

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

*Published with the  
permission of The Daily News,  
Durban*

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. ●

## Z. N.

*Published with the permission of Spark*

THE WIDEST POSSIBLE praise has been accorded Alan Paton's and Krishna Shah's *Sponono*. True indeed the production and talent assembled are of merit and technical points of production are well handled. The questions we would like to answer are: what is the message conveyed by the play and what is its social significance?

Counterpoised at contact point are three strands of thought—Christian morality explained in the words "forgive seventy times seven"; the white man's burden of looking after the black and trying to adjust the world to suit them both; and the black man's burden of trying to find a place in the sun.

Reduced to simplest of terms it is a projection of the African Image, an attempt to explain social relationships between black and white such as we have in South Africa from a common point of view acceptable between both black and white.

THE REFORMATORY is an interesting setting for this social milieu. But because the

drama at the reformatory is removed from the social realities that determine the lives of the people—hardships in the townships, poverty, unemployment etc.—it becomes a tussle between men's minds—a kind of spiritual idealism as opposed to social realities.

What we cannot overlook, however, is that the white man's burden (or paternalism) is only the other way round of explaining white supremacy. Looked at this way the top dog is white and the black man is the ward to be looked after. The white man cannot forsake this mission, Sponono says: "You are charged (also) for having deserted your religion. There cannot be a greater offence." Sponono finds the principal guilty. He sentences him "because he did not know that he was his brother's keeper."

THIS SEEMS to be a satisfactory solution of the problem. But it does not instill any joy, it leaves everybody disillusioned. This is the highest point Christian morality (in the play) can reach. There is virtue in forgiveness or conversely an eye for an eye. Sponono forgave through and through but could not forgive the man who did not forgive him.

This pathetic note is the climax. The contact point which would have been Christian morality has failed. The spiritual idealism falls apart. Sponono and the principal do not understand each other. In the nursing of spiritual values they have overlooked the social back-

ground that has nurtured them. The tutelage advanced by the principal gets too big for him to control and he runs away—desertion in the play. Sponono does not realise that he has overgrown wardship, hence he says to the principal: "When I needed you most you were not there. Why were you not there?"

The answer that he had finished does not satisfy Sponono. It is as if Sponono would go on to say: "You destroyed me and you shall destroy yourself."

STRIPPED OF CHRISTIAN MORALITY and spiritual idealism it becomes a grim struggle between man and man. Of course the one is black the other white. It all ends in a deluge. Sponono's victory is a dream, a make-believe as fantastic as what he would have liked young Ha'penny to uphold. Is it far-fetched to say Sponono is doomed to an end as sad as Ha'penny's?

What is quite clear is that the principal's mission (the white image) has failed. Christianity has not given the solution. The spiritual world of Sponono is far from reality.

But it cannot escape the reader, including the author, that the struggle of man against man is, at its highest and most idealistic, not a struggle for spiritual values or black against white, or against Christianity; nor is it even a variant of white supremacy, but for equality of opportunity for all. ●

Z.N.

## Alan Paton talks about SPONONO

**Question:** In Krishna Shah's Director's Log Book, he quotes you as saying 'Two people are trying to "contact" each other and this is its thesis'. Would you like to add to this?

**Paton:** Two people are trying to *reach out* to each other and that is the whole thesis. I think that is true. I don't want to add to it.

**Question:** What other themes did you want to bring out?

**Paton:** You see, I think that once you have decided what your story is and you are trying to tell that story, then, if it is a story which means a lot to you, a lot of other sub-themes come in, probably many of them unconsciously. People see them afterwards, but it was not your intention to bring them out. I was just going to tell this one story of this boy I had in the reformatory who formed a great attachment to me, and who had these very high ideals and principles, but who couldn't live up to them. And you know, in a reformatory, when you have got six hundred boys and you know that you can perhaps turn three hundred of them to law-abiding lives, you have to give up the other three hundred. It is no good breaking your heart over the other three hun-

dred, so you do something about the three hundred you can do something about.

**Question:** Did you bring in the other stories from *Debbie Go Home* just to counterpart the main *Sponono* story?

**Paton:** Yes! And to give some depth to the reformatory scenes too.

**Question:** In what ways have the reactions of critics and individuals interested you?

**Paton:** I was very struck by the diversity of meanings that people gave to the play. Some people thought that, because it was a story with one person who was white and one who was black, no contact between them was possible. Another person called it 'self-torment' or something—absolute rubbish. I didn't go through any torment—it was my job—suited me down to the ground. I just had to give this boy Sponono up for he had to take what was coming. You've got to cut your losses. You can't break your heart over every one—what a life it would be.

I do object to criticisms from other people who are playwrights or aspire to be playwrights. I don't think that playwrights should review playwrights—novelists shouldn't review novelists.

Is it a condemnation of Christian ethics? People wrote letters to me saying it was. This idea was never in my mind—it was not a judgement of any ethics. It was the extraordinary predicament in which these two people were caught. One is to love you too much so that you don't care about anything. The other is to love you so little that you have no hope. The question was insoluble between these two I suppose. It is hard enough between two ordinary people. But Sponono was a hard case.

**Question:** Do you think people and the press have seen the message as racial rather than human?

**Paton:** Some people, not all. I think that the part of the Principal could be played by a black man without having to alter the play in any way at all. The situation in this country adds some dramatic quality if that one man is white. When the Principal is brought to trial in the third act it adds dramatic quality. In the actual script there is nothing to indicate that he should be a white man.

**Question:** Could you have written the play in non-South African terms?

**Paton:** Is the play universal? I'm inclined to think so. Backgrounds often matter. On one hand it is quite permissible for someone to write a great Nigerian drama that means nothing to us here, and means still less to people in Scotland. On the other hand Shakespeare's plays could have been set in any background. For example, *Hamlet*: it doesn't matter whether that is in Denmark or not; the background is incidental. But if the theme of a play is not rooted in some kind of local place it must lose a lot of its colour and emotion. Did you ever see the film *Black Orpheus*? There was a beautiful piece of work. But if you had taken away the local colour, the carnival, I don't know what would have been left—I think some warmth and colour would have gone out of it. *The Blood Knot* in some respects is a play that a South African would understand better than anyone else. Many of the English critics sniffed at the whole thing with a lack of comprehension.

**Question:** Did the third act, with Sponono's thoughts magnified into half an hour, come off as you wished it to?

**Paton:** Yes, it did.

**Question:** What feature of the production most excited you with its potential?

**Paton:** The thing that most excited me was that African acting had never reached that standard before. It has never had a chance.

Another category—the chorus too I thought very exciting.

**Question:** Do you think that it is fair to call it a play?

**Paton:** Well, others may differ, but I thought so. One reviewer in Port Elizabeth said that it was a morality play. Which I suppose in some sense it was.

**Question:** Do you feel that any particular points need work doing to them?

**Paton:** Yes, of course, many. This question has more to do with the making of the play rather than the actual production. Well, this is the first experiment in collaboration between a person who is essentially a writer and a person essentially a director. The play is really a joint product. It is not mine. For example, these dreams of grandeur with which Sponono consoles himself each time he has been knocked over, when he becomes a great chief. It was the director who identified that with what one might call Africanism. It could, I think, have been done without. But he decided to do that this way, and I accepted it.

**Question:** To finish; what are the future plans for the play?

**Paton:** Krishna Shah hopes to produce it in New York. In Durban we got a lot of fun out of it. We really got to work with these people all those weeks. ●

## Makerere Journal

*A twice-yearly publication of the Faculty of Arts, Makerere University College*

### Number Seven - now available - contains:

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS—*Some notes on the presentation by African novelists of the individual in modern African society*—by John Reed, Lecturer in English at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.

AN OUTLINE HISTORY OF TANU—*An account of the emergence and triumph of the Tanganyika African National Union*—by George Bennett, Lecturer at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Oxford.

THE NEED FOR SELECTION AND GUIDANCE SERVICES IN UGANDA—*The diagnosis of an urgent problem*—by K. J. McAdam, Head of the Department of Educational Psychology at Makerere University College.

THE CRIPPLED TREE—*A study of a new play by H. W. D. Manson, the Tanganyikan-born dramatist*—by Trevor Whittock, Lecturer in English at Makerere University College.

THE AIMS OF LIBERAL STUDIES IN THE SIXTH FORM—*A lecture delivered to the conference on General Studies in the Sixth Form held at the Institute of Education in January*—by Eric Lucas, Professor of Education at Makerere University College.

WHAT IS AN AFRICANIST?—*A review of the First International Congress of Africanists held at the University of Ghana, Legon, in December 1962*—by the Rev. F. B. Welbourn, Warden at Makerere University College and one of the East African delegates to the conference.

#### REVIEWS

*A History of East Africa* by Kenneth Ingham—reviewed by George Shepperson.

*Introductions to Literature*, text books written for schools in Africa reviewed by Geoffrey Walton.

*Annual subscription: 50c S.A. (5s. stg., \$1 U.S.), to The Secretary, Makerere Journal, P.O. Box 262, Kampala, Uganda. (Please cross cheques, and make payable to "Makerere Journal").*