

Review

M. M. Molepo

Ilanga Le So Phonela Abasebenzi

This is a personal and a rather subjective view of this worker's play. I think that many people will read different messages from the play.

The play is produced by Junction Avenue Theatre Company, a non-racial group which started to operate in 1976. The Company is staffed by Witwatersrand University ex-students and other people working at the University. Since its commencement the Company has produced about nine original plays and one film.

An interesting feature of the play is the background of three of the performers, namely Samuel Gwazilitshe, Alpheus Nhleko and Mizkayifani Makhoba. They are all workers who have personal experiences of the issues they put forward in the play. Samuel Gwazilitshe is a migrant worker from the Transkei and is employed in a factory in Benoni. Mzikayifani is also a migrant worker. He worked in a metal factory in Benoni: he lost his job because of a dispute with the management, and joined the mines. Alpheus Nhleko also worked in a factory in Benoni, lost his job and was unemployed at the time he performed in the play. To these men, performing in this play was more than manifesting acting skills, it was a question of bringing their daily-life experiences to the stage. They are faced with what it means to be a black migrant worker.

The introductory song by the actors carries the overall message of the play, i.e. don't give up, the struggle continues and they hope to overcome. This sums up the struggle which is faced by workers in their relations with management. The introductory monologue by Samuel is moving, and reflects the working conditions faced by workers in industry. He complains that management want to turn them into machines. He complains about the fast pace at which they work. He gives a vivid picture of conditions in the hostels where they live and sleep. Regardless of these unbearable conditions in the hostels, workers are still expected to report on time and perform their exacting and exhaustive daily jobs.

This discussion of life in hostels leads to a debate amongst the actors as to whether it is better to stay in the 'kitchens', i.e. white suburbs. Although this means staying illegally with a woman domestic servant, in their opinion it is better than residing legally, but miserably, in hostels. Staying in the suburbs (servants quarters) compensates to some extent for a lack of home environment in the hostels which is faced by migrant workers. However, it also means that many workers run extra marital affairs some of which ruin their family relations and marriages. Although one may see this as a form of protest by workers against the unbearable and inhabitable conditions in the hostels, their life in the suburbs has disadvantages as pointed out above.

The introduction of a trade union to one of their fellow workers (Samuel) who did not know of a trade union, reflects the workers' awareness of the need for a labour movement. The labour movement would serve as a powerbase for their bargaining with management. At this stage the workers showed some resistance as manifested in their relations with the 'boss boy' (Siphiwe Khumalo) who, although he is a worker, is associated with management. He is seen as a messenger carrying the instructions of management.

There is a lack of clear communication between management and the workers. The line of communication which is available is a very long one, which is always via the 'boss boy'. The poor line of communication reflects a need for workers' representation.

The accident which came upon one of the workers (Alpheus Nhleko) revealed the impersonal attitude of the Medical Officer (Ari Sitas) who treated the injured worker. The monologue which follows gives a vivid exposition of the hazardous conditions under which they work and the harsh attitudes of the management. This made the workers more militant in voicing their grievances and demands. Their request for the recognition of the trade union they joined was met by a patronising attitude of management. The same attitude is reflected by the representative of the labour department (government). This is a strategy adopted by both management and the government to circumvent the workers' demands for a trade union. The attempt by the government and management proved fruitless as reflected in the debate between the workers and the labour department representative (Alpheus) over a liaison committee. The management and labour department representative on the one hand argued that a liaison committee is the right representative body for the workers, while the workers insist on a union. This is an interesting part of the play as it brings to the surface the conflict between the management and government on the one hand and the workers on the other.

The typical allegation by management that the trade union is an outside influence is ridiculed by a humorous explanation by the workers that they are the plant's employees, the trade union represents them, and they want to discuss the problems which they experience in the plant, so there is no question of outside influence.

The incident which led to the sit-in strike shows the arbitrary decision-making power which is enjoyed by management in the absence of a trade union. The incident is coloured by the racial issue as it becomes apparent that the culprit (Mzi) would not communicate clearly with the manager who found him outside the plant's yard looking for the 'boss boy'. A lack of understanding of each other's language led to the arbitrary dismissal of the workers, which was followed by a sit-in strike by other workers who demanded an explanation of the incident and reasons for the dismissal of their fellow worker. The other workers were also fired, arrested and charged with illegal striking and faced long periods of unemployment.

Although the management has the advantage of drawing new employees from

the readily available pool of 'reserve army of labour', the fired workers showed determination against many odds they faced. In my opinion, the strike and the resultant arrest and charges define more clearly the conflicting interests of the workers on one side and management and government on the other.

The concluding monologues which addresses the other workers who come to look for work is appealing and shows the long struggle faced by trade unions in their need to organise workers as a class; which goes beyond organising them in relatively small units of employees.

This is an educative piece of theatre if seen against the background of the present struggle between the trade unions and management and the government. Although the play goes as far as the struggle for recognition of the workers' union, the present South African industrial climate is more complicated. The struggle is not simply one of recognition, it is further compounded by the question of trade union registration in terms of the recent government legislation. Recognition of a union by management and its registration with the labour department are closely related and influence each other. One often reads in the press that such and such a management refused to recognise such and such a union because it is not registered. Most of the unions are not willing to register because they believe that the respective legislation under which they should register does not serve their interests (as workers). They believe that the bargaining power-base for which they strive will be eroded and brought under more control. This shows the role which is played by the state in promoting the capitalist class.