

Arts and Africa

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"ARTS AND AFRICA"

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Signature Tune

ELAINE: 'Drama', 'Theatre'. You often hear those two words used as though they meant exactly the same thing. But as far as I'm concerned they really don't. There's plenty of drama in our festivals, ceremonies and occasions like that but the theatre's another matter. It's organised, with some people taking part and the rest as spectators, And in a good many places this form of entertainment just doesn't seem to take root.

There's one notable exception however and that is South Africa. They've even begun to take plays abroad with great success. John Kani and Winston Ntshona are two black South African actors who've taken London by storm. In fact, their first season of two plays was so successful that they're now on a return visit in one of London's best-known theatres. Both the plays have only two characters but with some very powerful acting they convey, even to a foreign audience, what life is like for blacks in South Africa. One of the plays is called 'The Island'. And for South Africans 'The Island' means Robben Island.

ATHOL FUGARD:

Robben Island is seven miles from Cape Town in the Atlantic Ocean. It is our maximum security prison for Black political offenders. All told, at the moment, there are 200 men incarcerated there for political offences - the most important leaders of all our resistance movements in South Africa are in fact on the Island at the moment, serving life sentences: men like Nelson Mandela, Govan M'beki, Walter Sisulu.

ELAINE: That's the voice of the play's author - Athol Fugard and to confuse you a little he's white. He's also the author of the other play 'Sizwe Bansi is Dead'. The company he and Kani and Ntshona belong to is called the Serpent Players and although they've travelled to Europe they haven't yet shown their plays in the rest of Africa.

ELAINE: Now two actors who very much want the theatre at home to develop are Louis Mahoney and Victor Noonoo (Victor's from Ghana and Louis's from the Gambia) so they and Athol and I got together to talk theatre, and Victor Noonoo told me which play he and Louis had just seen.

VICTOR NOONOO:

Last night it was "The Island". It was quite good entertainment and there is a point where the characters are saying that when one laughs so much at a certain point he has to stop and listen which made a point for me because there is a lot going on in South Africa and people talk and nobody listens, but it gets to a point where somebody stops whatever they are thinking of and listens to whatever message the black South African has.

ELAINE: Now what about you, Louis?

LOUIS MAHONEY:

Well I found that it was quite interesting because it gave me an insight not only into Robben Island as a prison but also to the sort of feeling that happens between two prisoners, the fait accompli in which, say for instance, one of the characters decides that he is going to do a play about "Antigone" and this for me seems a way of getting away from the real problem facing them, like the breaking of stones and so on, perhaps it was to curry favour. But I think that that is not so important as the fact that here were two, I thought very poor characters who whether they had committed crimes - criminal crimes or political crimes I don't know - but the important factor was that I don't think that any human being should have been in the condition they were. It was very sad.

I mean, for me it was slightly political but on the other hand it was very entertaining because there was a lot of laughter in it, there was a lot of brotherliness about it and there was one very sad moment when you see the comradeship of the two almost disappear.

ELAINE: Leaving the content of the play for a minute. How did you feel when you left? You've said that it was entertaining, it was political, exactly what was your feeling? What did the play give you?

NOONOO: Well, as far as I'm concerned it was entertainment. I mean the political side of it, the message this play had, I've always thought about it and I knew it exist. Now when I got out of the theatre there wasn't any incentive for me to go and start doing something about it. But purely for entertainment sake I enjoyed myself being there.

ELAINE: Now Athol this is your play and you've just been listening to two people talking about it? How does this make you feel? I mean, why did you put this play on?

FUGARD: Well, Louis and Victor between the two of them have touched on several very real dilemmas. The dilemmas range from the problem of being both entertaining and yet using the stage as an opportunity for talking about things in South Africa, about conditions which we, the three of us, are very, very angry about. That dilemma, the question of how one combines entertainment and one's sense of commitment to a set of political convictions; then in terms of the point that Victor made of leaving the theatre afterwards and not having any real incentive - the play hadn't given him any real incentive to go on and do something about those conditions which we find evil.

ELAINE: Well this play is on in London but let's leave London and take it back into Africa. First of all let's go to South Africa. How do you use and why do you use the theatre in South Africa?

FUGARD: Well, it is just an opportunity to talk about things that a lot of people in South Africa don't want to talk about, don't want to know about. Specifically I work with the Serpent Players, that's the name of the drama group from which John Kani and Winston Mthshona come and where my association with them starts. We regard ourselves as being a very committed group and we very specifically set out to use the stage to both jolt our black brothers into an awareness of their condition and equivalently also to make white South Africans conscious of things that they normally try to ignore.

ELAINE: How do you think we can use the stage? For example Louis, you are from the Gambia, Victor you're from Ghana, I'm from Sierra Leone and this kind of theatre just isn't happening in Africa as far as I know. Why?

MAHONEY: I think primarily because the whole culture of a lot of African countries is based on street theatre. It is based on people around the corner, a trickster doing his little antics. I mean we are not so used to organised theatre in terms of Western theatre.

ELAINE: When we are it has to be very conservative, Western theatre.

- MAHONEY: Right! Or as it is being done now it has to be something that incorporates dance and music, so you have national dance troupes like the ones in Senegal, Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone and Liberia. Now I think there is a movement away from that because you've had people who have been abroad and only by that can they measure what their culture level is so they start forming little cultural stories and putting it into organised theatre, as we know it in the western world. I think it takes time but it will happen.
- ELAINE: Yes, it will happen. What do you think, Victor?
- NOONOO: At the moment the whole thing is happening amongst the black South Africans and it had to be because there is this problem that people want to bring out into the open. Now we haven't got similar problems in West Africa, in Ghana for instance, and so I think if the theatre is going to start in Ghana or people are going to get interested in anything we have to find a problem.
- ELAINE: But surely we have enough problems. We might not have apartheid, it might not be biting but there is enough corruption and poverty. I mean we have lots of silences which have to be broken.
- NOONOO: Yes, yes I quite agree with you but people are able to talk about it without fear of being thrown into jail.
- FUGARD: We're under pressure in South Africa and it is that pressure in a sense, which generates the energy which we direct into our theatre. I think it is terrible that it can only happen that way but in a sense I suppose an artist under pressure is about the most meaningful artist you can find.
- NOONOO: I think it is a very healthy thing to happen. You see it brings out the best in man; like you see these two people on stage and the energy they use to bring these facts out. You are totally involved.
- MAHONEY: Perhaps one important factor is that, you know, we say it is great if an actor can get to the core of the character and know the character very well. Perhaps it is all too easy for these two actors because they are living in an environment where either they've experienced these things in the play or their relatives have experienced it, so it is very true to life for them.

- FUGARD: Yes, Louis is making a very important there. For the theatre we make is made out of our very first hand experience of ourselves or as you suggested, not our own experience because obviously the two actors have not been on Robben Island but John Kani had a brother on the island for many years, Winston Mtshona has had relatives on that island for many years and the little township, the black ghetto, which the two of them come from called New Brighton, near Port Elizabeth, we've often said that Robben Island is in fact a suburb of New Brighton.
- NOONO: You see the only way I feel we can move the theatre away from the Ghana university where it is at the moment is to get plays like this, a play which everybody understands, Ghanaian people are very sympathetic to the South African cause and they understand what is going on there, so I have a feeling that if you could get this play on in Ghana it could start something.
- ELAINE: I was going to ask you, Athol, because you know your plays have moved to Europe, what has happened in Africa with your plays?
- FUGARD: Outside of the work which we do in South Africa itself, which by virtue of the sort of work it is and by virtue of circumstances there it is really 'underground', subversive. I mean we can't ever go public with these plays; apart from what we do in our own country we have never had the opportunity, never received an invitation to show our work elsewhere in Africa. And I must say that for us it has been something of a continual disappointment because we feel we've got a much more important commitment to the rest of Africa than we have to England or to Europe.
- ELAINE: Yes. And Athol what do you feel, take for example, Sierra Leone, if we wanted to take a play like "The Island" to Sierra Leone, financially would it be possible.
- FUGARD: Well, because of the circumstances under which we have to make the theatre in South Africa, knowing that we do not have decent theatres at our command (we have to play in church halls) our productions to start with are always conceived as something which can literally go into a suitcase and travel with the actors. Now in the case of both "The Island" and "Sizwe Bansi" only two actors are involved, that's all, we don't carry any scenery, we don't have any props or the few little things we need can be found on the spot. All anybody who is interested in these plays have to do is to invite John Kani and Winston Mtshona, that's all.

ELAINE: Sounds simple doesn't it. All I can add is: if you ever get the chance to see John Kani and Winston Ntshona, please, please take it.

MUSIC

Fiance Ya Kombo from the Mokoko Cavacha Orchestra, I think I got that right. But, if you think there's a lot more to be said about the theatre in Africa why not join me next week for then we are getting the second part of our discussion with Victor Noonoo, Louis Mahoney and Athol Fugard in "Arts and Africa".

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