

Identity, politics and restriction in Athol Fugard's art: Writing and liberalism in apartheid South Africa

**Authors:**

Khaya M. Gqibitole¹
Shamsuddeen Bello²

Affiliations:

¹Department of English,
University of Zululand,
South Africa

²Department of English and
French, Umaru Musa Yaradua
University, Nigeria

Corresponding author:

Khaya Gqibitole,
kgqibit@yahoo.com

Dates:

Received: 13 Nov. 2017

Accepted: 27 June 2018

Published: 31 Oct. 2018

How to cite this article:

Gqibitole, K.M. & Bello S.,
2018, 'Identity, politics and
restriction in Athol Fugard's
art: Writing and liberalism
in apartheid South Africa',
Literator 39(1), a1459.
<https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v39i1.1459>

Copyright:

© 2018. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work
is licensed under the
Creative Commons
Attribution License.

Athol Fugard enjoys a place of honour in the South African and generally African canon as a great dramatist, creative collaborator, director and as an artist who was able to create a distinctive theatre that blended African and Western forms of performance. His multidimensional (rather than a given perspective) approach to art enabled him to retain his literary leaning and identity. This article examines his often downplayed but equally potent contribution to the struggle against apartheid through theatre. It also discusses his multilayered identity and how it affected his compositions and play-making, as well as the paradoxes associated with even his most political plays. For instance, while he promoted a belief in 'the personal being inextricably political', in his plays, in public utterances he denied being political. The article further examines some of the plays' contested politics through a discussion of the diverse facets of restriction employed by the apartheid regime to gauge and suppress politics in the arts at the time and the underground activities of the playwright and his actor-collaborators who had to contend with the apartheid machinery that was designed – overtly or covertly – to suffocate any form of art deemed subversive and/or anti-apartheid. Generally, the article is anchored in the relation between intention, context and text or performance.

Introduction

Old and current studies on Athol Fugard's politics and commitment in theatre reveal that his art is enmeshed in controversies. His plays, even the radical ones such as *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* (1972), *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* (1972) and *The Island* (1973),¹ are replete with paradoxes and have generated considerable debates. Although he was more of a pacifist, he took giant and courageous strides to speak for the underdog² and therefore inadvertently against the regime and the institutionalised white privileged position. It would seem, as a white artist, he battled with the choice of content – between either speaking against apartheid or standing up for the oppressed. He chose the middle-ground, which explains why his political leaning is hard to unearth. For instance, despite the calls by black artists from the 1970s for art to serve a singular revolutionary role, he retained his conciliatory ideological and literary leanings. He steadfastly maintained the middle-ground, a space where conflicting identities and ideas clash and cohere. Predictably, activists such as Biko (1971:55) criticised this fence-sitting as a form of compromise or adaptation.

Using strictly political parameters, Fugard's liberalism is also criticised by critics such as Hodgins (1976),³ Coetzee (1992),⁴ Kavanagh (1985)⁵ and Mphahlele (1967).⁶ More recent studies on his plays show that the plays are potent enough as alternative anti-establishment plays (Burns 2002; Cima 2007; Davis 2013; Diala 2006; Olaiya 2008). This article does not only support these more recent studies but also reveal that Fugard actually crossed the strict racial line by writing about black experiences and working in close collaboration with black artists at a time when dissenting voices were silenced by the apartheid state, thus retaining a position as a non-commissioned black person's voice.

1. These three plays make up the Statements plays. *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* were devised in close collaboration with the black actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona. The first version of *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* (which premiered at the opening of The Space Theatre in Cape Town) was also devised with considerable assistance of the actress Yvonne Bryceland.

2. The less-privileged and downtrodden in society, mainly black people.

3. Hodgins queries Fugard's detachment and liberal position in his early plays before the 1970s (see Hodgins 1967).

4. Coetzee speaks of Fugard's dilemma of commitment because of his fear of risking his integrity as an artist in the mid-1960s (see Coetzee 1992).

5. For Kavanagh, apart from *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island*, the rest of Fugard's plays were subjective and bourgeois in nature and emphasised resistance to racial oppression instead of revolt against apartheid (see Kavanagh 1985).

6. Mphahlele argues that Fugard committed an act of omission by suggesting that a situation was bad without suggesting ways out of the man-made problem (see Mphahlele 1967).

Read online:

Scan this QR
code with your
smart phone or
mobile device
to read online.

The dilemma of Fugard's identity, his literary leaning and survival strategies is evident in his plays – even the collaborative ones that are still regarded as his most political venture – in the way he avoids direct political (anti-regime) statements and refuses to identify with any of the contending groups, whether white or black.⁷ Fugard's non-partisan stance, or what some critics refer to as his detachment from the real events in his plays, enabled him to remain relevant to the struggle, at least in the arts where he does not have to throw stones or promote violence or sacrifice as part of the struggle. His characters are multifaceted and so represent his multilayered views of identity (as in the Port Elizabeth and post-Statements plays), as well as the ever-shifting nature of socio-historical situations. This article deals with these complex issues and with Fugard's adoption of a multidimensional approach to art – a method that ensured his survival, as well as his transcendence of a single identity and restrictive state legislation.

Identity, politics and representation in the arts

Fugard is reputedly the 'most widely published and produced playwright from South Africa' (Kruger 2005:19); his status extends beyond the shores of his region and continent. His plays – both the solo and collaborative – have earned him an enduring place in the South African canon. As Kruger (2005:19) points out, his 'mature plays created a South African idiom that could be national, local, and intimate all at once'. As the most prolific playwright in Southern Africa, he has been a major influence of:

... theatre for the last half century, an achievement that received fitting tribute when a theatre was established in his name in a renovated church hall in the former District 6 in Cape Town in 2010. (Walder 2015:125)

Fugard's plays embody the possibilities of many realisations and have generated debates both locally and internationally. Notwithstanding his declaration that he was not a writer with a political cause, his commitment status has been contested over the decades. Fugard (in Walder 2003:2) declares that the political tag is frustrating because it generates expected political positions whenever his plays are read or received, thereby denying him 'certain freedoms' as a writer. Fugard was more interested in a theatre that could speak across the spectrum and thus created plays (sometimes in close collaboration with others) that survived the times and transcended local, national and regional concerns. Alluding to this, Walder (2015) argues:

Since the 1960s his plays have commanded audiences worldwide, although for many years they were premiered in his own country, in marginal, non-mainstream venues, with himself as director and, often, lead actor. His plays reveal a society in which the form of racist ideology known as apartheid created suffering of an intensity that shocked and which is yet depicted as potentially survivable. His is a dark vision of pain that never excludes the possibility of hope and dignity. (p. 125)

7.The term 'black' here is used to represent black people, mixed-race people and Asians in South Africa during apartheid.

Fugard had always 'protested against the prevailing tide of opinion' (Walder 2015:127) and as such refused to tailor his art to serve the sole purpose of the revolution. Even his renowned early works are not limited to protest *per se*. These plays offer a voice to the marginalised and voiceless in society, whether the black people, mixed-race people or white people. It is through these downtrodden people that he represents the human and universal conditions. His works 'revolved around a few fundamental themes: identity, pain, guilt, and survival' (Walder 2015:126). His painting on a small canvas is a microcosm of human experiences. And although he connects 'social awareness' and 'individual responsibility' (Walder 2003:12), he pays more attention to the potentials and survival of the individual, rather than to the revolutionary action. As a result, he was viewed by some critics as an apolitical writer, something that Fugard challenged because he did not believe in categorising writers as political or apolitical.

As a member of the underprivileged white class in his society,⁸ Fugard criticised the existing human condition and placed hope in the individual's will to survive. This constitutes an act of protest against the apartheid state whose policies sought to crush any semblance of self-belief in individuals. He crossed the strict racial line, but unlike white activists such as Ruth First or Joe Slovo, he was careful enough not to incur the full wrath of the state. Fugard hardly stood with the masses, especially when his ideological view was at stake; he neither accepted white supremacy and racism nor supported the corruption that came with the 'new, multiracial and democratic regime in his country', as demonstrated in his post-apartheid dramas, *Valley Song* (1996), *Sorrows and Rejoicings* (2002) and *Coming Home* (2009) (Walder 2015:121). In fact, he did not align with any race or class, and this gave him a rather neutral playing ground that enabled him to transcend petty politics, allegiance and identity.

Fugard's middle-ground position cannot be completely cut off from the complex nature of his identity and experiences. He had a mixed identity: his father, Harold – a disabled former jazz pianist – was of Irish, English and French Huguenot descent and his mother, Marie Potgieter – who operated a general store and later a lodging house – was an Afrikaner. Fugard's 'mixed descent' largely explains his multilayered identity and thus to some extent even the paradoxes in his plays. Notably, he inherited 'both the narrowly Calvinist but independent attitudes of his mother's background, and the more liberal attitudes of the English-speaking community, if not of his father' (Walder 2003:10).⁹ Fugard's mother had a stronger sense of identity than his father (Walder 2003:10; Vandenbroucke 1985:67), and this to some extent explains why she had more influence on young Fugard. His mother's strength lies behind a series of the 'powerful female figures in his work' (Walder 2015:125). Fugard, however, had an English education and chose the

8.This sector of the population formerly ruled South Africa (see Walder 2015).

9.In white South African terms, he is culturally a bastard.

English language instead of Afrikaans as a medium of expression in his plays. That was informed by the need to communicate to a 'world audience' (Walder 2003:10), but, importantly, without necessarily sacrificing the local feel of the material he was dealing with.

According to Walder (2003:12), Fugard had always been obsessed with the *other*, especially those 'compatriots excluded from the centre of power and mired in poverty and oppression'. This fixation had its roots in his teenage years, which he spent with the few black people who worked at his mother's store and poignantly he re-enacted the personal experiences in *Master Harold and the Boys* (1982). And in 1953, shortly after he dropped out of the University of Cape Town where he was studying Philosophy and Social Anthropology (the degree seemed unimportant to him at that time, although the philosophy was vital as an underpinning to his expressed ideologies), he left home and hitchhiked north to the Sudan. He eventually spent a year working on a steamship called S.S. Graigaur in East Asia, adventures that constitute his autobiographical play, *The Captain's Tiger* (1997). These were experiences, as he narrates, that 'cured him of racism endemic among South Africans' (Walder 2015:126). His close contact with other races, first the black people at the store and then the people on deck during his travels, deeply shaped his outlook and sense of identity.

Fugard's acute awareness of the potentialities of others and the need to sympathise with their experiences, led him to establish a multiracial theatre in 1958 – the Circle Players – for which he wrote, directed and acted.¹⁰ This resulted in the production of the township learning-plays *No-Good Friday* (1958) and *Nongogo* (1959).¹¹ These plays are set in the townships, with the black actors¹² in the group serving as his conduits into the layers of black experiences. In *The Coat* (1966), *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* (1972) and *The Island* (1973), he openly collaborated with black actors, which constituted a personal and political risk at that time. Crow and Banfield (1996:100) correctly single him out as a pioneer of the tradition of white-black collaboration in South Africa. To his credit, his collaborative dramas (*Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island*) with Kani and Ntshona were successfully performed and were, arguably, better than anything he had done on his own. Generally, his later experimental plays with the Serpent Players – at least from 1966 with the staging of *The Coat* – had a more direct relationship with audiences (especially black people because of their political and forceful content) than what had been possible with the reworked adapted plays they were staging. The collaborations allowed for the projections of diverse identities and ideas, but had their setbacks because they were marred by suspicion, controversies and conflict of interest (Davis 2013; Peterson 1990; Richard 1990).

10. Athol Fugard starred as Father Higgins in *No-Good Friday*.

11. In South Africa, townships refer to the often underdeveloped and segregated areas that were reserved for black people, mixed-race people and Indians.

12. Zakes Mokae, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane, Don Poho, Can Themba, Nat Nakasa and Ken Gampu. These artists later became writers.

Richard (1990:234) suspects that Fugard 'had ulterior motives for collaboration', perhaps both for his reputational gains and to suppress the radical contents of black people plays. Kani and Ntshona, though, transcended any suspicion (and segregationist legislation) on interracial activities by actively and willingly working closely with Fugard. At some point in their career they were even categorised and documented as his domestic servants in order to manipulate the apartheid legislation that limited relationships between black people and white people. The need to transcend legislative constraints informed their use of two-hander technique, one achieved through 'role deconstruction and de-totalisation' (Olaiya 2008:81). This ultimately led to the development of the 'cockroach theatre', a theatre that 'cannot afford large casts and elaborate sets and stage properties' (Olaiya 2008:81).

The cockroach theatre depended almost entirely on the actors' creativity and experimentation and improvisation. Kani and Ntshona played significant roles in the creation of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* in this regard. Cima (2009), Davis (2013) and Dahl (2014) particularly note the complications associated with the authorship of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* and the identity of the co-authors in relation to the plays' political content. Davis (2013:121), especially, highlights the tension between the co-authors and the unfortunate transformation of the plays by Oxford University Press in 1974 from political plays to liberal works without Kani and Ntshona's due input when they were reduced to written texts, *Statements*.¹³

Sizwe Bansi Is Dead on the one hand was developed through a 'challenge and response' style with Fugard serving as the creative agent-provocateur (Dickey 1987:175). Fugard, Kani and Ntshona (as co-creators and competing voices) surrendered their identities and experiences in the play-making process. Their adoption of the challenge and response technique – similar to Socratic dialectics – enabled them to experiment with the contentious image (the photograph) that forms the heart of the play (Taylor 1974).¹⁴ It is from the image that the trio 'developed a play with an unusual mixture of Brecht, Fugard and realism; and which unlike most of Fugard's works has a rather positive outcome' (Richard 1990:241). The photograph served as a launch pad for the dialectical exchanges between the competing voices. *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* is the re-enactment of the co-creators' real-life experiences (heavily filtered through memories) presented through a three-way give-and-take process, with all the voices having a say. Foley (1996) traces the process leading to the examination of the pass law system:

Ntshona, Kani, and Fugard [...] bring their personal experiences of this legislative maze to bear upon the play: Ntshona had firsthand experience of problem with the pass law; Kani had worked as a welfare assistant with the Bantu Administration in New Brighton [...]; and Fugard could draw on his bitter memories

13. Note that this point will be substantiated on page 8.

14. Fugard recounts that *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* was developed from a celebratory image of a naive black man, obviously wearing his best suit and smiling broadly, despite the troubles of the time. Fugard, Kani and Ntshona then developed the play in 2 weeks, with polishing here and there over time (see Taylor 1974).

of working as a clerk in the Native Commissioner's Court in Fordsburg during the 1950s. (p. 205)

Fugard created real-life characters and gave his actors so much importance in play-making that even his scripted plays had to pass through a hammering process. He gave the actors a chance to improvise with *dialogue* and *action*, and not just interpret a finished script. Improvisation was key to his practice, a form of play-making popular in 'the west in the 1960s and 1970s, when its defining principles of spontaneity, creative play, openness ... and group participation captured the imagination of artists ...' (Allain & Harvey 2006:87). Improvisation became an alternative 'tool of creative stimulation [...] and for devising performances', and is a suitable collaborative technique because it is fluid and gives equal chances to competing voices (Allain & Harvey 2006:87). Steadman (1992:191) believes that a collaborative work that explores improvisation may not really be more objective than a single-voice play but it at least 'reflects a dialectical exchange between different competing voices' in play-making. It is known for the shared creative and political attitudes of its participants, which, in the end, inform its form and content.

The political statements in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* were not actually what Fugard would have wanted to say, or what he might have said if he were to work alone, given his take on art and politics. *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, for example, is clearly political and a work ensconced in protest because the actor-creators brought their life experiences into it. The play is more of an embellished recreation of the actors' lives. This explains why Fugard, who did not want to be reduced to a political artist, distanced himself from the performances of the play, alongside *The Island*, after its eventual success as a potent political work internationally and at home. Nonetheless, the collaborators did not sacrifice poetics and aesthetics (features that define the literary) in pursuit of a political ends in the makings of the plays. They understood quite well that political processes were a part of their lives and had to be reflected in their works, and so the politics in their works was not an entirely 'independent element solely intended from the start' (Vandenbroucke 1975:191). Fugard himself (in Walder 2003:10) admits that there had not been a single aspect of his life that had not been touched by political events.

In devising *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island*, Fugard, Kani and Ntshona chose to let art speak for them. It is worth mentioning that Fugard's influence – first as a reputable artist and then as a collaborator – helped in promoting the poetics in the plays, rather than the politics. This, in a way, informs some of the differences in the reception of the plays as performances and as written texts that emphasise humanism and universality.¹⁵ Despite this shift in impact and value, however, the plays are still more political and hit harder on the views and policies of the apartheid regime than, say, Fugard's Port Elizabeth¹⁶ and post-Statements plays.¹⁷

15.The source of this contradiction will be discussed later in the paper.

16.*The Blood Knot, Boesman and Lena, Hello and Goodbye.*

17.*A Lesson from Aloes, People are Living There, Dimetos, The Captain's Tiger, Master Harold and the Boys.*

The Port Elizabeth plays, for example, only 'exploit the bleakness, poverty and degradation of life in and around Port Elizabeth, all three hint at the possibility of survival, even joy,' testifying the playwright's *sympathy* for the black population without 'directly indicting the agents causing the suffering' (Burns 2002:237). Fugard knew his limits as an artist in a police state and, like Camus, lumped socio-political structures 'with the universal and ineluctable absurdities of the human condition' (Diala 2006:243). His extensive reading of Camus' works and philosophy from 1962 to 1963 influenced his views on the nature of 'man's rebellion, the significance of human action, and the importance and function of art' (Dickey 1987:9).¹⁸

This explains why he accords attention to survival, joy and inward-good – typical ideals in the works of Camus, especially in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Instead of resorting to violence, both artists reinforce (differently) the view that evasions and acceptance of death as a gift are solutions to the human problem – a comfort Fugard was criticised about. This comfort is pronounced in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* in Sizwe and Winston's (like Sophocles' *Oedipus*) acceptance of their sad fate. This *absurdist* and *existentialist* form of drama emerged in the early 1950s with the success of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1951), Samuel Beckett's (1906–1989)¹⁹ *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and in dramas by Eugene Ionesco (1931–1994)²⁰ and Arthur Adamov (1908–1970).²¹ Fugard's plays (even in his early stage as a playwright) are littered with these influences, but with time he managed to create an art peculiar to his own context and leanings. In his own way, he created and devised (with his black actors) watered-down political plays that did not offer answers to apartheid brutality, such that even the bitter anti-state statements in them are best realised through a second-layer reading.

Unlike Camus, whose bitter experiences led him to alienate himself (a form of exile similar to that of his character, Meursault, in *The Stranger*) towards the end of his life, Fugard maintained his middle-ground. Camus' Meursault, in *The Stranger*, is parallel to Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* (1993) who is considered a traitor. Fugard's expressed support (in Rae 1971:78) for black people and the poor (of all races) met with challenges and rejection by some black artists. He defied this historically troubled and extreme context (the setting of all his plays apart from *Dimetos*) and overcame suspicions

18.Albert Camus was born in Dreaan (then Mandovii) in French Algeria on 07 November 1913 of Breton and Spanish parentage; Fugard also had a mixed parentage. Camus was brought up in North Africa and had many jobs there before moving to Metropolitan France. From 1848 to 1962, the Mediterranean region of Algeria was administered as an integral part of France. Camus's experiences were quite similar to Fugard's in many ways; he notably influenced Fugard's practice and ideology about the revolution. Camus was active in the resistance during the German occupation and became the editor of the clandestine paper *Caligula* – a name of one of his pre-war plays *Caligula* (1939). He, however, abandoned politics (and journalism) and devoted himself to writing.

19.Samuel Beckett was an Irish avant-garde writer and director who believed in a minimalist theatre. He is regarded as one of the most influential writers of the 20th century, and wrote in both English and French. The Theatre of the Absurd had one of its early roots in Beckett.

20.Eugene Ionesco was a Romanian-French avant-garde playwright.

21.Arthur Adamov was the chief exponent of Theatre of the Absurd. The political elements in his later works were influenced by Bertolt Brecht.

and suppression by utilising the stage to depict painful South African experiences, the type found in *Boesman and Lena*.

His Port Elizabeth and post-Statements plays were concerned with personal experiences – especially of white people and were mainly meant for white people audiences. Mainly, the plays were more concerned with the dramatist's personal experiences than general statements about the conditions of life in his country. He demonstrated a deep-seated concern with the specifics of life as against the universal concerns. He declares his position in MacLennan (1981):

If there have ever been *universals* in my writing they have had to look after themselves. I concern myself with the *specifics*. When the fire-blackened paraffin tin, or Boesman's flea ridden mattress, or the mud between Lena's toes means something to me, things might start to happen. It's been this way with anything I have ever written. I think it was Camus that spoke about 'the truth the hand can touch'. (p. 219)

These *specific* feature in *The Island* is the re-enactment of oppression and the unmitigated concomitant nature of the prison conditions. The materials that constitute the story suggest that it is a detailed but creative account of the suffering and psychology of black prisoners. Fugard, as a white person, never lived in black townships, and was never incarcerated on the island; he relied on his black actors, and on his notebooks, which are a detailed record of many years of research on Robben Island. Kani supplied details from the letters he received from his brother, Harry, who served a 5-year term there (Laurea 1998:87). Ntshinga and Duru's²² testimonies (scribbled in Fugard's notebooks years earlier) were also utilised during the play-making exercises. The actor-creators experimented, improvised and arrived at an acceptable account. *The Island* 'operates within a dialectics of performance and text, player and role [...] peculiar to dramatic performance, and especially to the dramatic representation of rehearsals and workshops' (Dahl 2014:3).

The nature of the workshops, with the usual experiments and improvisations, made it possible for Fugard to escape from developing a writer's block and move from a pronounced 'witness' (precisely after the staging of his solo play, *Boesman and Lena*, in 1969), to being more of an active participant. He was worried that the play did not address his socio-political concerns. Walder (2015:132) maintains that Fugard wanted to 'align himself with the forces of change and resistance in the country', and so his 'drive to bear witness to the lives of the victims of apartheid soon created a remarkable group of experiments', with a play-making method that placed his 'actors' experiences at the centre of the stage, challenging through production and performance the very divisions upon which the state relied'. This technique also enabled the co-authors to transcend the socio-political constraints that used to cripple the arts at the time. Apartheid compelled the artists in the country to re-strategise their theatre-making process in order to create works that would survive the

22. Norman Ntshinga and Welcome Duru were among the hard-core black actors who made up the Serpent Players of New Brighton. They were both arrested and incarcerated on Robben Island.

dangerous times – a period when 'an innocent politics and an innocent theatre were no longer possible' (Purkey 1998:17). In the case of the devised plays *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island*, the co-authors' choice of form and content ensured their survival and (along with Workshop '71's *Survival*) influenced the post-Soweto black theatre.

Fugard, Kani and Ntshona managed to break the long conspiracy of silence in the country in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island*. This, however, started with *The Coat*, an exercise which prepared the ground for the Serpent Players' most radical experiments in the 1970s. The play demonstrated that protest statements can be made using the theatre and that the artist can get away with it, a meta-experiment with immediate materials and politics. The actors (with Fugard as scribe and agent-provocateur) used Brechtian techniques to depict the situation in the country (Burns 2002:237). The scenes in this play 'are a dialectic in Brechtian style, with a presenter who challenges the characters and/or actors' feelings and motives and actors coming out of character [...] (Burns 2002:238). *The Coat* reveals the actors' ability to manage the misfortunes in the country and channel bitter experiences in the right direction, transforming the apartheid stage into a political one (Cima 2007).

In the making of *The Coat*, the actors used the Brechtian distancing technique to analyse the fate of the 'coat' and how best it could be put to use by the man's wife. The fate of the man's family and the coat are creatively re-enacted on stage, the motive being to explore the political events in the country. The play does not, however, depict events as *given*, but as texts in themselves that are open to *play*. Fugard's depiction of the specifics of individual suffering did not start – or end – with *The Coat*. He had exhibited similar concern in his learning-plays, *Nongogo* and *No-Good Friday*, in the characters' quest for survival despite fear, poverty and humiliation. In most of his plays, the individual is rooted at the centre, so much that the yearning for survival and possible joy hardly elude his characters, even in their most troubled moments.

The experiments that followed also proved that the issues bedevilling individual life could be intellectualised and talked about. Kani (in Richard 1990:248) states that these 'experiments were commanded by truth'. This places *The Island* experiment a step further than the normal intellectualisation practice because it was more realistic and enabled the co-creators to speak about the notorious prison. *The Island* and *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* managed to set a little fire to the apartheid stage, but they also had their limitations. The co-creators reveal an unexpressed consensus between prisoners and jailers in *The Island* and a silent approval of harsh laws and bureaucracy in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*. The plays may have their failings, but they at least kept the hope alive and promoted the belief in the personal being inescapably political.

Fugard experimented with alternatives but never preferred sacrifice and violence as a solution to human problems. His position on violence was largely informed by Camus,

who advocated for metaphysical rebellion instead of revolutionary violence (Diala 2006). He believed in the ability of the individual to survive against all odds. His characters represented hope, as well as the belief in individual freedom. They were aware of their place in society and the little they could achieve and so shoulder their troubles by trying to chart their own paths, as in Boesman in *Boesman and Lena* and Sizwe in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*. They also proffer possible ways out, like Winston in *The Island*, who declares that he has played his role in the struggle, calling on others to also stick their necks out for the same cause.

Furthermore, Buntu's 'surgery' of Sizwe and Robert's passbooks in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* is also an apt demonstration that the apartheid system can be manipulated at its best, with the attendant risk in mind.²³ Another instance is Styles, who promotes the individualistic values of struggle and self-reliance in a bid to emerge from nothingness to being one's own boss and proprietor. In the end, and as Fugard believes and practises, art is not expected to preach, but should generate discussion and/or interpretation, something *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* managed to achieve in one of its early runs.²⁴ Fugard (in Schoningh 1985) recounts that it generated arguments and protest among audience members:

Arguments and counter-arguments, angry declarations and protests followed fast and furiously. As I stood at the back of the hall listening to it I realised I was watching a very special example of one of theatre's major responsibilities in an oppressive society: to try to break the conspiracy of silence that always attends an unjust social system. And most significant of all: that conspiracy was no longer being assaulted just by the actors. The action of our play was now being matched and equally by the action of the audience. People were saying directly and forcefully, almost recklessly so, what they felt and thought [...] A performance on stage had provoked a political event in the auditorium [...]. (p. 235)

This may well not have been Fugard's intention from the beginning. He was satisfied with the play's early success, but needed something more. As suggested earlier, he refused to respond to the *call* to use theatre solely for political purposes because he did not want to be tagged as a political artist, as that would have limited his art and achievements. The publication of the statements in 1974 (including *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, *The Island* and *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act*) by Oxford University Press came as a saving grace. As Oxford University Press editor of the edition, Carol Buckroyd, did serious editorial work that finally watered down the plays' political impact and repackaged Fugard as more of a universal playwright to the detriment of his co-authors (Davis 2013). Fugard, at Buckroyd's request, also included a solo introduction to the trilogy, thus becoming both the main author and spokesman in a taut debate about both political conditions and artistic exploration:

23. Buntu is aware of the troubles Sizwe Bansi may likely face and surmount when he 'surgically' exchanged the photographs in the two passbooks.

24. The performance took place at the Space Theatre in Cape Town on 08 October 1972.

Thus, the reader of these most overtly political of Fugard's plays was reassured at the threshold of the book that there's no mention of the theory of apartheid in the plays ... The reader was instead assured that the politics of the plays were tempered by literary abstraction. The specific South African content was not denied, but the plays were promoted as more widely significant, as representations of 'Africa' and the 'African experience ...' (Davis 2013:126)

As pointed out, Fugard garnered most of the materials for *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* from his black actor-collaborators, even as he did much of the writing when one looks at the printed version, which is part of the statements. It is *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* that ensured a place for Fugard in the canon and not his prior – although successful – plays such as *The Blood Knot*. Cima (2009:103) notes, however, that Kani's and Ntshona's contributions as co-creators and actors to the success of the plays were 'marginalised in favour of championing the figure of Fugard as author'. Their names were omitted internationally, while Fugard was celebrated as a great dramatist of universal (not regional or national this time around) importance. Clive Barnes (in Cima 2009:106) argues that the plays are great because of the 'contributions of all three men to the script'. The relationship between the co-creators turned sour and manifested during the 1977 Royal Court revival of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*. Fugard became dissatisfied with the collaborations and the reductive label that greeted the success of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*. He felt that the politics in the play had surpassed its poetry, a rather naïve and unfortunate stance that prompted his critics and black playwrights to question his commitment.

Cima (2009:108) points out that *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* 'transformed into exactly what Fugard meant to avoid ever since he stepped into the rehearsal room with Kani and Ntshona in 1972: an agitprop protest drama'. Thus, while Kani and Ntshona toured the play around the world – from England, Scotland, Ireland, New York, and Washington to Australia – before going back to London in 1977, Fugard was dissatisfied with its agitprop nature. Fugard often questioned the political dimension of the play (alongside *The Island*) since it did not reflect his personal and metaphysical and apolitical vision. He struggled with this dilemma in a country which placed artists in a position whereby 'their work will always be measured against the current political situation' (Dickey 1987:2). He believed that art should 'reflect the truthfulness of suffering without resorting to propaganda or moral instruction' (Dickey 1987:3). For him, didacticism, politics and propaganda (if they must appear in the arts at all) should play a second-layer role: a latent rather than manifest position. This explains, as highlighted earlier, his disassociation with *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* as performance, especially its tour abroad and in South Africa, with Kani and Ntshona.

The successes of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* came at a price because the co-authors came to be seen as political artists of great power, a reductive tag Fugard was not prepared to accept. As argued, he was interested in poetry

and not politics in the plays, the middle-ground he had chosen. He inculcated a strong sense of aesthetics in the minds of his actors. Kani and Ntshona also tried to avoid the (common) reductive political label and their reduction to black actors who basically supplied materials instead of being co-authors (Cima 2009:94). Kani's *Nothing But the Truth* (2002) and *Missing* (2014)²⁵ demonstrate his literary acumen, securing him a place in the literary canon of his country. Unlike the black artists in the country, Fugard avoided open confrontation by not pitching his tent with any of the contending groups.

Fugard refused to alter his stance and moved more in the direction of a universal rather than an embodied artist. As outlined earlier in the article, this cannot be far removed from his crisis of identity. His characters, Sizwe and Winston, experience this crisis. In *The Island*, Winston doubts his ideals and role and why he is even incarcerated on Robben Island: 'why am I here ... fuck the others ... fuck our ideals' (Fugard 1993: 221). In *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, Sizwe's 'dishonourable' switch of name equally results in a crisis of identity and the attendant confusion: 'Robert ... Sizwe ... I'm all mixed up. Who am I?' (Fugard 1993: 185). There is normally an attendant crisis when truly playing – in real-life or fiction – the role of another person. Fugard's attempts to rediscover himself by speaking for a different class is characterised by this crisis. The journey to self-discovery is a long and tough one; it typically involves difficult choices, especially when the individual is faced with an opposing force. Fugard had his own hard options and he chose to restrict his identity to the private sphere. His art allowed him to protest the injustices of the system and retain a more universal (rather than particular) position concurrently. His crisis of identity was *historical* as well as *intended* – intended because he refused a singular identity as that could violate his tenets of liberal polity and reduce his status to a regional anti-apartheid artist.

The different facets of restriction and containment in Fugard's art

The state constituted an opposing force for artists and activists in South Africa. It contained and determined individual thoughts and action, such that several artists were forced into self-censorship. There were two obvious choices for artists: (1) write *undesirably* and get arrested, or, in the least, have your work restricted or banned, or (2) overlook and bypass the censorship laws in the country, and so suffer the consequences. Artists such as Fugard had to make tough choices and operate underground so as to perhaps avoid censorship and survive the ugly days. The influence of the historical period on the thoughts, safety, and production or composition process cannot be overlooked here. The apartheid state had an unprecedented power to crush and contain individual thoughts and ideals.

Fugard's choice of content, form and survival strategy was in part informed by his awareness of the fact that the state could

²⁵The plays were published decades after the success of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island*.

impose a ban on his art, or even arrest and imprison him. This ultimately forced him into self-censorship, considering that his driving motive was to get his plays performed, and not banned. His fears, limitations and drive are detailed in *Notebooks* (1983), which gives insight into his thoughts about the apartheid state and his work in theatre. He understood the role of art in the liberation process and was aware that politics impinge on the creative process. Fugard was aware of the restrictions in the country but was driven by the need to contribute more on reporting what was happening on the ground – than to tell the truth and not 'bear false witness' (Coetzee 1992:370). His failure to write more productively about the underdog and the struggle as was expected of the arts at that time depended on his experience and skin colour. It also had a lot to do with his literary and ideological leanings. As such, his interpretation of events and what he wanted to see happening in the country differed from the struggle for black freedom (Maponya 1987:7). Fugard, just like Barney Simon, talked about a different kind of freedom for black South Africans.

Black audiences in the townships were not really interested in race relations or the possibility of a non-racial society. They were more 'interested in getting their freedom before they could even talk about non-racialism', as against the more liberal audience members in the cities who praised protest 'works that would make statements against apartheid as opposed to statements about liberation and about the land going back to whom it belongs' (Ndlovu 1987:6). In *The Blood Knot*, for example, the concern is with race relations, a theme that interests an audience in the city, but that is not the concern of township audience. This shows that Fugard was only an involved-witness, unlike the black artists who were victims of the system. The differences in commitment between white artists and black artists at the time lay in their status in society: while white artists witness and report, black artists were direct victims. Manaka (1987) states the roles of black artists:

We are not just witnesses; we are also victims. We also throw stones. Whatever happens, if you are supposed to put on a show, and there is a war going on, you become part of that war ... Sometimes, you are organising a play, you are going to put on a show in the township, and then you get involved in organising a bus boycott and you have forgotten that you have got to go and do a show. You've got to join those people, so theatre becomes an integral part of the resistance in the country. We do not see it as separate ... (p. 6)

The artist-victim tag determined the scope and content of plays by black people, one that Fugard dissociated himself from by producing multidimensional plays that are more of poetry than politics. Art, in the liberal sense of the word, requires detachment from statements and events. It is this that accounts for the major differences in the reception or interpretation of plays by Fugard (even his protest works) compared with those by black dramatists in the country. Fugard's detachment from events did not, however, render his dramas less potent or apolitical, although his passion about the liberation of black people could not be compared

with that of his actors because they were part of the so-called *victims* of apartheid. He worked on his own terms and helped his actors to make sense of the world and events around them more creatively.

Fugard's detachment from immediate events certainly affected his works, but it also allowed him to recount the events without the evident bitterness inherent in the works of black artists. His plays are considered valuable, universal and fit to be included in the South African drama canon, partly because he avoided propaganda and journalistic reporting common at the time. He was nonetheless an involved-witness who crossed the line, although he did not throw stones like black people who are artists (labelled as rebels), who openly resisted and subverted the authority. He was also not so keen about black liberation in the way his black actors were. Kani's and Ntshona's passion to narrate and/or stage the black story affected Fugard, tilting his art towards politics, since working with them meant recording or detailing bitter black experiences. The accounts in *The Island* are entirely black prison experiences; the improvised newspaper scene in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* is also an expression of black life and trauma. The actor-creators in these plays were able to improvise and recreate the events because they were closer to their real experiences as black South Africans.

It is the detailed black experiences in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* (even in *The Coat*) that qualify them as Fugard's most political dramas. These plays evidently vary from his Port Elizabeth and post-Statements dramas because of the materials, actors and processes involved in their creation. The double-edged sword of criticism of Fugard's plays is thus not surprising considering the intricate context and events with which he was dealing. The restrictive system and containment policies in place in his country added to his problems. The post-Sharpeville period from the 1960s onwards, for example, was so intense that even white liberals were not spared the wrath of the regime. It was around this period that Fugard, along with his family, returned to the country and thereafter worked closely with the Serpent Players from 1963. As a young émigré living in London with his wife, he bought a one-way ticket back home at a time when 'many liberal whites sought refuge in Europe from the massive police campaign mounted against all opponents of the regime' (Smith 1974:1).

This sort of dogged commitment was unusual from white liberals under apartheid, of course apart from the few white dissidents who chose to remain under the harsh clouds and support the black struggle. Liberalism under apartheid suggests a limit to one's involvement, whether for racial, political or economic ends. It did not, all the same, equal non-commitment to a cause, but an awareness of certain limits, which also depended on the knowledge of the restrictive measures that could hamper their active participation. It was equally informed by a sense of identity: as white people, liberals could not escape the limits of their identity and place in a country so divided along racial lines; in fact, it took the better part of their activities. As Walder (1993:121) points out,

the 'near-total hegemony of the white minority created by apartheid has meant that white liberals and other dissidents [...] are part of the structures of domination they oppose'.

Fugard enjoyed certain privileges as a white person and that created a cloud of suspicion from critics and many black dramatists who argued that he 'consigns his truth to a certain epistemological standpoint that makes him a partial witness, despite his protestations to the contrary' (Olaiya 2008:78). Hence, the restriction was multifaceted: on the one hand were the strict censorship legislations, and on the other, the awareness of identity (group affiliation) and the need to play safe. This in a way explains why many black artists, and some critics, questioned the roles of liberals and collaborators who are white in South Africa, but whose roles in the anti-apartheid struggle cannot be undermined. This influential group played an active role in ways they could and still felt safe, carving a space for themselves in-between the contending groups: white and black people.

Fugard avoided the much emphasised subversion and large-scale insurrection; he also refused to channel his art to the sole interest of the revolution. It appears that, like most white people, he was also aware that the benefits of apartheid far outweighed the inconveniences for white people. Instead of agitating for violence, he utilised the theatre as a viable means of attaining individual freedom. His apparent equivocation was not only tied to the censorship and state laws, he had also doubts about the revolutionary crude tactics and calls for violence and sacrifices. He defied, almost entirely, the idea that every revolution comes at a price, resulting in victims who must lay their lives on the line for the struggle to succeed such that he was considered by some critics as 'being lukewarm or not radical enough' (Skordis 2003:99). The critics have, in a way, failed 'to acknowledge that an artist may be forced to give up political correctness for larger political ends' (Skordis 2003: 99).

Fugard argues that a good art has more impact on the individual and group psyche than rebellion and violence might. His *non-commission* and choice of scope enabled him to contribute to the struggle in many other ways, although his approach to art went contrary to the expectations of the time. Fugard (1983:183) states that he strove 'consciously and deliberately for ambiguity of expressions because it is superior to singleness of meaning and reflects the nature of life'. It is critics who mistake his ambiguous intentions with a non-committal stance, thus failing to realise that had his works been that acerbic, they may not have been produced at all and 'may not have made an effective appeal to their audiences' (Skordis 2003:99).

Conclusion

This article identified that adopting a single, unambiguous and political position is restrictive: it defines the writer's identity and leanings, takes away his veil, reduces his status and limits his contributions. Fugard avoided this *given* dimension by adopting a multidimensional style that allowed

him to maintain liberal polity tenets by transcending politics and propaganda and the limits imposed on the arts. Survival, value and a fitting place in the arts were central to his choice of literary style and practice of the experimental collaborative theatre from 1963. This article revealed that even his most political collaborative works have a survivalist inclination – a form of liberal technique characterised by dodges and evasions. It argued that their apparent ambiguous statements enabled him to avoid the unnecessary face-off with the authorities. He utilised his mostly black actors as conduits to materials he was, at first, denied access to at the time and as participants in the stories because he could not bring himself to fully being part of the struggling masses.

Furthermore, the article stated that his actors, Mokae, Bryceland, Kani and Ntshona, for example, were the main sources of most of his stories: from the learning-plays, *Nongogo* and *No-Good Friday*, to *The Coat*, and subsequently *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act* and *The Island*. It was established that he overcame the diverse facets of restriction, to a certain point, through his collaboration with actors. Collaboration had often been his most potent way of making political statements. *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* survived the dangerous time not only because they were collaborative plays without an easily identifiable author and statement, but equally because they were unscripted, experimental and improvised pieces during their early runs. The article concluded that Fugard's contributions to the alternative theatre in the country outweigh the limitations of his non-partisan position and liberalism.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

We declare that we have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced us in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

This article was created from S.B.'s PhD thesis with K.M.G. as the supervisor.

References

- Allain, P. & Harvie, J., 2006, *The Routledge companion to theatre and performance*, Routledge, London.
- Biko, S., 1971, 'The definition of black consciousness', in A. Stubbs (ed.), 2004, *Steve Biko: I write what I like*, pp. 5–27, Picardo, Johannesburg.
- Burns, H., 2002, 'Thelong road home: Athol Fugard and his collaborators', *New Theatre Quarterly* 18(3), 234–242. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X02000325>
- Cima, G.A., 2007, 'Statements: The making of Athol Fugard', unpublished M.A. dissertation, Ohio State University.
- Cima, A.C., 2009, 'Resurrecting *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* (1972–2008): John Kani, Winston Ntshona, Athol Fugard, and Postapartheid South Africa', *Theatre Survey* 50(1), 91–118. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557409000088>
- Coetzee, J. M., 1992, *Doubling the point: Essays and interviews*, Harvard University Press, London.
- Crow, B. & Banfield, C., 1996, *An introduction to post-colonial theatre*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Dahl, C., 2014, 'Tragedy and theatricality', *The Island. Modern Drama* 57(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.3138/md.0527R>
- Davis, C., 2013, 'Publishing anti-Apartheid literature: Athol Fugard's statements plays', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48(1), 113–129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989412470943>
- Diala, I., 2006, 'Theatre and political struggle: Trends in Apartheid South African drama', *Neohelicon* xxxiii (2), 237–246.
- Dickey, J.R., 1987, 'Theatist as rebel: The development of Athol Fugard's dramaturgy and the influence of Albert Camus', unpublished PhD thesis, Indiana University.
- Foley, A.J., 1996, 'Liberalism in South African English Literature 1948–1990: A reassessment of the work of Alan Paton and Athol Fugard', an unpublished PhD thesis, University of Natal, Durban.
- Fugard, A., 1974, *Statements: Three plays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Fugard, A., 1983, *Notebooks*, AD Donker, Johannesburg.
- Fugard, A., 1993, *Township plays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hodgins, R., 1976, 'Interview with Athol Fugard', *Newscheck* 21 July, pp. 24–29.
- Kavanagh, R., 1985, *Theatre and cultural struggle in South Africa*, Zed Books, London.
- Kruger, L., 2005, *The drama of South Africa: Plays, pageants, and publics since 1910*, Routledge, London.
- Laurea, T.D., 1998, 'Athol Fugard's favourite actors', unpublished PhD thesis, Università 'CA' Foscari Di Venezia.
- MacLennan, D., 1981, 'The Palimpsest: Some observations on Fugard's plays', in S. Gray (ed.), *Athol Fugard*, pp. 217–223, McGraw-Hill, Johannesburg.
- Manaka, M., 1987, 'South African playwrights', *The New Theatre Review* 1, 1–10.
- Maponya, M., 1987, 'South African playwrights', *The New Theatre Review* 1, 1–10.
- Mphahlele, E., 1967, *African writing today*, Penguin, Middlesex.
- Ndlovu, D., 1987, 'South African playwrights', *The New Theatre Review* 1, 1–10.
- Olaiya, K., 2008, 'Deconstructing Apartheid's global gaze: Death and resistance in Fugard et al.'s *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*', *Global South* 2(2), 75–91. <https://doi.org/10.2979/GSO.2008.2.2.75>
- Peterson, B., 1990, 'Apartheid and the political imagination in Black South African Theatre', in L. Gunner (ed.), *Politics and performance*, pp. 35–54, Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg.
- Purkey, M., 1998, 'Productive misreadings. Brecht and Junction Avenue Theatre Company in South Africa', *NELM* 2517, pp. 13–18, WITS School of Dram/Arts, Johannesburg.
- Rae, A.K., 1971, 'Dialogue and characterisation in the plays of Athol Fugard', unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Pretoria.
- Richard, C.E., 1990, 'Athol Fugard: The playwright as a director of his own works', an unpublished PhD thesis, City University of New York, New York.
- Roberts, S., 1980, 'Fugard in the seventies: Inner and outer geography', in S. Gray (ed.), *Athol Fugard*, pp. 224–232, McGraw-Hill, Johannesburg.
- Schoningh, F., 1985, 'Athol Fugard, John Kani, Winston Ntshona: No permit to stay', in G.V. Davis & M. Senior (eds.), *Texts for English and American Studies*, pp. 232–249, Paderborn, Zurich.
- Skordis, R., 2003, 'Improvisation and playmaking: A look at some improvisation techniques and their application during the directing process', unpublished M.A. dissertation, Stanford University, San Jose, CA.
- Smith, C., 1974, 'Talk with Athol Fugard at the Royal Court London', *New Theatre Review* 22 October, 1.
- Steadman, I., 1992 'Performance and politics in progress: Practices of representation in South African theatre', *Theatre Survey* 33(2), 188–210. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557400002404>
- Taylor, M., 1974, 'Fugard waves through the flames', *The New Haven Register* 13 October, 40–41, University of Stellenbosch, Cape Town.
- Vandenbroucke, R., 1975, 'Robert Zwelinzima is alive', in S. Gray (ed.), *Athol Fugard*, pp. 190–197, McGraw-Hill, Johannesburg.
- Vandenbroucke, R., 1985, *Truths the hand can touch*, Theatre Communications Group, New York.
- Walder, D., 1993, 'Crossing boundaries: The genesis of the township plays', *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal* 39(4), 409–422. <https://doi.org/10.2307/441575>
- Walder, D., 2003, *Athol Fugard*, Northcote House Publishers, Hordorn.
- Walder, D., 2015, 'Athol Fugard', in M. Middeke, P.P. Schnierer & G. Homann (eds.), *The Methuen drama guide to contemporary South African theatre*, pp. 125–143, Bloomsbury, London.