

Suddenly I could stomach no more of this degradation—not of myself but of all men who were black like me. I felt I would suffocate if I had to look at any more whites baring their hatred for non-whites.”

MR. GRIFFIN WRITES that the Southern newspapers ignored his story when it made world headlines in 1960, except for “one abusive article from Mississippi.” And one pathetic perversion from Johannesburg, which will have reached him from me by the time you are reading this. He has been asked to reply to Miss Webster. But his reply is already in his story. It also makes the best

epilogue to what has been said here, and the best account of the pattern that Mr. Cassirer and so many others so rightly fear:

“The old pattern showed itself again. An organised group essentially subversive, who claim super-patriotic and super-religious motives takes power and quickly becomes oppressive of both whites and nonwhites who are in opposition to it. It is the dictatorship pattern, nothing else. It has been shown as such, analysed, documented. It is a universal phenomenon wherever some popular racial prejudice exists. It espouses a popular cause and drags down those decent souls who think it is on “their side.” Too late

they discover that we have lost freedoms, for the dictatorial group will turn on anyone who does not toe the line. This was the most alarming of my findings. Yet I knew that those very whites whom I sought to protect by exposing this pattern would want my hide. “This is different”, they say. “These groups are fighting to protect us, to protect our children and grandchildren.” But where one bulwark of freedom falls, the next falls easier. Where racial prejudice is fostered against one group, it grows and spreads to others . . . And so the poison spreads, wherever men begin to compromise principles, no matter for what cause.”

‘Fighting Talk’ is silenced

J. B. BOOTH

FIGHTING TALK has been silenced. Its rousing, spirited tones will be heard no more, and there are many who will mourn its passing as one of the liveliest monthly journals in our country.

At the beginning of March, after numerous threatening growls from Minister of Justice Vorster, with the Nationalist press obediently giving tongue, a banning order was served on the magazine, forbidding publication and making it an offence to possess even a single copy.

So, in terms of the Minister’s order, not only must *Fighting Talk* cease to exist but, for South Africans at least, its existence must be as if it had never been.

Not that this will ever be achieved. The impact of the journal on the South Africa scene was considerable, and it will yet be shown just how considerable when the times come for an accounting of the forces which shaped the liberation of South Africa.

It had its critics, of course. For many—especially those who declined to read it—it was too left or too strident. But as the grim realities of Verwoerd’s brand of fascism became evident, there were fewer in the opposition groups who voiced this criticism. Its readers fell into two main groups: those who felt there was too much politics—though this was implicit in its founding to act as an unofficial voice of the Congress movement, and those—particularly its African readers starved of thorough-going political analyses and discussion—who felt that it was too literary. Those who read its literary material formed a further two groups of grumblers: those who found it too highbrow, and those who found it too low.

But a few journals can ever hope to escape grumbles, and the very rumbling is a sign of life and vitality.

For those who battled to bring out the magazine each month, the grumbles were simpler: always too little money, problems of sales and circulation in a country where the committed journals are denied the huge distribution machine of big business. There were also the raids on offices, occasional arrests and swoops by the police on news vendors—such events do not help to promote circulation. Writers were a problem too: many articulate South Africans, even if they refused to join the White laager of doomed baasskap, are too intimidated, the social and political pressures too strong for them to think of writing for so belligerent an anti-Establishment journal. Outspoken writing in this country needs political courage of a special sort.

Yet *Fighting Talk* managed to do it. Month after month, in spite of frightened and difficult printers, in spite of tenuous links with overseas correspondents, in spite, especially in the last year, of bans which made it impossible for members of its editorial board to meet, in spite of bans which made it illegal for some of its most constant and valued contributors to write—and in spite of the banning threat ever hanging over the journal, it came out.

It was a grim struggle against funds, printers, time and police but the staff, led by editor and kingpin Ruth First, battled on.

What it must have cost her to bring out each issue, bright with apparent ease, over a period of nearly ten years, no one will be able to calculate—not even she. Towards the end it was being held together by the most fragile threads: staff, writers and funds were dwindling under the relentless pressures of Vorster’s police state, but it kept going gamely until the final silencing ban.

IN THE PERIOD AFTER its switch to a more radical line—it had started after the war as the organ of the Springbok Legion for returned soldiers—it had managed to carry some fine writing. It provided a platform for some of the top political leaders in the country: men like Chief Lutuli, Nelson Mandela, Monty Naicker, Duma Nokwe, Walter Sisulu. The authentic voice of the political opinion of South Africans in the majority could be found in *Fighting Talk*. It demanded political commitment and passion but also factual documentation in its articles; and its analysis of major issues and

popular campaigns over the years not only reflected the policy of the Congress movement, but also played a vital role in framing it.

Yet it will probably be in the field of literature that *Fighting Talk* will be equally remembered in the long run. For some of the best talent in our country was first unearthed, and was found a forum, by *Fighting Talk*, and it provided an organ for some of our best non-white writers: Alfred Hutchinson, Zeke Mphahlele, Alex La Guma, Dennis Brutus, Richard Rive, Lewis Nkosi, Arthur Maimane, Can Temba, and T. Gwala. Most of these found their feet—and their voices—in *Fighting Talk*. Established white writers also made their appearance, often to state a case on a controversial cultural theme: Alan Paton, Athol Fugard, Nadine Gordimer, H. C. Bosman and Lionel Abrahams.

It is silenced now. Its absence leaves a great gap in

our political and cultural thought: the scene becomes even more sombre.

THAT A VOICE OF PROTEST, of defiance, of sanity, should have been drowned out in this way is frightening. Even more frightening is the marked absence of protest. Like so many other barbaric assaults on freedom in South Africa, this ban will pass ignored or unnoticed by the majority. It is just one of the many blows under which we reel, or submit tamely, or even silently applaud.

Perhaps the silencing of *Fighting Talk* is just a sign that our fighting spirit has also been crushed? Many no doubt can be excused for their silence or apathy. But that the informed and aware and sensitive those who progress to value human life and human values—should remain silent—this surely is unpardonable. ●

A Symposium on the Paton-Shah Play SPONONO

SPONONO SPONONO SPONONO

Jolyon Nuttall

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ALAN PATON and Krishna Shah's play *Sponono* proved a milestone in South African theatre.

If in the final analysis the work were ascribed a failure, there would be sufficient in it that was new, that was evocative, that was the embryo of so much to come, to make it a worthy venture. But, with a steady progression towards a Third Act of extraordinary power, it is a triumphant success.

What are Paton and Shah trying to express? And what are they trying to incorporate in this essentially indigenous play with an essentially universal theme? In notes from a director's log-book compiled by director Shah during rehearsal and printed in the programme, Paton describes the play with characteristic simplicity: "Two people are trying to 'contact' one another."

THE TWO PEOPLE are the Principal of a Johannesburg reformatory and one of the boys committed to the institution. The Principal thinks and rules by the laws of society. The boy—Sponono—thinks by the laws of God, of which the greatest is that man should forgive. In each is bound the other's faith. And in each, through the failure to contact, is the other's undoing.

"Where's Meneer? . . . Where's Meneer? . . . He is my only hope," cries

the boy as he is brought to the empty Principal's office under suspicion of murder. "Meneer" is not there because Sponono in turn has "finished" him.

THE PLAY MOVES on two planes. Acts I and II deal with the realistic facts of life in the reformatory and the steady deterioration of the relationship between Sponono and the Principal. Act III becomes the trial of the Principal in Sponono's mind as he sits at the empty desk of his mentor. The figures from the earlier acts pass in and out of the witness box as the Principal stands in the dock. Is the Principal guilty in not forgiving Sponono, as Sponono forgave others, or is he not guilty? In the decision lies the climaxing power of the play.

SUCH IS THE THEME. What is the medium? Again, a note from the director's log book: "This is pure theatre—mixture of songs, dance, music, mime etc. Play has all these." It is because it has these, in the idiom of Africa that this play represents an indigenous milestone. And it is on this plane that Shah's direction comes into its own. Throughout the play there are grouped on stage two blanketed choirs: Theirs, in the Zulu tongue, the chants that record the ebb and flow of emotions in the minds of actors. In the scenes in the reformatory yard, Shah makes full use of the songs and dances of the people, and the unteachable ability of his cast to mime and mimic. In the primitive court ritual in Act III, a "sangoma"—diviner—is introduced to hunt out the guilty one.

Throughout, a discipline has been maintained that makes these features fit the play. Shah is of the Method school of acting. It is unlikely, with the inherent talent of his cast, that he needed much Method in schooling the actors. ●