

Matsemela Manaka

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Matsemela Manaka began his literary career in the mid-1970s. He was responsive to the ideas of black consciousness, took a leading role in the Soweto uprising of 1976 and participated in many of the cultural developments that ensued. In his work he set out to reconstruct what apartheid had subverted, if not destroyed: the cultural identity of black South Africans. He has sought to

revitalise African tradition in the contemporary urban context and to rediscover South Africans' roots in the culture and history of Africa.

Manaka was born in Alexandra, one of the oldest of the black townships just north of Johannesburg, on 20 June 1956. After his family moved to Soweto, he attended primary and secondary schools there, and then went on to study commerce part-time at Ithuteng Commercial College, Pretoria North. Since for university entrance he required Afrikaans, he also registered to take his matriculation examination as an external candidate at Madibane High School in 1976. When, on June 16, that year, the Soweto uprising took place, Manaka - then just twenty - found himself in the midst of it. Although the immediate cause of the unrest was the imposition of Afrikaans as a language of instruction in schools for black children, the demonstrations also constituted a protest against the whole system of "Bantu Education" introduced in 1953. In common with other students Manaka boycotted exams and, as a student leader, was briefly detained and interrogated by the police; he thus left school without the matriculation necessary

for university entrance. Unlike many of his generation who felt that passive resistance in the form of peaceful demonstrations had been conclusively shown to be an inadequate means of overthrowing the apartheid regime and therefore left the country in search of military training with the banned liberation movements based abroad, Manaka did not opt for exile. Instead he left Johannesburg, hoping that in the quieter rural areas he would be able to recover from the tumultuous events of Soweto.

It was in the northern town of Pietersburg that he first found the time seriously to develop the artistic talents which had hitherto found expression mainly in student drama. He wrote poetry and plays, composed and performed music, made lithographs and woodcuts, and painted in oils. This astonishing variety of artistic gifts has been the hallmark of his creative work ever since, particularly for the stage, where he has increasingly sought to incorporate music, poetry and painting into his productions.

His artistic beginnings Manaka thus ascribes to the impulse of the Soweto events: "I was also born out of those flames." With strict control imposed on the schools and the Black Consciousness

Movement banned in October 1977, art seemed to offer an outlet denied elsewhere. Manaka became a member of the Creative Youth Movement (C.Y.A.) founded by students from Madibane High. Defining its aim as "promoting and developing the creative talents of young people in all aspects of the arts," the group ran creative arts programs for children, mounted exhibitions, and organized creative writing workshops. In 1978 it set up the Soyikwa Institute of African Theater, which ambitiously committed itself to "theater of *people's education*" for, communal theater, original and African theater." This somewhat idealistic program it sought to realise by putting on plays in the townships as well as in the urban areas, by running actors' training programs and theater-in-education projects. For seven years C.Y.A. functioned without a permanent home, based first in Manaka's parents' garage, and then staging productions in the makeshift conditions of the church-owned Moravian Hall. Only with the launching in 1984 of the Funda Arts Center, financed by the Urban Foundation, did the group gain the use of a fully equipped theater.

C.Y.A. proved of great importance to Manaka's career, since it provided the opportunity for him to produce his first play, *The Horn*, and to participate in art shows. At the ^{age} of 21 he submitted a collection of poems to one of the more progressive publishers in the country, Ravan Press, who were beginning to provide an outlet for the work of black writers, long neglected by major houses. Some of his poems were considered good enough to appear in a new literary magazine committed to "writing for liberation" and soon to become the most influential cultural publication in South Africa. Under the title *Staffrider* it first appeared in March 1978. Manaka joined its editorial collective; he thus found himself not only working in a publishing house whose structures in the years 1979-81 were unusually democratic by South African standards, but also right at the heart of exciting developments in black literature: he worked as coordinating editor; he functioned as public relations manager; he developed an informal distribution network; he conducted writers' workshops and helped to establish writers' groups - all tasks which he regarded as consciousness-raising, as a renewed attempt to create a politically united front.

Consistently with this view of culture as a unifying force, Manaka has avoided aligning himself with any organized political movement, though his sympathies clearly lie with the ideology of black consciousness, which through its influence in politics, education, social welfare and culture, had helped to create the climate which culminated in the Soweto Uprising of 1976.

The ideas of black consciousness also shaped the young Manaka's theater practice, although he has adopted a more broadly Africanist perspective since. The strategy of withdrawal from association with whites, the creation of new organizational structures and the conscientization of black people, which, according to Kavanagh, inform the theater of black consciousness, may be seen at work in Manaka's career. He insists on black self-reliance and commitment to all-black productions; his plays have usually been directed, managed, designed and lit by blacks; they are also scripted for all-black casts. The establishment of the Soyikwa group was an attempt to create new structures. Their artistic profile has remained wholly black; no plays by white authors have been staged and there has been no artistic collaboration with whites; they are committed to an "alternative,"

non-commercial status and remain reluctant to involve externally based cultural brokers in the marketing of their work.

Manaka is only too well aware that such a stance is not without contradictions when the Market is virtually the only theater space available to him in Johannesburg and when a theater group born of the ideals of black consciousness must yet accept funding from white-owned business. Not until the political will exists to redefine priorities and reallocate arts funding in a new South Africa is this situation likely to change.

What Manaka understands by the "conscientization of the people" finds expression in the plays themselves and in a number of articles, the most important of which is "The Theatre of the Dispossessed," where he formulated an exhilarating, if unashamedly didactic notion of theatre rooted in entertainment which would give his people courage in their struggle to survive and hope in their quest for freedom.

The corpus of Manaka's work to date consists of some 16 plays and performances. These are - in chronological order - *The Horn*; *Egoli*; - *City of Gold*; *Imbumba*; *Blues Afrika*; *Vuka!*; *Pula*; *Children of Asazi*; *Domba*; - *The Last Dance*; *Siza*; *Koma*; *Toro*; - *The African*

*Dream; Gorée; Blues Afrika Café; Ekhaya. - Going Home; Ekhaya--
Museum Ovesoweto; and Yamina.* On average, then, over the period
1977-1993, Manaka has written - and usually staged - one play per
year.

Manaka's first major production was *Egoli! - City of Gold*,
workshopped with the two actors, John Moalusi Ledwaba and Hamilton
Mahonga Silwane, first performed in early 1979, and substantially
reworked for production at the People's Space Theatre in Cape
Town. The popular success of the production did not prevent the
Publications Control Board later banning the published script as
"undesirable" in terms of Section 47 (2) (e) of the Publications
Act of 1974, which effectively meant that it was deemed
"prejudicial to the safety of the state, the general welfare or
the peace and good order."

Egoli, which later toured Europe, was instrumental in bringing the
work of the young dramatist to the attention of an international
audience - a success confirmed by his second production, a double-
bill comprising *Imbumba* and *Pula*. *Imbumba* ("unity") first
performed under the direction of Ray Hlongwane at the Blackchain
Hall in Diepkloof in April 1980, and *Pula* ("rain") employing the

same group of actors from Soyikwa, crowned a visit to Britain in 1983 with a coveted "Fringe First" award at the Edinburgh Festival.

As a black writer Manaka often experienced harassment in obtaining permission to travel abroad. He was refused a passport to travel overseas with the *Pula* and *Imbumba* tour, his passport only being restored in 1985 after the United States Embassy invited him to visit arts centers and theaters across the country.

Success overseas began to transform Manaka's career, as the opportunities open to him increased dramatically. His theatrical productions could now also be staged at prestigious venues in Europe like the Berlin *Schaubühne* or in the US, where *Children of Asazi* was mounted as part of the *Woza Afrika* Festival of 1986 at the Lincoln Center. Support from foreign embassies inside the country was also forthcoming. Most importantly, however, Manaka was exposed to the kind of theatrical and artistic developments overseas which, due to the combined effects of South African control over the flow of cultural work into the country and the cultural boycott imposed from overseas, were largely denied him at home.

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Although Manaka has gone on record as saying that his plays are concerned not so much with apartheid as with cultural identity, it is nevertheless remarkable when one surveys the work of the early phase of his career - the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period of intensifying repression and gathering resistance - to note just how comprehensive a dramatisation of the socio-economic conditions under which black people suffer in South Africa he provides: the poverty of the rural areas; urbanization and detribalisation; the migrant labour system; forced removals of population; social disintegration in the townships; and crime. Manaka depicts life in the rural areas as dire in the extreme. In *Pula*, when the rains do not come, the crops fail, villagers and animals die, mercy killings of newborn children are performed to prevent their starvation; in *Egoli* transfers of land ownership between white farmers make the wives of absent migrant laborers redundant, their children eat soil and tree leaves, they die of hunger; in *Imbumba* prisoners are employed as farm workers under appalling conditions of labor. Rural poverty is seen to be the prime cause of disastrous urbanisation.

Manaka reworks a classic theme of South African literature - "Jim comes to Jo'burg": in *Egoli* the bright hopes of the migrant laborers streaming into Johannesburg in search of work are disappointed; in *Pula*, Izwe goes to seek his fortune, but is forced to take a job in a shebeen; in *Gorée*, Nomsa leaves her home in the rural Transvaal for her "dream" of the city, only to discover Johannesburg is a human jungle. All of their dreams come to nought.

Egoli, which is set in a mine compound for migrant laborers, portrays the industrial system as it is experienced by black workers: the poor living-conditions; the daily violence of their communal lives; their brutalisation; the burden of separation from their families; the sexual deprivation. The conclusion of the play amounts to a harrowing indictment of the hopeless situation of the migrant: starve in the rural areas or die in the cities.

Egoli was Manaka's first major production (the title is the African name for Johannesburg): it already displays many of the stylistic features so difficult to reproduce on the printed page which have become characteristic of his work. The play is a two-hander in two acts, consisting of a series of scenes from the

lives of migrant laborers John and Hamilton, who work on the mines and live in a compound. The text, though mainly in English, abounds in words drawn from *fanagalo*, a pidgin mixture of English, Afrikaans and Zulu common on the mines, here often used to humorous effect. The set imaginatively deploys only the sparsest of props: a beerbox for a chair, a single naked light bulb as the only source of light, their beds blankets on the floor. The performance proceeds through the creation of a series of memorable theatrical images: in ACT II the workers rising from their sleeping positions are seen to be joined by a heavy chain attached to steel chains around their necks. A more arresting image of servitude it would be difficult to imagine; the ensuing struggle to free themselves of the chain becomes a symbol of the liberation struggle and of its final triumph.

Manaka's reliance on the physical capabilities of his actors, his exploitation of the resources of the human body is evident here in his frequent use of mime, often in flashbacks where the characters mime episodes from their pasts. In the first act John and Hamilton vie with one another in a veritable *tour de force* of mimic technique: Hamilton improvises an erotic encounter with a

prostitute, hilariously playing both roles; John reconstructs his arrival in Johannesburg, miming the dance movements developed by garbage collectors emptying trash cans into a moving truck he learnt on his first job. Hamilton is brought in and the mime sequence opens out into an exuberant multilingual role play, until both collapse in laughter. But mime can shock too, as when we witness the consequences of industrialisation in a macabre scene in which a worker's hand is ripped off by a steel-cutting machine or in the mime sequence involving drilling, blasting and loading culminating in the collapse of a mine shaft. Such scenes also illustrate Manaka's skilful use of sound and rhythm, obvious examples here being the blows John and Hamilton administer in their attempt to break the chain linking them, the drilling noises imitated by the men, the rhythmic beat of their spades striking the stage as they load the kibble.

Manaka also consistently relates music to the theme of resistance. *Egoli* offers a fine example. John sings a liberation song and relates it to the "ancestral songs" he recalls Oupa Phalaborwa singing in the days of his youth, "telling stories that taught us how to live. How to survive the grips of Piet Retief and

fight for our liberation..." And he resolves to pass on the story of his own life to his children in the same tradition of oral story-telling.

Pula, a play constantly reworked in performance and similarly slight in plot structure, (Izwe goes to the city, in search of work, ends up in a shebeen and, disillusioned, resolves to return to the rural areas) is notable for its refinement of the techniques on display in its predecessor. Here mime is used both to depict the working of a generator-driven water-pump and to represent actions of a more ritualistic nature (the slaughtering of a cow for a feast; the utterly harrowing depiction of the birth, mercy killing and burial of a baby which would otherwise have to starve, again a powerful theatrical image of dispossession). This play also sought to involve the audience in the action (in the bar scene), a device Manaka was to develop in later works.

Children of Asazi, premiered at the Market Theater in 1984, was the first of Manaka's plays to be seen in the US. It dramatizes the issue of forced removals of population using as an example the campaign to save Alexandra (where Manaka was born) from demolition

and its people from forced removal to Soweto. It graphically documents appalling black housing conditions: people seeking shelter in corrugated iron shacks, enduring gross overcrowding, unable to pay the rent or without the necessary residential qualification under the pass laws to permit them to live in an urban area.

In recounting how communities are torn asunder and families separated Manaka is able to show the social disintegration this causes the black community through the fates of his characters. Children are abandoned to the streets (for such is the significance of the title): Diliza is the child of a broken marriage brought up without a mother; Charmaine's father is an exile and she fears that her boyfriend's political activism might result in a similar fate; Nduna's wife has left him for a political activist, although she was pregnant by him at the time; Mabu has lost his home to a corrupt black politician who bribed an official to acquire it. Such personal histories determine the attitudes each of the characters adopts to the struggle against removals. The options open to them are few: Diliza advocates outright resistance; his pregnant girlfriend Charmaine is all for

accepting resettlement - she has no choice, since she will need a home for her child; Mabu lapses into silence, before sounding off his defiance at the end.

- 4) *Children of Asazi* has a powerful social conscience: it enters a plea for a renewed morality and a compassionate awareness of the plight of the suffering, the unemployed and the homeless. In spite of this eminently "political" message, the play goes beyond mere protest against abuses of apartheid to focus on human relationships within a situation of struggle.

Politically Manaka relates his work for the theater to the struggle for liberation in the widest sense, involving theater in rural self-help projects as with *Siza*, in literacy campaigns as with *Koma*, in arts training as with *Domba*, and in the rediscovery of the African cultural tradition as with *Blues Afrika Cafe*, *Goree* and *Ekhaya*.

Since 1986, his plays have also displayed more formal experimentation and a more pronounced African orientation. At the same time he was concerned to create a forum which would be a force for unification both politically and artistically. The result was *Domba - The Last Dance*, a combination of drama, music

and dance designed to enable all groups based at the Funda Center, — i.e., the Soyiwka Institute of African Theater, the Madimba Institute of African Music, the African Institute of Art and the photography and film group "Dynamic Images"—to collaborate on a single project. *Domba* portrays the initiation of girls into womanhood through the traditional Venda *domba* dance, otherwise known as the "snake dance." The term "*domba*" refers to the initiation schools where girls are given sex education, but are also instructed in the social history and geography of their country. The play portrays the dance as a symbolic bond of unity and communality between women who teach each other to survive in a male-oriented society. The fact that it also transposes the action to the urban areas led one critic to suggest — quite correctly — that Manaka was here "creating a new form of expression by fusing cultural roots with contemporary experience." Musically the play exploited a full range of African and European instruments available to the students of the Madimba Institute — drums, shakers, and *maraka*, *kiganda*, *murundzi*, *kabasa*, *marimba*, cowbells; and pipe, horn, treble and bass guitars, piano, flügel horn,

trumpet, tambourine, whistle, synthesizer - to perform an eclectic mixture of African traditional and European compositions.

Siza, also performed in 1986, scripted through an improvisation process and with sets designed by Manaka himself, was a Soyikwa Rural Theater production, which, as its title indicates, since the word "*siza*" means "help" or "relief" in Xhosa, was "created with the aim of providing a forum for discussing issues that confront the rural community and how such communities could initiate self-help projects." One such project - the sale of art works - was incorporated in the action of the play, the audience being the potential purchasers! The play was conceived as a rural theater project, the participating student actors themselves running workshops in the rural areas where it was performed.

Manaka's next play - *Koma* - "a musical play on literacy," which tells the story of a young woman graduate working on literacy programs for workers living in migrant hostels, uses texts by major South African writers such as Es'kia Mphahlele, Njabulo Ndebele and Don Mattera, includes popular music from jazz to *mbaqanga*, and experimentally incorporates many of the languages spoken in Southern Africa: English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, Pedi,

Venda, Shangaan, South Sotho, and Shona as well as languages spoken in Malawi and Zambia. The more comprehensive use of indigenous African languages in this play Manaka explains as a partial response to Ngugi wa Thiongo's call for African writers to turn their backs on English and to write in their own languages. This bold experiment in exploring the relationships between race, class and language met with a strong response from audiences. In 1987 Manaka also completed his play *Toro - The African Dream*, described as "the search for self through a cultural collage of drama, music, mime and poetry." Its two protagonists, sheltering in a house on the eve of their intended departure from South Africa to seek "fresh air" in the north, finally reject this option and elect to remain in the country in order to contribute to the struggle for freedom from inside. This two-hander, reminiscent of Beckett, was described by one critic as "a work in progress rather than the finished article," and was revamped for production at the Market in April 1988. With greatly increased forces and a pared-down story-line, the play incorporated much more music and dance in a memorable celebration of the dream of African independence which opens the play, in the singing of

freedom songs, with its evocation of the power of music to effect change and of its role in preserving African culture from Western cultural imperialism.

During the long years of apartheid black South Africans had been cut off not only from the literary tradition of their own people, but also, due to the cultural boycott and to censorship within South Africa itself, from the literature of independent Africa. As the movement for change gathered momentum in the mid-1980s, however, meetings and conferences held outside the country placed black South African writers in the unfamiliar position of being able to travel, not as hitherto only to Europe and the US, but also to Africa. In 1986, amid intensifying international debate about apartheid, a symposium was held in Dakar to which a group of South African writers was invited, among them Manaka. He gladly grasped the opportunity to familiarise himself with the countries and cultures of West Africa visiting Senegal, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Nigeria. Particularly impressed by the island of Gorée off Dakar, a former center of the slave trade and thus a potent symbol of African dispossession, he later took the history of the island as the subject of a play, which he called *Gorée: The spiritual*

journey in search of African dance. The notion of the journey here is open to several interpretations: it describes the journey of a South African to West Africa; it is a fictionalised record of Manaka's own journey to Senegal; it is both a journey of self-discovery and a journey in search of a new South African cultural identity.

↳ The play is a two-hander, both parts being for women, the one an older spiritual healer from Benin, the other a young dancer from South Africa. The story, narrated largely through music, song and dance, is simple enough. Nomsa is travelling through Africa researching dance; she comes to Gorée in search of an African woman, reputedly the finest dancer on the continent. Failing to find her, she decides to return to Dakar, but misses the ferry. From a baobab tree emerges an old woman, who proceeds to relate the history of the colonisation of the island by Europeans before guiding her through the former slave house. She sings of the freedom which Senegal's independence has brought. Frustrated in her desire to return to Dakar. Nomsa speaks of her own life in South Africa, the dream of the city, her disillusionment.

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As the two women make music and dance together, the similarities in their musical histories become apparent: both were talented as children, both grew up in the African tradition, Nomsa as dancer, Oba as *kora*-player; both then received tuition from Europeans, Nomsa in ballet, Oba in the violin. Performing together they begin to reverse the effects of such alienation from their own tradition: Oba begins to play African songs on the violin, Nomsa performs African dances. Together the South African and the West African celebrate their common African culture. Oba asserts that not even slavery could destroy their tradition and despatches Nomsa back to South Africa, bidding her on her return to realise her true cultural heritage.

— In speaking of the need for Africans to reclaim their identity through music, drama and dance, *Gorée* has much in common with previous plays by Manaka. Like *Domba* it uses many African and European musical instruments; the choice of dances is similarly eclectic, the spectator witnessing dance forms from Europe, West and South Africa, used here with startling effect to represent Nomsa's spiritual rebirth or the police breaking up a demonstration in Soweto. Like *Toro* it celebrates the dream of

African independence. Like *Ekhaya* it uses music as a constituent element of the theme.

⌋(Much in the play has symbolic import: the figure of Oba, the Senegalese earth mother; the baobab tree, source of man's basic needs for shelter, food, clothing, even of the material to make drums; the journey itself; above all the music.

In recapitulating the history of West African slavery, Manaka is fussing on the dispossession of Africans - and the analogy would not be lost on his South African audiences - but the form he is interested in is the cultural. Nomsa, for instance, has no knowledge of Africa, she has learnt dance from a European, she has been denied knowledge of the rest of the African continent. On her journey she learns to reintegrate African and South African culture. But as Manaka has asserted, South African culture itself has two sources, the African and the European; hitherto the latter has been dominant. In *Gorée* he seeks to illustrate how the two may be fused more positively. This is demonstrated through music: Oba "colonises" the violin as a symbol of Western culture; she integrates the European into the African culture. Thus Manaka symbolically foreshadows the culture of the new South Africa: the

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African heritage is incorporated into the South African, the South African is brought back to Africa; a new, more balanced fusion of the African and European is postulated.

Blues Afrika Café, Manaka's ^vnext play, staged in the Warehouse at the Market Theater in early 1990, was a most ambitious experiment, which placed a great strain on the young author's budget. Very expensive to put on, it called for a 12-piece band, three professional singers, three male dancers and two actors. Like most of Manaka's later plays, *Blues Afrika Café* placed great reliance on music and dance, the actual spoken passages being reduced to some 8-10 pages of text. But its most unusual feature - and one which rendered the Warehouse a particularly appropriate space for this production - was the format of a cabaret taking place in a restaurant. The action of the play, which concerns the return to the country of a black South African woman who has been married to an American together with her two African-American daughters, takes place in a restaurant where the women tell the story of their lives overseas and sing the blues - to the consternation of the restaurant owner, who demands less politics and more entertainment. Staged in the centre of Johannesburg, the play

sought to remind the audience of the violent reality of the townships beyond its boundaries; at one point a young dancer bursts in, late for the show because he has been shot at in the street.

Manaka here uses food as a way of bringing people together and as an image of unity. The play opens with a village song calling on the people to till the soil and prepare food to strengthen the people for nation-building. Throughout the performance traditional African dishes are served to the audience, while the cabaret format engendered a good deal of inter-action between cast and audience, the singers moving about within the auditorium and improvising scenes with the audience. It is hardly surprising that each performance ended with the audience coming on stage to join the dancing! *Blues Afrika Café*, then, is an interesting example of Manaka's concept of participatory theater, of his increasing adoption of Africanist themes, and of his concern to go beyond the theater of political protest to what he terms "theater for social reconstruction" which will foreground "African cultural values."

Manaka's recent play *Ekhaya* was written in England at the beginning of 1991 at the height of the debate taking place in

South Africa and overseas on the return of the exiles, which had become possible after the changes introduced by President de Klerk in 1990, especially the unbanning of the liberation movements. The return of the exiles, some of whom had been away for close on thirty years, whose numbers were very great and whose personal histories in some cases rendered them highly suspect to the authorities, was subject to many delays and fraught with psychological, political and social difficulties. The play addresses many of the issues involved, but it does so by focussing specifically on the case of a returning musician.

The question of returning musicians had excited a great deal of comment, not least because of the unusual eminence of some of those involved (Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, etc.) and the confused situation created by the apparent relaxation of the cultural boycott.

Although a number of South African writers in exile have made exile itself a theme of their work - Es'kia Mphahlele's *The Wanderers* (1971) and Christopher Hope's *The Hottentot Room* (1986) are good examples - *Ekhava* differs from these in that its author

has no personal experiences of exile, although he has worked with exiles and has familiarised himself with their situation.

It was intended that the play would in its first production, feature a cast comprising some of the exiles who had been its author's informants (Peggy Phango and Nomasonto "Sonti" Mndebele, both singers and actresses; Lucky "Chamza" Ranku, a guitarist; and Josh Sello Makhene, a performing artist and director, all London-based who between them represent several generations of exiles).

Ekhaya tells the story of Paki Goitseman, a musician and erstwhile member of the cast of the London production of the South African musical *King Kong*, who has remained on in the UK in exile.

Three times married - to a South African, Tshiriletso, now dead;

to a Surinamese, Yaba, from whom he is now separated; and to a

...ry of the interminable

... resolves that the time has now come to

return.

H writes to Shoes, his granddaughter in Johannesburg, announcing his impending arrival and asking to be met at Park Station, adding that he is returning in spite of his disturbing "dreams about terror and torture."

As an artist and musician the existence of the cultural boycott complicates his return to the country. Before his departure Amado forces him to realize that his desire "to sing for the people" would constitute a breach of the boycott and extracts a promise from him that he will not perform in public until the matter of the boycott has been resolved.

Arriving back in South Africa, Paki finds himself in the midst of a curfew, which makes it impossible for him to go on to Soweto that night. He and his granddaughter prepare to bed down in the station for the night. Paki tells Shoes of his first wife's death and funeral in exile - he has brought her ashes back for burial with him - and about his separation from his second wife. He also speaks movingly of his longing to return, of his conflicting emotions when contemplating the hardly expected opportunity, and of the fates of some of those who died without being able to do so. Standing in the now deserted station he sings of his own return and of the continuing struggle for freedom. During the song he suffers a fatal heart attack. Among his belongings are found his collection of art works, his manuscripts, his musical scores, etc.

The story of Peki Goitseman's exile and return constitutes merely the bare bones of the play. It gives little impression of actual stage performance with its large number of musical items, repeated use of flashbacks and dream sequences and "surrealistic" in-performance style. Structured in three "movements," the play is set in Johannesburg and London, which enables the author to provide both perspectives on the return of the exiles: that of the people at home expectantly awaiting them and that of the exiles themselves, joyful at the prospect of return but apprehensive of the future.

The play is performed by a "chorus of five," each player being called upon to take multiple roles (there are 13), only some of which are prescribed.

The characters - a heterogeneous group of South Africans at home and in exile as well as Nigerian, Surinamese, Jamaican and Black British - collectively present a spectrum of people of African origin: at home, in exile and throughout the African diaspora.

The first movement is set in the heart of the old city, Diagonal Street, outside the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. Three people are on stage: a shoeshine girl, a news vendor selling *The Sowetan*,

whose prominently displayed headline reads "Exiles come home," and the shadowy figure of the guitarist Lombo, who is conceived in the dual function of traditional street musician and ancestral spirit presence, and whose soft playing underlies much of the action. The brief second movement set in London is designed to portray personal and political aspects of Paki's situation before he sets out for South Africa. It comprises three dream sequences, whose purpose is to reveal his private anxieties, his expectations and memories of the home country, and an amusing but rather contrived debate between Paki and his wife on the pros and cons of the cultural boycott. The dream sequences are quite different in character: the first is a humorous encounter between Paki and an uncomprehending representative of white officialdom, ignorant of his country's history and of the languages of the majority population. The second takes the form of a long poem spoken by Paki as he recalls to mind the labour and living conditions to which he is returning. Inspired by a series of photographs by David Goldblatt, the poem evokes the plight of workers forced to commute long distances from their villages to their places of work, lamenting the suffering, the undermining of their manhood

and the destruction of family life which the migrant labor system inflicts upon his compatriots. Between the two there occurs a harrowing nightmare, in which light and sound effects are used to depict the hanging of prisoners whose bodies drop one by one to the stage, which is gradually revealed to be strewn with corpses covered by newspapers.

The third and longest movement depicts Paki's actual return to South Africa. Preparing to spend the night on the station, he and Shoes are confronted by the drunken Des and his friends, "the blues people," who at first try to prevent them occupying the corner of the station they regard as home. It is this makeshift sleeping place which is described by the homeless Des as his "Ekhaya" - his "home" - the only time the term is used in the play.

Into this final movement are inserted two flashbacks, the first taking the form of a partial re-enactment of the funeral ceremony for his wife Tshiriletso in London at which the actress playing Shoes, rapidly transformed into a Black British girl, delivers an impassioned oration critical of the manner of her death from alcoholism and calling on her fellow exiles to go back home with

dignity. The second flashback then depicts his separation from his second wife, the Surinamese Yaba.

Many facets of the personal lives and political situations of South African exiles have gone into the making of this play: the circumstances which forced them to leave the country in the first place; the psychological difficulties of lives lived out in the frustrating and artificial climate of exile, expressed here in alcohol problems; the strong sense of loss at the fate of those who died in exile before they were able to return home; the spirit of community among exiles; the expectations and fears associated with the question of whether to return at all; the practical problems in the actual process of returning; the effects of the provisions of the cultural boycott on performing artists who do return; the question of how exiles should be received when they return; the legacy which the artistic work of the exiles represents for the country; and the task of reconstruction which faces them on their return.

In view of the intense violence which accompanied political developments throughout 1990 and of the fact that the exiles were coming back into a situation of violence, it was the author's

intention to add a section to the play on how to deal with violence, which would stress grassroots unity and relate through music and dance the celebration of the exiles' return to the search for political harmony.

Manaka ends *Ekhaya* with one of the most powerful scenes in all his work: a blazing image of colour and sound celebrating the unity of all the arts - literature, music, painting and film - and the renewal of African culture which the reintegration of the exiles into the South African tradition represents.

When Paki rises to his feet to sing "a song about being back home to reinforce the struggle for freedom" and suffers a heart attack, Des and Shoes, in a frantic search for his medicine, unpack his bags, filling the entire stage with the objects he has brought back home with him: "books, music records, cassettes, video cassettes, original manuscripts of poems, plays, music scores, film scripts" - the legacy of the exiles. As they do so, Lombo, the ancestral spirit who presides over their return, picks up a score lying on the stage and starts to play the final chorus "We are the living link / the African Heritage," which fades into *Nkosi sikelel'i Afrika*, the national anthem not only of Black

South Africans but of much of the African continent, too. This final profession of Africanist faith symbolically relates the struggle for total liberation in South Africa to the rest of independent Africa.

Ekhaya is Matsemela Manaka's most ambitious play to date. Its interest and importance lie in the fact that it fixes a historical moment in contemporary South African cultural politics - the return of the exiles, the cultural boycott, the role of art in the reconstruction of South African society.

At the same time the play seeks to relate the question of South African exile to the African diaspora and to locate South Africa within the African tradition. Artistically it seeks not only to combine in performance the talents of South African artists from inside and outside the country, but to celebrate in its conception the unity of all the arts.

Matsemela Manaka's varied talents as painter, poet, musician and playwright have enabled him to transcend the stark format of protest theater and to develop a theatrical practice characterised by exuberant experimentation and innovation. His contribution to

South African theater essentially lies in his concern to focus on the broader issues of conscientization, black political unity and liberation within a commitment to African cultural identity expressed through new forms of theater which will renew African tradition in a contemporary context. In the transitional South African society of the coming years, that commitment can only gain in importance.

INSERT
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