**Fugard, Athol (Vol. 9)**

**Fugard, Athol 1932–**

Fugard is a South African dramatist. His plays feature a small cast of characters whose minds are probed by Fugard. Although Fugard depicts lives of desolation and ennui, he is most concerned with apartheid and its consequences. He collaborated with John Kani and Winston Ntshona on three of his most recent works, *The Island, Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, and *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act*. (See also *CLC*, Vol. 5.)

Though there have been plenty of books, films and documents in the past 20 years outlining or illuminating different areas of repression and distortion in South African life caused by apartheid, the … plays by involving Athol Fugard … [provide] the first sustained attempt to show British theatre audiences the terrible effects of the régime in human terms, reaching into the most personal areas of life. (p. 40)

*The Island* is, perhaps,… [more] explicitly political [than *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*or *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act*], as it deals with two detainees on Robben Island, where hard-line opponents of the South African government are kept. The monotonous, soul-destroying, back-breaking routine of their lives is, if anything, rather too emphatically established at the play's outset in a lengthy mime by the two [characters] involved …; and the play goes on to explore their relationships with their basic situation and with each other, fluctuating between hope and despair, mutual affection, exasperation and jealousy. (p. 41)

The play cannot help but be moving on account of the conditions it depicts, particularly at its tremendous emotional climax. Thematically and artistically, it has affinities with Beckett's *Godot* and is none the worse for that…. But, ultimately, the play does not quite reach the level of *Sizwe Bansi*, if only because the characters are not individually delineated and believable to the same degree.

Little remains to be said about *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, which has received unanimous and justifiable critical acclaim…. All that I would like to add is that the play has everything the most demanding theatregoer could conceivably wish for: a strong story-line, with tension and humour nicely balanced; very individual and profoundly conceived characters;… and a political and social significance informing every line of the text without ever becoming blatant or overt. (pp. 42-3)

*Statements* deals with the clandestine love affair between a white woman, a librarian, and a coloured man, the headmaster of a local school, married to someone else. ('Coloured' in the South African sense of the word, meaning 'mixed race'). As most people know, sexual intercourse between people of different races is forbidden in South Africa; and the tension of the situation arises mostly from this fact and partly from Errol Philander's guilt caused by his adultery….

Despite its many excellent moments … *Statements* is, in many ways, the least satisfactory of the three. It is the most obviously a 'play' …, constructed on fairly conventional literary lines…. Fugard fails to clarify the relationship between Errol and his wife and how it affects his relationship with Frieda the librarian. Also, the role of the policeman stands like an afterthought tacked onto the play, never organically involved with the action….

Overall, one feels far better informed at the emotional level as a result of these plays about the grim texture of life for some of the oppressed South African people. Fugard's main strength lies in his ability to create plays on two levels: the bedrock economic and political one and the personal one of characterisation and relationships. These two levels subtly impinge and interact on each other, creating works of art that are emotionally as well as politically convincing. (p. 43)

*Jonathan Hammond, "A South African Season: Sizwe Bansi, The Island and Statements," in* Plays and Players *(© copyright Jonathan Hammond 1974; reprinted with permission), March, 1974, pp. 40-3*.

It is hard to look at *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* as a mere play; it is both more and less than that. One of a brace of theater pieces by the white South African dramatist, Athol Fugard, it was created in collaboration with John Kani and Winston Ntshona, the two blacks who constitute the entire acting company. Significantly, the program describes these works as "devised" rather than written, and *Sizwe* is indeed a device. It is, essentially, three documents stapled together….

Let us not pretend that this is drama, or even literature. It differs from Fugard's best plays, *The Blood Knot* and *Boesman and Lena*, where the structure is much more homogeneous and harmonious, the characterization fully three-dimensional, and where, though the references are South African, the relevance is universally human. Here the construction is rambling and diffuse, and though there is much human savor, the main focus is on specific South African injustice. What is laudable, though, is that *Sizwe* is not just agitprop; that the people, even if they are of a circumscribed place and time, come before the propaganda. So perhaps we can best describe it as poster art. When it is affixed to buildings, fences, or barricades, it is a poster, a call to arms or other organized action. Decades later, when it and others like it are hung in exhibition on museum walls, something else will become apparent: a certain artistry, and maybe even a modicum of art.

Despite these strictures, I do not consider *Sizwe Bansi* unrewarding or uninteresting, except for some *longueurs* in the third section. Fugard, an intelligent, magnanimous, and brave man, and his two first-rate actor-collaborators … have breathed much juicy authenticity into their "device." A new motto may arise from it, to supersede the South African government's "Divide and Conquer!"—"Devise and Overcome!" (p. 87)

*John Simon, in* New York Magazine *(© 1974 by NYM Corp.; reprinted by permission of* New York Magazine *and John Simon), December 2, 1974*.

Athol Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*, which was presented in New York four years ago, is one of the best new plays I have seen in my life [see Kauffman's comments, *CLC*, Vol. 5]…. (p. 16)

[*Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island*] are drawn from the innermost feelings of three gifted and committed men. So it's something more than sad to report that, for me, both plays are disappointing….

The chief trouble is simultaneously the chief emotional asset: the conditions out of which these plays grow. The facts of South African apartheid are as well known, in essence, as they are ever going to be to those who are interested in knowing them; and these plays do little more than elaborate, without deepening our insight into, those facts. And even those facts are interfered with by the staginess, old and avant-garde…. Even more disappointing, because more centrally relevant to the work of making plays out of this material in the first place, is that they illuminate so little imaginatively….

As for Fugard, I've known no one in my lifetime who has worked with greater passion in the theater, but apparently his very passion can misguide him. I presume to think it has done so here. He is a director of strengths, but he is a writer of much greater strengths. He has opted in these past few years to work with actors in "devising" plays: he had his reasons—passionate, I'm sure—for doing this, but the result is wasteful of his best talents. This devising of plays with actors is a function of directors who cannot write original work—sometimes greatly gifted ones like Andrei Serban. But I hope Fugard, a writer, will write. In these plays devised with actors he has slipped into theatricalisms like none I can recall in his other work. These new works, compared with *Boesman and Lena*, are somewhat superficial because they are artistically insecure and essentially didactic, and are thus only about the troubles of South African blacks.

I'm aware of the risks in that "only," but I stand by it, particularly after rereading *Boesman*…. (pp. 16, 26)

*Stanley Kauffmann, in* The New Republic *(reprinted by permission of* The New Republic; © *1974 by The New Republic, Inc.), December 21, 1974*.

*Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* … have received considerable praise, but the critics of the popular press have stressed the politics of these plays in a way that does them a disservice and that reveals much about prevailing (mis)conceptions about the relationship between "politics" and art. These *are* political plays, but are not one-dimensional, undramatic, or inartistic as is sometimes implied by the pejorative use of "political" to imply a limitation in a work of art. The critic short-circuits his analytical function by simply naming a play "political" and dismissing it out of hand, if its politics are "bad," or damning it to faint praise for good intentions, if its politics are "good." (p. 116)

Because Athol Fugard speaks openly about the conditions in South Africa that he abhors, and because his plays are set in his homeland and confront the inhumanity spawned by its laws and values, it is facilely assumed that he is a propagandist and that his plays are mere devices. Art, dramatization, and suggestion are supposed to have been replaced by politics, explication, and emotional marching orders. Fugard, however, can no more ignore the conditions in which he lives than could Faulkner ignore slavery. Fugard's link to his homeland is complete. He cannot conceive of living or working elsewhere, and this intimate tie is evident both in his portrayal of blacks living under apartheid, and his description of the exquisite mating of cobras….

Fugard and his actor-collaborators implicitly and profoundly understand that political values and processes permeate their lives and must, therefore, be reflected in their work. "Politics" is not simply added on to a pre-existing work, nor is it an independent element solely intended from the start. Kani [one of Fugard's collaborators] has said that "it is for the audience to call a play political, not for the artist to intend it so … these plays are called political because they show our lives, not because we are politicians." (p. 117)

Like Ibsen, Fugard might claim, "I am less the social critic and more the poet than people seem generally inclined to believe." He is a kind of despairing pessimist, an agnostic whose faith resides in human beings and the making of theatre. He is not a writer with a cause; would any propagandist state, "I'd like to believe that a play can be a significant form of action but I've never been able to convince myself?"

*Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* opens with a long monologue by Styles, a factory worker turned photographer, whose speech is interrupted, finally, by the visit of a customer who calls himself Robert Zwelinzima. In a flash-back Robert, now called Sizwe Bansi, visits Buntu who, during a night of drunken revelling, discovers the body of a dead man. Sizwe's own identity book prohibits him from working or living in the city and he is convinced by Buntu to switch books with the dead man, Robert Zwelinzima, whose book is in proper order. In *The Island*, John and Winston prepare *Antigone* for a concert at the prison where they are confined. John is called to the warden's office and informed that an appeal has been successful and he is to be released in three months. Ecstatic at first, the friends realize that their close relationship will soon end since Winston has been sentenced to life; they present *Antigone* nonetheless.

*Sizwe Bansi* has attracted more attention than *The Island* (and has been performed more frequently) but is marred in several ways. It is discursive at times, and some of its components are unassimilated, but the subject is powerful and suggestive…. It is only in retrospection that one realizes the accomplishment does not quite equal the potential of the material. The focus created by the opening monologue, and Robert's visit to Styles's studio, is dissipated in the second half of the play, particularly in the seemingly interminable carousal of Sizwe and Buntu.

The central image of a photograph—that snapped by Styles and the one on the identification card—is poignant. A photograph affords a kind of immortality, perhaps the only kind possible to a black South African. Styles calls his studio "A strong-room of dreams…. That's what I do, friends. Put down, in my way, on paper the dreams and hopes of my people so that even their children's children will remember a man…." (pp. 117-18)

Unfortunately, the photographic image is insufficiently sustained, obfuscated in a torrent of words and emotion.

The play also suffers from some over-explanation and an inconsistency in the character of Sizwe. As a newcomer to the city from the government established "homeland," Sizwe is unfamiliar with the difficulty of finding work or living quarters without the appropriate stamps in his book. Buntu tediously explains the bureaucracy of Influx Control, computerized records, permits, licenses, Native Commissioners, and government living quarters—but Sizwe's illiteracy can explain only a part of his innocence. It seems, finally, unbelievable, particularly when he is utterly confused by the opportunity of changing his name. While this underscores his association between name, identity, dignity, and manhood it reaches a preposterous level when Sizwe becomes confused by the imagined effect a change of name will have on his relationship with his wife and children. Near the end of the play he states: "A black man stay out of trouble? Impossible, Buntu. Our skin is trouble." This rings a bit hollow coming from a man who appears so naive and backward and who, seemingly, has never before experienced the impact of the laws and regulations.

*Sizwe Bansi* is also somewhat formless and rambling at points…. (p. 118)

While discursiveness might seem an inherent danger of the collaborative and improvisational process which resulted in these plays, *The Island* is structurally integrated, tightly controlled, and sharply focused…. Kani and Ntshona use their own names in *The Island*…. (p. 119)

Both plays contain aurally haunting moments: A siren blasts as John and Winston exit; Sizwe repeats again and again his new identification number and the repetition becomes an insistent chant, so earnest that one understands the daily significance of this number to the man. Both plays also use the audience. Styles's opening monologue is openly addressed to it and he is assisted at one point by a volunteer. While this is generally a self-indulgent device, there is none of the usual tension and anxiety created when the spectator is startled from his voyeurism and asked to relinquish his anonymity….

Fugard's characters are never the one-dimensional stick figures implied by those who see these plays as political tracts. *The Island* is the story of political prisoners, but also of the loving bond between two men. Styles's monologue in *Sizwe Bansi* on the Ford plant seems to imply an indictment of the capitalistic base, yet in his struggle for some degree of independence and integrity he turns to private enterprise. True, he has few alternatives, but he aggressively protects his investment from the curiosity and reach of a customer's children. (p. 120)

Fugard has stated that he is addicted to the actor and that it has been an obsession throughout his career. Fugard implies that it is for the actor that he writes. In both these plays he has helped create original and full-bodied characters equal to those in his previous work. These collaborations also resemble Fugard's previous plays in at least two other ways—the characters, despite their plight, maintain an infectious and incisive sense of humor, and variations on the play-within-the-play technique are used.

Whatever the desperate conditions of their lives, Fugard's characters are able to laugh—at themselves, at their surroundings. Sometimes it is the laugh which keeps one from the brink of insanity, but more often it is a simpler bemusement, an ability to see and embrace incongruities. (pp. 120-22)

Fugard's characters often engage in self-conscious play to escape themselves or their wretched environments, and their fantasies may lead to an epiphany of self-recognition. Indeed, in a pervasive and painful sense black South Africans are forced to play a role—that of the happy, contented and obeisant semi-human he is thought to be….

In all of Fugard's plays the imagination is a certain road to an equitable and happy world of dreams. In *The Blood Knot*, Morrie and Zach relive their childhood in an escapist ride in an imaginary car. Milly and her lodgers in *People Are Living There* give a party at which, she insists, they must have a good time (whether or not they actually do). Lena pretends to understand the words of the Old African speaking a foreign language in *Boesman And Lena*. In *Statements After An Arrest Under The Immorality Act* the lovers explain how they would spend their last forty-three cents on a day with no tomorrow.

Sometimes characters play by intentionally deceiving others: in *Hello and Goodbye* Johnny leads Hester to believe their father is still alive; in *Sizwe Bansi* the foreman is dependent on Styles for the translation of his instructions to the "boys" and, by Styles's cunning, is made a dupe in the process. In the photography studio, Robert strolls down a make-believe avenue lined with imaginary office buildings, a cigarette in his hand, a pipe in his mouth. John and Winston have a nightly ritual of placing imaginary telephone calls from their cell to their friends back home.

The presentation of *Antigone*, however, is a return to the conventional use of a formal play-within-the-play and its use is more calculated than playful: Insight and comprehension have preceded rather than followed the act of play. The parallel between Antigone, John, and Winston is clear: Whatever the higher law might be, each has contravened the inhuman, immoral, and arbitrary law of the state and is held accountable. This use of a political play within a larger political play raises the question of the relationship between art and politics. (p. 122)

Antigone is not saved, nor Creon deposed, but a statement is made—a dramatization, not a call to arms. The mere ability and strength to make such a statement marks a change from the impotence of Fugard's previous plays. There is a clear shift from the complete powerlessness of *The Blood Knot* in which Zach has no choices and Morrie has some, but does not take them. Mary Benson, an exiled South African, has written, "the characters in Fugard's plays are vital metaphors of human survival." They endure, without self pity. In *Sizwe Bansi* and *The Island*, however, survival is not simply the result of Promethean forebearance or saintly patience. The characters of these two plays begin to take an active hand, however tentative, in their own fate and future. Styles has opened a business and Sizwe breaks the law in order to support himself and his family. There is no call for revolutionary upheaval. For the time being at least, Sizwe uses the system for his own benefit; though somewhat dim-witted he is not impotent, nor as pathetic as Milly, Lena, or Zach. In *The Blood Knot*, the brothers are passive, saved by fate from a confrontation with a white woman. In *The Island*, John and Winston openly present *Antigone* to the prison dignitaries. Characters have developed a sense of pride and are even willing to defy the laws—Winston was imprisoned for burning his passbook in front of a police station.

Since *Sizwe Bansi* and *The Island* are collaborations it is impossible to attribute changes from the earlier plays to a change in Fugard's perceptions. Indeed, this may suggest that the changes are not of his own making. He has been working with improvised theatre since 1967. Although useful, collaboration has been a stage of his development which he has now left to return to the privacy (and security?) of pencil and blank paper. He admits that collaboration does not always allow the opportunity to aver the personal statements he wants to make, "Yes, there is some difference between what I want to say and what we have said." Perhaps, strange as it may seem, *Sizwe Bansi* and *The Island* are more optimistic and hopeful than is his own vision.

Some critics have complained that the material of *Sizwe Bansi* is well known by now and that nothing new has been added. It is true that we have heard before the plea for dignity, "I'm a man brother" and know, intellectually at least, the horror of prison life. However, *Sizwe Bansi* and *The Island* make us experience these things deeply. They authenticate experience outside our own. The subjects are far from hackneyed within the context of these plays because they are so forcefully driven by felt experience. These plays *are*well-known in one very important sense—they are human statements, not political treatises; we respond to them immediately.

*The Island* and *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* appear so pervasively political because the reality, the milieu, in which they are rooted, is so overtly political. Our society is equally political, though less obviously so because of its subtle (but perhaps more insidious) benign neglect, and pale of normality, equality, and legitimacy. (p. 123)

*Russell Vandenbroucke, "Robert Zwelinzima Is Alive," in*yale/theatre *(copyright © by* Theater, *formerly* yale/theatre *1975), Fall, 1975, pp. 116-23*.

In South Africa … the inability of black and white to love each other is legislated by the state, so a South African play on the subject has to be a political play. Athol Fugard's *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* is a play that would rather be about love, but is about politics by force of circumstances, and, by the nature of those politics, is a horror play. On a library floor, a white spinster librarian and a married Bantu school teacher lie in the nude, after lovemaking, and talk—about life, learning, and libraries, about the course of their love affair and the works of Sir Charles Lyell, about reasons for existing and modes of action. (The black man quotes a line from Lyell that has important meaning for him: "No vestige of a beginning and no prospect of an end.") There is a noise outside the shuttered library; the white woman worries about a nosy neighbor—and very abruptly a white man, a detective-sergeant, appears at the side of the stage and reads from a police report: The two people are under surveillance, and the scene we have been watching is the night of their arrest….

I don't know if Fugard himself … had the idea of presenting the play as one continuous scene, with interrogation, trial, and punishment all happening with the characters still in the library, he desperately holding onto his clothes, she clutching a sheet around her, trapped at the moment when the state interrupts their lives. The power of the image is awesome, though Fugard's language doesn't always support it. A genius with the poetry of petty naturalism, he strives for a higher language here and stumbles a few times on his way to it. At the end, he regains his stride with a fine monologue: The white woman, in prison, is learning to grow and to strengthen her spirit.

But the black man has suffered more than imprisonment. I don't know how to convey the effect of his final speech, except to say that there are certain parts of human life that have always seemed closed to art, because they are unimaginable, and for a writer's imagination to leap over one of these barriers is a special kind of triumph. This speech is the nightmare of a black man who has been castrated by a white state and dreams that he is called before the Last Judgment to account for the loss of his testicles. If this is political art, it is on that high level where a political stance renders a major service to art and to the human spirit, making us feel inside something we have always thought was impossibly distant from ourselves. (p. 91)

*Michael Feingold, in* The Village Voice *(reprinted by permission of*The Village Voice; *copyright © by The Village Voice, Inc., 1978), February 20, 1978*.