

SOCIOCULTURAL AND POLITICAL VALUES IN SELECTED PLAYS BY
SOUTH
AFRICAN PLAYWRIGHTS *

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the issue of values expressed in South African plays, and takes a look at representative plays from the entire spectrum of South African drama - Afrikaans, English, Black drama and alternative Theatre. Following a survey of the field, discussions are provided of selected plays in all the sections.

It emerges that there is a fair amount of homogeneity right across the board in terms of sociocultural and political values. There is also a strong insistence on value linked to Black consciousness in the plays by Black playwrights, which is important in view of the fact that the Black playwrights often have an overtly didactic and propagandistic intention.

1. INTRODUCTION

South African drama is multi-faceted and encompasses a very wide diversity. For that reason it is not easy to determine precisely what it is and how to approach it. In the introductory phase, therefore, a brief outline will be given of the field covered by the umbrella term "South African drama".

Indigenous literature in South Africa means literature written in English, Afrikaans and any of the nine main vernaculars of the country as a whole. Because the oral tradition is still strong in some of these vernaculars,

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and because the main activity of Black playwrights in particular is embodied in English, drama in the vernaculars will not be included for the purposes of this paper.

The development of drama in this country, as many other cultural activities, has been determined to a large extent by the political situation, and this has been particularly true for the past thirty years. "White Afrikaans theatre, White English theatre and Black English theatre developed along parallel lines, but at a varying pace" (Steadman and Hauptfleisch, 1984, p. 7). Drama in South Africa can, for the sake of convenience, be divided into four main categories, each with many sub-categories: Afrikaans drama (White, although some Coloured writers like Adam Small have written in Afrikaans), English drama by Whites, English drama by Blacks and a fourth category called by Steadman and Hauptfleisch "Alternative theatre": a form of drama contrived by members of all the racial and language groups, for although predominantly English, these productions usually contain a mix of styles and of language.

For the purposes of this paper, representatives from each of the four main categories will be discussed. It will emerge that there is a certain degree of homogeneity within each group as to the values expressed, although it is also striking to note that there is a measure of homogeneity right across the board when it comes to values concerned with human dignity.

2. A SURVEY OF THE FIELD

Because of reasons rooted in cultural nationalism and the bilingual nature of the country (in terms of the dominant social groups) Afrikaans drama came to be established as the first indigenous theatrical tradition in the country. In the single-minded drive towards an Afrikaner identity, creative artists in the literary field produced a solid body of work. While English-speaking people in the country could comfortably entertain themselves by going to performances by visiting theatrical touring groups, Afrikaners had to fend for themselves, and this had a most salutary effect on the development of an Afrikaans theatre tradition. The earliest works were mostly in the mould of social realism with a fair

sprinkling of intensely patriotic and nationalist themes. From the sixties onwards there was a significant change: in this period some of the best works of the Afrikaans stage came to be written and produced in a period termed "introspection and rebellion" (Steadman and Hauptfleisch, p. 11). Ever since the late fifties Afrikaans playwrights have tended to be critical of the almost chauvinist drama produced by early playwrights, and this is reflected in the reception accorded plays like *Die pluimsaad waai ver* (N.P. van Wyk Louw), a play commissioned for the Republic Day festival in 1966 and then publicly censured by the Prime Minister. The virtual estrangement between creative artists and government was further underlined by Bartho Smit's *The Maimed*. The stunning play by Adam Small, *Kanna by kō hystoe* falls in this category. Apart from a spate of very good "sociodramas" by P.G. du Plessis (*Seer in the Suburbs*) and others, this period also saw the dawning of the scathing political play in Afrikaans (liberally interspersed with English: a form of drama increasingly popular in a "bilingual" country). The single most important exponent of this form of drama is Pieter-Dirk Uys (it is not easy to determine the slot into which he has to fall - Afrikaans or English), who has created his own form of alternative theatre in that he usually performs in all his own satires, and has developed a mythical satirical commentator on the South African political scene in the figure of Evita Bezuidenhout, the ambadress from Bapetikosweti. He has become, in the middle eighties, something of an institution and has done a great deal to drag social and political skeletons, especially those of the Afrikaner (although not exclusively) out of the cupboard. He makes vicious fun of people's adherence to outdated norms and values, and his continuing success can in part be seen as a barometer of changes in sociopolitical attitudes in the country. He has been criticized by Mshengu (1977:5), however, for his retention of nineteenth-century form: "Uys is not prepared to liberate himself yet, and the form of *(God's Forgotten)* shows it".

"English drama" should, strictly speaking, include Black and Alternative theatre, but for convenience the term will be used to include the activities of English speaking White South Africans. This theatre had, up to the sixties, not really produced much of real value, because the English speaking audiences remained culturally bound to productions imported from "home". Part of the very real contribution of the English

theatre in this country has been their creation of an infrastructure in the sense of the building of theatres and the emergence of some legendary producers and directors who served to establish great works of the Western theatre in the country. (It has only really been since the sixties, since Sharpeville and the boycott of the British playwrights that South African English drama has come into its own.) Very early works in this category include Stephen Black's *Love and the Ilyphen*, a satire, the domestic comedies of Berthe Goudvis, and Lewis Sowden's early political plays. Harley Manson, a prolific writer of the sixties, was shifted on to a sideline in criticism, because at the time when he was most active, critical interest in South Africa shifted to "committedness" and a sociopolitical insistence on "relevance". This attitude has greatly aided the greatest living South African playwright, Athol Fugard. Together with other "committed" writers such as Ian Ferguson, Stephen Gray, Barney Simon and Paul Slabolepszy he has come to carve a deep niche in South African drama, and has set an inevitable course for this drama on which it is still firmly placed, to the detriment, perhaps of a playwright like Geraldine Aron whose work is committed only to the human condition. It is true, however, as asserted by the popular singer David Kramer (Beeld, 24 July 1985) that "culture in South Africa is closely linked with politics. This has developed to a sort of embracing of the self . . .". Fugard is regarded as being committed in the sense of the word that he uses the complex anomalies of the South African situation in order to illustrate and discuss the realities of the human condition here and everywhere. "Black theatre" will be taken to mean, for the purposes of this discussion, drama produced by Black writers and belonging to the particular upsurge of Black drama in the seventies - as part of the new political consciousness of the Black groups in the country. "Beginning in the 1930's with a desire to create theatre relevant to the lives and needs of Black people, this theatre arrives in the 1970s at a point where sociopolitical and cultural nationalism converge and produce the 'Theatre of Black Consciousness'"¹ (Steadman and Hauptfleisch, p.141).

¹ "Black consciousness can be seen as a political culture emanating from the Black White polarization in South Africa which does not replace the ethnic bonds and loyalties of the urban Blacks, seeing that it

The concept of Black consciousness is a crucially important one in Black drama (as evidenced by the words of an eminent Black writer²), and it means that describing the theatre in this way is not merely a way of linking a concept of theatre to a concept of pigmentation: "rather, Black theatre can be seen to be theatre which identifies with a set of values. It is theatre which deals with the lives, the needs and the aspirations of the majority of South Africans, and which tries to instil a consciousness in its audience of what it means to be 'Black'" (Steadman and Hauptfleisch, p. 140).

The early works of a playwright such as Gibson Kente are very important in the line of development of Black drama. Although his work is different from the works of later militants in the field such as Maishe Maponya, Lewis Nkosi and Bongeni Ngema, it is extremely important in the sense that it accurately reflected the vicissitudes of life in the townships. His work was immensely popular and laid the foundations for independent Black theatre, especially when more restrictive legislation forced increasing segregation of theatre audiences.

Black consciousness is therefore seen as the most insistent set of values informing the increasingly militant and vigorous Black theatre in South Africa. Its aim is seen as being an attempt to unite Black people. This is also apparent in the reason for the choice of English as the lingua franca of this theatre, once again expressed by Siphso Sepamla, " ...

is a political identity which seeks to transcend differences in cultural identity so that political manipulation on the basis of cultural differences can be frustrated" (Van Niekerk, 1984, p. 33).

² Siphso Sepamla has also given voice to this concept. He refers to the urban Black, the audience of Black theatre, as "a person who bears a Black mind that has almost been saturated with white values to the extent that it has become a white mind. We think this has come about largely as a result of words and suggestions put into the Black mind. We believe that the Black mind has gone to sleep and it is for this reason we are using the concept of Black consciousness to re-awaken it" (19, p. 17). (See also Steadman, 1981, p. 2).

how does this choice of language reconcile itself with Black consciousness? For the foreseeable future and the fact that the township people are suspicious of things tribal, I think English will be our language. Obviously, we are doing things to it. We are trying to make it our English - without apologies, by the way" (19, p. 19).

Alternative theatre in South Africa is a recent and most vigorous offshoot of theatrical activity, and it has come into being precisely because of the very varied and multi faceted nature of the society of this country. Mostly it involves characters from all conceivable groups in the country, and it also utilizes all the varieties of language available to the many sub-cultures in the country. One of the most important forces giving rise to this has been described as the year 1976, when "the dominant system of norms and values in South African society was shaken by the political events of June 1976" (Steadman and Hauptfleisch, 1984, p. 166). Alternative theatre is seen to have aligned itself against the dominant tendencies in South African culture. It is commonly felt in South African theatre and drama studies that the Western tradition which has been so firmly fixed does not have the sole right to existence in terms of theatrical history in this country. Because traditions are seen largely to evolve from dominant values, alternatives to those values will have to arise and be considered, and this is precisely what is happening in both Black theatre and in Alternative theatre, for it is felt that the dominant culture¹ has enshrined the values of Western traditions in literature, art and theatre, and universalized these as standards of judgment (although in all honesty drama in this country would seem to present a fairly homogeneous face in the representation of values - especially in the seventies and eighties). Alternative theatre is described by Steadman (in White and Couzens, 1984, p. 138) as "theatre which takes a conscious stand against established norms and is dedicated to presenting creative alternatives to social structures which determine established patterns of behaviour and response. Alternative theatre thus offers a cultural

¹ "In South Africa, because of the nature of the political and social structure in the last few decades, the dominant culture has been that of 'Whites'" (Steadman and Hauptfleisch, p. 170).

portest defined by political and ideological factors", H. Dhlomo, an early dramatist in this theatre, "was interested in national history and values as reflected in the African tradition. But he was more interested in the relationships of these to the modern urban African" (Steadman, in *White and Couzens*, p. 140). (This is of importance for both "Black theatre" and "Alternative theatre".)

3. DISCUSSION OF PLAYS

3.1 The Afrikaans theatre

In this category, plays by Bartho Smit and Adam Small will be discussed.

The Afrikaans playwright Bartho Smit has become enshrined as possibly the best playwright working in this field, although his relationship with the powers-that-be has always been somewhat precarious. His work is openly critical of many social and political institutions, and for this reason he has not escaped censure. He belongs to the ranks of the more enlightened Afrikaans playwrights of the last quarter century, when the works of these playwrights began to parallel those of their English and Black counterparts in being highly and vocally critical of the existing state of affairs. Smit is a very subtle and sophisticated artist, and he finds imaginative allegorical parallels in some of his plays by means of which to question prevailing political values. In *Christine*, a play which he himself translated into English and which is commonly regarded as his best play, he deals with prejudice and guilt and betrayal in terms of Nazi Germany, but with close and unmistakable reference to the South African situation. He critically examines attitudes towards racial superiority, towards some entrenched assumptions of Calvinism and his criticism is harsh and scathing. The same critical attitude is manifest to a much larger extent in *The Nailed*, a play dealing in explicit and agonising detail with the destructive effects of apartheid on human relationships, on the dehumanising effects entrenched political values can have on humanity. The impact of the work is perhaps much more stunning because of the precision and control of the writing - his work lacks the didactic element that is an inevitable concomitant of the work of the Black and "committed" writers dealing with the same subject. The sense of horror that he evokes in the irrevocable clash between human values and eu-

trenched and bigoted political values informs the play with the same pervasive dread as that informing a Greek tragedy. One knows the ending to be equally unavoidable.

Adam Small is "technically" a Coloured, but he writes in Afrikaans, which is the home language of the larger portion of the people so classified. In his colloquially named play *Kanna by kō hystoe* (Kanna is coming home!) he deals in a searingly ironic fashion with the traditional views of religion and the solidly conservative values of family and society. Kanna, appropriately enough an adopted son, rises above the restrictions (social and intellectual) under which his family lives, and goes into exile, to return home for the funeral of the matriarch Makiet. The prodigal son returns as a wealthy and successful man, deeply ashamed of his too acute vision when he is confronted with his family again, and yet unable to return fully. There is never any overt criticism, yet in the picture of an entire community dehumanised (yet still humbly praising God, even after subjection to such cataclysmic events within the family as rape, suicide and murder) one is confronted by an indictment too fierce to be ignored. Small reveals in no uncertain terms also an implicit indictment that all parties share complicity, one group through domination and the other through submission, a submission expressed in terms of acceptance of traditional religious values and norms.

3.2 English theatre

This category will include discussions of plays by Athol Fugard, with brief reference to Pieter-Dirk Uys.

Fugard needs no introduction. He has in the space of the last twenty years become the most notable playwright in South Africa, dealing with South African society and realities at all levels. His earlier work (including the family plays) did not yet have the abrasively critical quality of the later, more politically inspired plays. For the purposes of this discussion, a selection will be made from his work, with the stress on the more recent plays. Fugard's subject has almost always been man caught up in the invidious structures that make up South African society.

In his most overtly political plays, such as *The Island*, *Sizwe Banzi is dead* and *Statements*, he decries the loss of personal and humane values under the heavy hand of an inhuman political machine.

Gradually, however, in the later plays, there has been an increasing growth towards a greater complexity, a fuller exploration of the nuances of expression within this society, and, to my mind, a more sympathetic rendering of values held dear by the various groups. The overtly critical attitude, the harshly uncompromising stand, the raw cry - these have made room for a subtler expression, which is no less effective for its mutedness.

In *A Lesson from Aloes* he looks at the interaction between Piet, an Afrikaner farmer exiled to the city, his English wife and his Coloured friend. Piet exemplifies traditional Afrikaner cultural values, poignantly expressed in terms of his committedness to the concept of name and land, the family farm. Piet's loss of the farm to drought (the prevailing symbol in the play, made visible in the collection of aloes, cacti which can survive even great drought) makes him all the more vulnerable to a threat to his name, and Fugard presents this sympathetically, giving to Piet these words: "There's nothing you can do to stop a drought, but bad laws and social injustice are man-made and can be unmade by men. It's as simple as that. We can make this a better world to live in" (p. 35). Fugard sees the complexity of the system as a clash of values which can yet be ameliorated. This is stated much more clearly in the later *Master Harold and the Boys*, with a further retreat into the self in the most recent *Road to Mecca*.

In *Master Harold and the Boys*, which is a frankly autobiographical play, Fugard deals with compassion and wry awareness with the issue of entrenched values in a situation fraught with tension - and the situation is defused and resolved only in terms of the larger encompassing concept of the golden rule, of love transcending barriers, and of trust. This seems increasingly to be the message in Fugard's later plays, and to my mind the plays have gained greatly by this dimension in which he looks at differences unafraid and resolves them dramatically not in terms of militancy but humanity. In *Road to Mecca* he deals mostly again with trust between people, and in a vein similar to *Adam Small*, almost, he rejects

the comforting but deadening effect, as he sees it, of traditional religion. He presents a sympathetic picture of the Afrikaans minister, and yet one unmistakably gains the impression that he is suspicious of goodness embedded in a set of entrenched and prejudicial values rooted unquestioningly in tradition, and an invidious one at that.

As already pointed out, Uys represents a fresh satirical breeze in the-
atrical activity in the country. Although, in the best tradition of the
satirist, not accepted by many, his work represents the most scathing
attack on social abuses available to the general theatre-going public.
His work, while uneven in quality, and heavily dependent on contempo-
rary political issues, debunks many of the entrenched values held dear
by both Afrikaans and English-speakers in the country. In the striking
play *God's Forgotten* he presents an apocalyptic future vision of South
Africa as an embattled last bastion, and in this play he makes vicious
fun of the (outmoded) view held by some Afrikaners of having somehow
been the elect of God, a view inspired by some rigidly held tenets of
traditional (Afrikaner) Calvinism.

3.3 Black theatre

"Black theatre, then, is more than a genre, a movement or a posture
based on ethnicity. The label (for such it is) expresses more important
notions of identification with a set of values. These values fall under
the rubric of the Black Consciousness movement, and they define an at-
titude to the nature and function of performance in Southern African
society. Most Black theatre, as the term is understood by its practi-
tioners in South Africa, is really proletarian theatre which dedicates itself
to the depiction of life lived as a Black man: and in South Africa, that
has to do with politics and ideology" (Steadman, 1981, p. 2).

This position is even more explicitly stated by Mshengu (1977, p. 5) when
he challenges the idea that the values of the old communalism should be
reconstituted in the life of the individual (and especially the urban
Black). He maintains that there is a "need to progress towards a new
communalism through social reorganization", which is precisely what
Black Consciousness is about. To achieve this purpose, the theatre is
used unashamedly as a weapon - Mshengu maintains (p. 7) that "we must

use theatre because we know that theatre can do the job better than a tract. Theatre is an irreplaceable weapon in the armoury of a society that is struggling to achieve for its people a meaningful life ... Third world theatre must be imaginative and sensual, intellectual and polemical but its meaning and its function must be rigorously unequivocal". There is conscious refusal, also, in urban Black theatre, to search for anthropological "roots" - ethnic parochialism is seen as an instrument of manipulation and oppression.

These attitudes are clearly expressed in the plays mentioned for discussion: Fatima Dike's *The Sacrifice of Krefi* and *The First South African*, and Maishe Maponya's *The Hungry Earth*. (The choice of these plays is in part dictated that texts are readily available - much in the field of Black and Alternative theatre is improvised and contingent to say the least.)

Dike looks at the traditional concepts and norms of the Xhosa nation in her ritualistic play on Krefi. The clash between tradition and an encroaching Western civilization is depicted with poignancy and bitterness. The yawning chasm is very apparent in this play. She takes this clash between traditional values (exemplified in the adherence of the Blacks to their initiation of boys into manhood) a step further in *The First South African*, where the "White" child of a Black mother is subjected to all the stereotyped situations. His violent rejection of traditional Black restraints also makes him fall foul of the reigning "White" system, and his isolation, a recurrent theme in South African drama, is complete.

Maponya, in similar vein to Manaka (Egoli) uses the situation on the mines as a microcosm of social life in the country. Steadman has summed it up as follows: "Mining features prominently in contemporary Black theatre because it exemplifies the ways in which urban industrial life dislocates the values and aspirations of the migrant worker and, on a different level, signifies the exploitation of the individual by social structures" (1981, p. 7). One could sum up this clash at the simplest level by the view of the ordinary Black that it is a matter of a clash between the haves (the Whites) and the have-nots (the Blacks). In most instances there is a simple vision of Western culture, based mostly on an involvement with material goods. This is most eloquently expressed in the title of

the latest sensation in the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, written by Mbongeni Mngema, the creator of *Woza Albert!* (see next section): the play is called *Asinamali* (We have no money!). Sociologist J.S. Oosthuizen (1985, p. 126) has maintained that for most Blacks traditional Marxism is attractive because of the attitude towards material goods expressed in it, and because it appeals to their traditional communalism, but this is not a solution in any way, as the Blacks have rejected both Capitalism and Socialism in their search for a relevant synthesis in sociocultural and political life.

3.4 Alternative theatre

To a very large extent, Black theatre cannot be separated from the concept Alternative theatre. Tomaselli (1981, p. 31) feels that "worker theatre must be ... conceptualized as alternative theatre for it strongly resists a content determined by capital, that is subject to the interest of capital and that is controlled by capital. The semiotic components - use of signs, production of interpretants and their relation to the interpreter all stand in opposition to bourgeois forms of theatre". He concludes his article with the statement that "Alternative theatre is working class theatre and has taken 'theatre' back to its roots: it has rediscovered the origins of theatrical heritage; its very crudity has re-integrated theatre with life ..." (p. 32).

Most of the pre-occupations and emphases of Black theatre emerge in Alternative theatre: the difference lies, perhaps, in the fact that Alternative theatre mostly presupposes collaborative efforts, as *Woza Albert* was a collaboration between Barney Simon and Ngema, and *Cinquanté* a collaborative effort of Barney Simon and his group at the Market Theatre. It is also true that productions which fit the description of Alternative theatre are less group-directed, involving all the social groups and all the languages of the country in a brilliant theatrical montage. While apartheid and the political situation still constitute the matrix, there is a greater stress on the individual, and insistence on humanity - Ngema has referred to his play in this genre, *Woza Albert*, which contains some frankly revolutionary exhortations, as a "celebration" (programme notes to *Asinamali*).

Recapitulation

It emerges, therefore, that there is a strong degree of homogeneity in terms of values expressed in South African drama, and that most of these values are incorporated in the plays as celebrations of the human and the compassionate in contrast to the dehumanizing realities of the present social situation in South Africa.

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