform the characters and stories of his most celebrated works. This places Fugard in the African writing category centred

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on national experience, neo-colonialism, and postcolonial disillusionment (Megbowon & Uwah, 2020).

By the late 1950s, Fugard had established his voice as a playwright, drawing on his philosophical training, personal experiences, and a discouraged awareness of the injustices around him. His early plays, such as *No-Good Friday* (1958) and *Nongogo* (1959), marked the beginning of a career defined by a fearless engagement with South Africa's social and political realities (Walder, 2000; Njoki & Ogogo, 2014). It was his contributions with these plays that underpin the success of the second theatre company founded by Fugard as the Serpent Players in August of 1963. Serpent Players was based in New Brighton township, Port Elizabeth which later included the likes of South African acting stalwarts John Kani, and Winston Ntshona (Riodan, 2024). The Serpent Player's collaboration was an act of resistance, defying laws that forbade interracial stage partnerships and risking arrest or censorship. The actors brought their own stories and insights, enriching the plays with humour, resilience, and emotional truth even as they depicted hardship and injustice. The use of humour, despite the gravity of the subject, became a powerful tool to convey the indomitable spirit of the oppressed (Shelly, 2009; Riodan, 2024). Despite the lack of support from the South African circuit, where due to politics shows were often closed after one performance, the Serpent Players was significant in Athol's most productive years. Fugard's work saw an explosion on the world theatre stages from *The Blood Knot* (1961) to the rapturous reception of *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* (1972) and *The Island* (1973) (Riodan, 2024).

Collaboration as a political tool

It is Fugard's disruptive nature which made him a force for agitation in South Africa's fight against oppression. But it was his wisdom to know that he needed to collaborate as there was power in using his privilege to tell the stories of those that were oppressed and presenting a united voice. One of the most powerful outcomes of his collaborations is *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* (1972) that was co-created

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with theatre stalwarts and exponents of the South African protest theatre John Kani and Winston Ntshona (Bennamane & Boudjaoui, 2022,). First staged in 1972 during the height of apartheid, the play explores the crushing impact of South Africa's Pass Laws through the story of Sizwe Banzi, a Black man forced to assume a dead man's identity to survive and provide for his family. This act of self-erasure is both a survival tactic and a profound loss, as Sizwe must destroy his former self to access fundamental human rights. The play's structure is innovative: it blends monologue, documentary-style narrative, and role-switching, drawing the audience into the characters' struggles with intimacy and immediacy (Bhattacharya, 2023).

Central to the play is the theme of identity. Sizwe's desperate choice reflects the broader dehumanization of Black South Africans under apartheid, where people were reduced to numbers and denied dignity. The line "I'm not a number, I'm a man" captures this anguish and the existential cost of survival in an oppressive system (Bennamane & Boudjaoui, 2022). The play does not offer easy answers; instead, it leaves Sizwe's fate and the possibility of reclaiming his humanity open-ended, emphasizing the ongoing struggle for dignity.

In between, we have been provided with a sometimes hilarious, but underlyingly tragic, trip through the magnificent adventures of these young men, trapped in the vicious ramifications of the pass laws and all the other 'apartheid stuff' designed to make the lives of 'urban blacks' impossible, but nevertheless surviving with their dignity and humour intact (Riodan, 2024).

This production was billed as one of the best South African theatre exponents, and on 26 October 2022, the theatre critics of *The Independent* (London), Paul Taylor and Holly Williams (2022), ranked *Sizwe* as one of "the 40 best plays of all time". Considering that it had been created by these three men in 18 days in a derelict school and took over a year before it had a written script, this is a fantastic accolade. It serves as inspiration to train theatre makers who are still fighting

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social injustices that they may be facing. Fugard's theatre was not just about telling stories, but about creating a space for dialogue, solidarity, and survival. The process blurred the lines between actor and character, past and present, making each performance a living act of protest and affirmation of life. This spirit of collective creation and resistance is what gives Fugard's work its enduring power and relevance (Lunden, 2025). These stories are still studied by theatre practitioners and interpreted today as haunting memories through stories of the past (Wertheim, 2000).

Shaping the training of South African theatre makers

Fugard's influence on global theatre is profound but dynamically affects theatre making in South Africa. His history of transgressive theatrical disruptions and the willingness to make theatre that spoke up about his privilege with marginalised performers is revolutionary. The beginning of protest theatre in the townships started in the 1950s with the likes of Fugard, and his collaborative and improvisational creative processes employed during apartheid are still taught as "poor theatre", agit-prop, and protest theatre storytelling theatrical styles to imitate. Fugard described these resistance plays as a process of "Challenge and Response", responding theatrically, existentially, and morally to the ideological challenges of apartheid (Lunden, 2025) helping others reenvision their reality and act against the oppressors. More than thirty years post-apartheid, these techniques and styles are studied and emulated in South African theatre as truly inclusive and multi-dimensional works to speak truth to power, through shaping the script through shared experiences and improvisation. Making public the cross-racial collaboration occurring during the height of Apartheid where horrific human indignities were being inflicted on the black populace of South Africa, made this creative pact even more defiant and radicalised. This 'workshopping' theatre method (also known in other parts of the world as collaborative playmaking or devised theatre) allowed the plays to reflect juxtaposed authentic voices and lived realities which were showcased to a variety of audiences – both secretly and publicly from the 1976 onwards in theatre houses such as

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the Market Theatre. This makes the work more resonant and politically urgent (Wertheim, 2000; Post, 2008).

It is the celebration of the fabric of what made Fugard a multi-award-winning writer that may be taught as affective theatre making. Fugard achieved his accolades through authentic storytelling and social consciousness, collaborative inclusive creative processes, the simplicity and focus on performance, tradition of free expression and critical engagement. These techniques combined to make Fugard's theatre a powerful tool for bearing witness to injustice and affirming the dignity of those dehumanized by apartheid. Even today, these aspects are foregrounded as training principles of protest theatre and harnessed for authentic storytelling.

- ***Authentic Storytelling and Social Consciousness***

Fugard's plays, which confronted the realities of apartheid and gave voice to the marginalized, have become required reading and performance material in all drama and theatre training materials. His commitment to social justice and authentic representation inspires students to use theatre as a platform for dialogue, unity, and transformation, aligning with the department's mission to cultivate artists who challenge and reflect society.

- ***Collaborative and Inclusive Creative Processes***

Fugard's collaborative directing style, marked by openness, dialogue, and mutual trust, has influenced Tshwane University of Technology's rehearsal room culture. Students are taught that the director's role is to facilitate rather than dictate, empowering actors to contribute creatively and explore their characters freely. This spirit of collaboration and inclusivity, pioneered by Fugard, is now embedded in Tshwane University of Technology's approach to both classical and contemporary works.

- ***Simplicity and Focus on Performance***

Inspired by Fugard's embrace of poor theatre and minimalism, where the focus is on the actor's performance and the essential message of the play, rather than on elaborate sets, costumes, or technical effects (Wertheim, 2000), South African poor theatre artists often prioritize the actor's craft and the power of the narrative over-elaborate staging or technical effects. This focus ensures that performances remain centred on the human experience and the emotional resonance of the story, a hallmark of Fugard's work (Dei, 1993).

- ***Tradition of Free Expression and Critical Engagement***

Fugard's pioneering efforts established theatre in South Africa as a vehicle for free expression and critical engagement, even under censorship. This tradition continues today in several of the community and mainstream theatre productions. Artists are encouraged to address contemporary issues, experiment with form, and use theatre as a tool for communication and advocacy, much as Fugard did throughout his career.

Enduring Inspiration for New Generations

Fugard showed us that theatre is not merely entertainment; it is a mirror, a weapon, and a beacon of hope. In remembering him, we honour not just a playwright, but a moral compass and a relentless champion of humanity. His words and his example will continue to guide us, reminding us that, even in the darkest times, the stage can be a place of light, courage, and transformation. Through his unwavering commitment to truth, justice, and the authentic representation of marginalized voices, Fugard transformed the theatre into a space of resistance, healing, and profound human connection (Lunden, 2025). Athol Fugard's passing marks the end of an era, but his influence on South African theatre and global dramatic literature will endure for generations.

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