



Historicizing Anglophone theater in postcolonial South Africa: Select political and protest plays

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which Anglophone dramas in postcolonial South Africa became a tool of political and protest theater. It examines the emergence of Anglophone theater, explores its development into political praxis and discusses the performance or non-performance contexts, as well as their specific socio-political milieux, with reference to the select plays from South Africa. These plays are compelling as they characterize specific tensions internal to South Africa, while alluding to colonial legacies and global coercion. Historicization is a crucial phase in this study and the key part of the methodology that establishes their political and aesthetic significance, both at the time of performance and after. The central argument of the article is that Anglophone theater of South Africa is subjected to – and bound by – socio-political and cultural dynamics of the country; the emergence of political and protest theater is often caused by subtle or overt subterfuges of biopolitics exercised internally within this postcolonial territory.

KEYWORDS: *Postcolonial Drama, Athol Fugard, Sizwe Bansi is Dead, The Island, Mbongeni Ngema, Asinamali*

1 INTRODUCTION

[D]rama may not be very effective in achieving short term political objectives. In the long term, [...] it has been and remains a powerful influence on changing social attitudes, on the gradual development of the collective consciousness. It is not the direct appeal, the surface message that is most effective, but, in keeping with the essential nature of the dramatic, the indirect implications of the dramatic action, the meaning that emerges, as it were, between the lines of the dialogue, from the wider reverberations of the action (Esslin 1988, p.172).

Dramas, as Esslin pens it, function as powerful aesthetic arms in responding to the socio-political and cultural nuances in society: they have political objectives. This article explores the ways in which Anglophone dramas in postcolonial South Africa became a tool of political and protest theater. It explores the way/s in which such dramas can be effective in reaching political objectives: how they can progressively lead to alter the collective consciousness in society, and how they can create a strong positive effect on social attitudes. Hence, the methodology employed is a process of historicization of Anglophone Theater in Postcolonial South Africa, with a focus on the plays produced during the latter half of the 20th century.

These plays are compelling as they characterize specific tensions internal to these postcolonial nations, while alluding to colonial legacies and global coercion. Historicization is a crucial phase in this study and the key part of the methodology: it gestures a way of reading the plays, that establishes their political and aesthetic significance, both at the time of performance and after.

Thus, the article examines the emergence of Anglophone theater, explores its development into political praxis and discusses the performance or non-performance contexts, as well as their specific socio-political milieux, with reference to the select plays from South Africa. As such, the details obtained through historization are embedded in the analysis and discussion in the article. The central argument of the article is that Anglophone theater of South Africa is subjected to – and bound by – socio-political and cultural dynamics of the country; the emergence of political and protest theater is often caused by subtle or overt subterfuges of biopolitics exercised internally within this territory. Biopolitics, simply, is a political schedule which takes the administration of life and populations as its subjects: it refers to the subjugation of human life processes through diverse political strategies and mechanisms which are regulated under regimes of authority (Foucault 2003; 2008).

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was built broadly on a qualitative methodology study: as noted, historicization is the key part of the methodology that establishes the plays'

political and aesthetic significance, both at the time of performance and after. Hence, the analysis is based on the reading of the performance histories in South Africa, with a focus on select dramatists, theaters and plays: Athol Fugard and Mbongani Ngema are two significant cases in point. The historicization process is supported through the political context extant in the country, especially the influx control exercised by the government during the 20th century. Two Apartheid Acts which provide material for all such protest South African plays are essential to historicization, hence briefly presented in the article.

2.1 Influx Control in South Africa

Even before the 1950s,¹ black Africans were deprived of the universal franchise – except in Cape Province and Natal – while only whites could engage in skilled jobs in the mining industry (Mines and Works Act, 1911). It was illegal for Black citizens to own lands, except in small areas restricted to them by the white rulers – Natives Land Act 1913 (e.g Hammond-Tooke 1993, Graver 1999 & Ross 2008). Nevertheless, it was in postcolonial South Africa, under the National Party's reign², that segregation rules were explicitly imposed and exercised to the greatest extent. Two very significant Acts are briefly examined below.

The key intention of the Group Areas Act and the Pass Law Act in South Africa (during the NP's sway) was to banish non-whites from the cultivated and urbanised geographical areas in the country, and to

allocate such areas for white settlers (e.g. Graver 1999; Hammond-Tooke 1993). Fanon writes that “[f]or a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity” (1963, 44). The NP's Group Areas Act allowed to assign the most developed lands for whites, and the least developed rural outskirts to non-white people. Black others were dispossessed of their, to use Fanon's words, “most concrete” (1963, 44) assets – lands – and were exposed to hunger, disrespect, and subjugation.

Despite the independence gained from British rulers, this is an affirmation of NP's racial discrimination. Ashcroft et al. write that “racism is actually *predicated* on speciesism” (2007, 198) [original emphasis] – a term used to “designate the belief of most human cultures that they are superior to and very different from other animals” (2007, 197). Racism enables individuals to consider “a group's unchangeable physical characteristics to be linked in a direct, causal way to psychological or intellectual characteristics and which on this basis distinguish between ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ racial groups” (Ashcroft et al 2007, 181). Thus, a belief that the white rulers were superior to the black natives led them to violate the norm of equality in distributing lands.

As a result, ten homelands called Bantustans were reserved for black people in the rural areas, while the peripheral

¹ South Africa gained its independence from the British colonizers in 1948.

² This will be elaborated in the next section of the article.

areas in the urban cities known as townships were allocated for the non-white communities (e.g. Graver 1999; Hammond-Tooke 1993). State differently, approximately 80% of land was allocated for white citizens – 15% of the population of the country.

This alludes to Fanon's pronouncement made in 1967 in *Black Skin, White Masks* about white colonizers' egocentric obsession and acquisition: "[t]he white man wants the world; he wants it for himself alone. He finds himself predestined master of this world. He enslaves it. An acquisitive relation is established between the world and him" (2008, 97). According to his standpoint, when it is applied to apartheid influx control mechanism, racial groups (black and Indian in particular) had either to experience hardships – such as shortage of food and vulnerability to diseases in their homelands – or travel long distances to townships to find work, leaving behind their family members. Being away from their homelands meant that they had no access to emergency services such as hospitals and administrative offices, as anyone living in the wrong places was forcibly moved or imprisoned and harassed. An exception was made for domestic workers who could stay in their white masters' residences; however, his family members were not allowed to stay in the white master's house.

According to the Pass Law Act, also called Passbook Law, all South Africans over 16 years old should always carry a passbook with them, a document similar to a passport. Non-white citizens without a valid entry into white zones were arrested,

incarcerated and subjected to other physical and verbal harassment by the government officials (e.g. Beresford 1989; Glaser 2001). Furthermore, non-whites had to have special work permits endorsed on their passbooks, which had to be renewed annually, to find employment. Black citizens were obliged not only to carry their passbooks, but also exposed to inspection by any policemen or authority. The passbook was a biopolitical device to exercise the Group Areas Act, used in implementing racism.

Evidently, these two laws acted as a control contrivance applied to a population as a whole: black individuals were collected as masses, marginalized, and confined to their homelands and townships in order to exercise the government's power. It was a way to expel the black majorities from the white zones because, despite the state's coercion, ruling Afrikaner minorities of the NP had a battle to dominate the majority South Africans. As noted previously, more than four-fifths of the citizens in South Africa were black natives. Chukwu-Okoronkwo wrote that the state "consolidate[d] on achieving their obnoxious objectives, with political power in their kitty, therefore, the white minority had to come up with several instrumentation to subjugate the black" (2011, 19). Hence, the two acts regulated South Africans in an economical and efficient manner. This echoes one of the intentions of biopolitics – to capture and regulate people as a "global mass" (Foucault 2003, 242-243), which was actualized mainly through racism in society.

Any discussion of Foucauldian biopolitics requires a brief explanation of the concept of biopower. The processes of biopower connect both at the level of individuals and at the level of population as a whole (Foucault 2003). The level applied individually is “the anatomo-politics of the human body” (Foucault 2003, 243), which is affected in turn by the aspects related to life in general – death, birth and diseases. Anatomo-politics induces a particular conduct or behaviour on the individuals’ bodies. It ensures the individuals’ discipline, enhances their capabilities, and maintains their docility. It is concerned with disciplining and systematising the human body.

Yet, the second aspect of biopower focuses not on the individual species’ bodies, but as a whole population – on biopolitics. The primary target of biopolitics is “birth rate, the mortality rate, longevity” along with “a whole series of related economic and political problems” (Foucault 2003, 243). From the late eighteenth century, this primary target has been extended to “control over relations between the human race, or human beings insofar as they are species, insofar as they are living beings, and their environment, the milieu in which they live” (Foucault 2003, 245).

Foucault explains that, “we have [...] the emergence of something that is no longer an anatomo-politics of the human body, but what I would call a ‘biopolitics’ of the human race” (2003, 243), which regulates populations as a whole, while being controlled by political sovereignty. Foucault claims that “unlike discipline, which is addressed to bodies, the new non-disciplinary power is applied not to man-

as-body but to the living man, to man as-living-being; ultimately [...] to man-as-species” (2003, 242). He adds that this new power is “not individualizing but, [...] massifying” (Foucault 2003, 243) man as a whole. It “deals with the population, with the population as political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem” (Foucault 2003, 245). Foucault contends that “State racism – a racism that society will direct against itself, against its own elements and its own products” (2003:62) – is one form of biopolitical operation. Implicitly, biopolitics describes the ways human beings exist in society, not only as legally recognised national of a state, but as biological entities under the coercion of politics.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Emergence of Political and Protest Theater in South Africa

Blumberg and Walder state that “[b]oth Brecht and Piscator shared a view of the theater as a weapon in the class struggle; and it is in these terms that much dissident or oppositional theater in South Africa was conceived during the Seventies and Eighties” (1999, 5). Kruger observes that theater of the 1970s and 1980s is distinctive, not simply because of its political themes or the forms, but owing to the growth of an audience both within the country and abroad to “deflect overt suppression by the state” (1999, 147). Theater in this era is rebellious and devoted to turning against subjugation exercised by the state, especially by sensitizing the audience for such a

transition (Kruger 1995). To discuss these claims further, it is necessary to mention the appearance of English-language theater on-stage and the country's political ambiance during the pre-colonial era.

Dutch, British, German and French plays, which were staged in South Africa in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century during the period of Western colonialism, provided the basis for the twentieth century South African theater; the exposure to English language and European ideologies through the church resulted in the emergence of English-language theater (e.g. Graver 1999, Hutcheson 2004 & Kruger 1999). In particular, the schools run by the British colonizers trained black people to express themselves through missionary and biblical teachings. Bantu Men's Social Centre founded in 1924 in Johannesburg, and Bantu Dramatic Society (BDS) are two examples of such training, which resulted in the birth of dramatists including Herbert Dhlomo,³ the first author to publish in English – *The Girl Who Killed to Save* (1936) (Graver 1999, Hutcheson 2004). However, according to Greenwald et al.'s categorization of South African theater, the BDS's productions are missionary-influenced plays, and are uncritical of the political atmosphere (2002). These BDS dramatists were

impeded by “fragmentary education and limited access to local and touring performances in the white theaters”; thus, they were “no more amateur than their white counterparts” (Kruger 1999, 47). What is implicit through these observations is an absence of explicit political setting in such theater.

The enactment of political and protest movements in theater became gradually visible with the emergence of the Afrikaner Nationalist Movement, developed as the National Party (NP), and the Black Nationalist Movement as the African National Congress (ANC) established in 1912 (e.g. Glaser 2001). After achieving independence from the British reign,⁴ and by winning the election in 1948 on an apartheid platform, the NP continued to impose British regulations by manifesting apartheid legislation in South Africa; the ANC began to react against the NP's regulations. The NP's law used a major biopolitical apparatus to classify all the inhabitants into four racial groups – white, coloured (mixed-race), black and Indian – primarily based on appearance.⁵ As South Africa was claimed by the NP as a white persons' country, all other racial groups were denied many human rights, particularly the majority, black citizens (Glaser 2001). In this respect, the impact of

³ Bantu is originally taken from the Zulu word, “abantu” (Bantu as used by the colonizers) meaning “people”: in Zulu it is the plural word of “umutu” which means “person”. Yet, Bantu is used generally to refer to many ethnic groups (approximately 500-600) in Africa (e.g. Graver 1999 and Glaser 2001, Kalfani et al. 2005).

⁴ Dutch people (Afrikaners/Boers) colonized South Africa prior to the British and formed the majority of white settlers in South Africa. The country became a British colony:

consequently, an anxious situation of anger between British and Dutch settlers was developed which reached its climax in the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902): however, in 1910, the country became independent under the British rule, while Afrikaner rulers established the Union of South Africa (Glaser 2001).

⁵ This was according to the Population Registration Act No 30 of 1950.

the Group Areas Act (1950) and the Pass Law Act (1952) – implemented to maintain influx control – is significant for its masked coercion in regulating black people. Consequently, theater became a platform to respond to the injustice and coercion of biopolitics implemented through apartheid segregation.

While the NP was involved in implementing laws and regulating black populations subtly, resistance to them also gradually emerged through political movements and theater. The involvement of the ANC led by leaders like Nelson Mandela, and the Black Conscious Movement (BCM) led by Steve Biko was crucial (e.g. Glaser 2001; Mandela 1995).

Yet, once resistance emerged, the subtlety of the NP's biopolitical mechanism turned to overt coercion. By establishing a Freedom Charter in 1955 and receiving support from other political groups, the ANC was engaged in non-violent activities and protests: two overt violent events were the killing of 70 protesters in 1960 in Johannesburg by the police and Mandela's life imprisonment in 1964 at Robben Island (Mandela 1995). The BCM, which was established in 1969 mainly with the aim of deconstructing the NP's language policy to promote Afrikaans as the language of instruction at schools, was suppressed: Biko died in police custody in 1977 after a violent police interrogation.

Referring to the BCM movement, Kruger states that “[t]he domestic political atmosphere” also emerged as “state-appointed administrators of the black universities responded to student protests against apartheid in general and discriminatory educational policy in particular by closing down the universities and detaining student leaders” (1999, 130). What is implicit through the NP's counteractions is how the state manipulated its power in subjugating the protestors through explicit modes of violence.

To examine theater's resistance towards the NP, it becomes necessary to delve into the development of theater praxis under the NP's rule. In 1948, a definite Afrikaans theater came into being with the establishment of the National Theater Organization (NTO), which developed two significant organizations – the Art, Music and Drama Association, and the Rehearsal (RR) in Johannesburg where Athol Fugard initially worked. As Smit argues, the founding of the NTO is an “evidence that Afrikaans [...] had attained [...] recognition of cultural parity with English” and Afrikaans had “left behind” its previous status as “kitchen” language. (2010, 485). Smit adds that it is a great achievement for people whose mother tongue was Afrikaans.⁶ Evidently, despite the establishment of the NTO, black people's participation in it was extremely limited as the NTO favoured “white people”. This was witnessed through the

⁶ Dutch descendants (Boers/Afrikaners) spoke *Afrikaans* – a language variety originated from Dutch and appeared in the 17th century. However, with the advent of British colonisation, Afrikaans was defamatorily

named as “Cape Dutch”, “African Dutch” or “Kitchen Dutch” until the late nineteenth century, until its recognition as another language variety similar to Dutch and English in South Africa (Glaser 2001).

banning of their dramas, based on the apartheid monopoly of the NTO, as evinced through the following observation:

From its inception this organisation had no place for black creative participation, although reliance upon black labour for the carrying out of all menial tasks was not dispensed with. Members of the Board of Governors as well as actors together with all other theater practitioners were white: despite the appellation “national” the two companies formed were Afrikaans and English playing to white audiences only (Orkin 1991, 57).

What is apparent through Orkin’s statement is the subjugation and ostracism experienced by black theater practitioners during the apartheid era; because black theater is not given a space by the NTO, this expulsion is anomalous to the political milieu. It also showcases “the social realities” of the era (Smit 2010, 486) – racial segregation.

However, Graver and Kruger’s claim is that since the late 1950s, a “distinctly South African theater” also arose which “respond[ed] to the vibrant mix of cultures [...] and challenge[d] the brutal policies” (1989, 272). This attempt to establish a distinctively South African theater, despite the ostracism experienced through the

NTO, culminated in Fugard’s *No Good Friday* (1958) and *Nongogo* (1959), and the RR’s musical production, *King Kong* (1959) (Graver & Kruger 1989). For instance, *King Kong* had all black cast: Fugard performed with his black South African colleague, Zakes Mokae, in Johannesburg (Graver and Kruger 1989, 272). The emergence of these plays can be regarded positively, providing a forum for black peoples’ participation.

Wertheim writes that Fugard is a pioneer in raising concerns of, and for, black peoples in his dramas, and his plays were allowed on-stage during the 1950s partly because of Fugard’s “moderation” in presenting political ends (2000, 3). Kruger argues that Fugard did not “inaugurate” in writing about South African issues: “[w]hat Fugard did was to make “political theater in the Western mode” visible, available, and ultimately legitimate to a degree impossible for the small, beleaguered interracial groups associated with liberals or communists in the 1930s and 1940s” (1999, 19). Fugard was able to receive a large audience due to the “moderation” in his works: it may also allude to his non-black identity,⁷ and his initial collaboration with the RR, which was supported by the NTO. Implicitly, such plays were not explicitly “dissident or oppositional”, not “deflect[ing]” the state’s biopolitical operations.

3.2 Theaters’ Overt Resistance

Although the NP took actions to defeat the political and student protesters, theater

⁷ His father was a descendent from an Anglo-Irish English-speaking family and his mother was Afrikaner (Kruger 1999).

practitioners started to dramatize the challenge against injustice and brutality by sensitizing the community to the NP's biopolitical mechanism. Hence, in the early 1970s, oppositional theater was abundantly produced, with the BCM's support and inspiration. Such protest plays were performed in non-whites' geographical locations in urban cities; often performed by black people, these plays were "markedly more political" and had a common inspiration for black people's lives (Graver and Kruger 1989, 273).

Simultaneously, theater groups sans the BCM's direct support also were founded: two main groups were "the Space in Cape Town (opened 1972, closed in the early 1980s) and the Market in Johannesburg (opened 1976)" (Graver and Kruger 1989, 273). The Space and the Market theater used "their national and later international visibility to evade censorship in the turbulent 1970s at a time when the violence of the apartheid state became well known worldwide" (Kruger 1999,147). Staging *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972) and *The Island* (1973), both in the vicinity and abroad, are two cases in point (Walder 1993).

Nonetheless, the rulers took immediate actions to curb this political resurgence, by censoring the plays and harassing the players (Walder 2003). Hence, the emergence of protest theater since the 1970s was "curtailed by Afrikaner suppression of political mobilization"

(Kruger 1999, 73). Because of the ideological revolution in theater, "[a]ll the leading groups had folded or were banned by 1975": only "multi-racial" plays were permitted to be staged in the cities as "the government need not worry about their rhetoric sparking a revolution" (Graver and Kruger 1989, 273).

For instance, some dramas of Gibson Kente, despite the absence of explicit political ideologies in them, were banned in the 1970s as he was believed to be influenced by the BCM (Orkin 1991)⁸. The most disgraceful and terrible incident was the death of Mthuli Shezi – the author of the play *Shanti*: Shezi "was pushed in front of an oncoming train at the Germiston railway station during a scuffle with Germiston railway policemen"; later following the Terrorism Act, the rulers arrested the producers while banning the play (Orkin 1991,1).⁹ Another significant example is Fugard's *The Blood Knot* premiered in 1961 and renamed as *Blood Knot* in 1987. It was censored as it explicitly disparages the Act related to inter-racial marriages, and metaphorically resists the racial categorization law in South Africa. What is evinced here is Fugard's vital contribution to protest theater as he "dared to challenge the social system of his country" (Wertheim 2000, vii) and voiced "on behalf of those silenced or ignored by their society" (Walder 1993, ix). Graver highlights how the "performative power" was intensified analogous to the political resistance and

⁸ Kente, being a Black South African from Soweto, contributed greatly to black theater (Orkin 1991).

⁹ Shezi was the elected Vice President of the Black Peoples Convention in 1972 (Orkin 1991).

insurrection against apartheid in society in the 1970s and 1980s (1999,1-2).

As a result, people became more aware of the biopolitical violence and subtle subjugation means exercised by rulers. Paradoxically, the process resulted in the closure of Space in the 1980s and the non-closure of the MT, for the Space was more open for anti-apartheid productions whereas the MT “tend[ed] to respond to the tastes and attitudes of the relatively affluent English-speaking liberal whites – slightly less than seven percent of the population” (Graver and Kruger 1989, 274). Moreover, the MT produced European classics ranging from Shakespeare and Brecht to Dario Fo and local history plays (Kruger 1999); thus, after the “demise” of the Space, the MT “dominated” theater (Kruger 1999,148). It is evident here how theater was still subject to violence, prejudices and segregation similarly to the early days of the establishment of the NTO.

Meanwhile, under the inspiration of the BCM, theater practitioners also started realizing the need for theater which goes beyond mere protests: they were less interested in the theater that made complaints about the apartheid laws to the administrators. Instead, they understood the need to position themselves as eye openers and to sensitize the oppressed populations dominated by apartheid exploitation (Alcock 1999).

One way to achieve this was to change the dramaturgy to include Physical Theater

(PT). As Alcock defines, PT’s “intervention lies in its exploration of a performance aesthetic, of stereotypes of gender and sexuality, as well as the manner in which the physical body is perceived in society. The body itself becomes the site of exploration” (Alcock 1999, 53). What is implicit through this is that the audience observed on-stage what they were experiencing, the violence of the NP’s regulations. Alcock justifies the significance of PT and writes that:

[i]n the manner of agitprop theater of the Seventies and early Eighties in South Africa, the body becomes central to the mobilization of people as audiences. The body is very often used as a weapon. Physicality, rather than what is verbally expressed, as in dramatic dialogue, drives the message home (Alcock 1999, 53).

PT does not merely engage in dance and mime but exposes “the gamut of expression, both physical and verbal, at their [actors’] disposal” (Alcock 1999, 51)¹⁰. Through PT, performers’ bodies are emphatically employed to explore tragic encounters and discrimination, hence PT is very significant for black dramas. Kruger also acknowledges that the techniques in PT “including the mimicry of animals and humans, the creation of location through gesture, and knock-about comedy, have proven particularly effective for crossing barriers of language, culture, and age”

¹⁰ Alcock notes that Buckland “makes a conscious intervention in the body politic, in the politics and social conditions of the

country, setting out ‘to activate people’ and thereby provide a means of empowerment” (1999, 51).

(1999,189). Hence, with PT, dramatists made their plays explicitly defiant by stimulating the audience.¹¹ It must be noted here that the term “MT” is based on the location of the theater venue, whereas PT is based on the performance features of dramas.¹²

3.3. Sensitizing the Oppressed

Parallel to the gradual development of the BCM and PT, the need to address and awaken the oppressed, rather than the oppressor, became imperative as the apartheid brutality became prominent: consequently, the theater of Resistance also came into being in South Africa, which is “distinct from the protest of Town Theater” (Mda 1996, 201), and sensitized the audience to socio-political conditions. As Mda adds, unlike the MT, which aimed at awakening the oppressor to the tragic consequences of apartheid, Resistance Theater (RT) addressed the oppressed directly “with an overt aim of rallying or of mobilizing the oppressed to explore ways and means of fighting against oppression” (Mda 1996, 201) whilst changing the perceptions among the oppressed.

Theater in South Africa gradually became political and protest platforms in counterattacking the apartheid injustice. *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, *The Island* and *Asinamali!* were produced despite such political calamity: these plays originated mainly due to overt apartheid discrimination in political and theater

domains, and as a theatrical resistance to biopolitical stratagem in the country.

Sizwe Bansi is Dead was first staged in October in 1972 for “a single Sunday night performance for a members-only audience” at the Space Theater in Cape Town (Kruger 1999,147). Raji states, however, that “[n]ot a few people felt revolted by the theme of the play” when it was first performed (2005,140) because of its non-conformist protest nature and apartheid criticism in it.

Yet, the debut production was prohibited by the police even “before a multiracial audience” (Walder 1993, xxix). It was then staged in its two actors’ (John Kani and Winston Ntshona) hometowns in Johannesburg and New Brighton before being “banned in Cape Town” (Kruger 1999,147). Although it moved its “predominantly white audience [...] to laughter and tears” at the Space Theater it “provoked” the black people in the performers’ hometowns (Kruger 1999,13). These performance histories highlight the way the play informed its audience, allowed the black communities to respond to apartheid violence.

Also, the play “creat[ed] a stir” in Britain (Walder 1993, xxix) when it “embark[ed] on an overseas tour” in the 1970s (Kruger 1999,147). Although the play was positively received in London, it was criticized as it “contained propaganda [...] discrediting the South African Embassy in London, the Government and White South

¹¹ A fine instance of the use of PT and “physicality” to address resistance against the white dominion is performed in *Asinamali!* (1985).

¹²It is a theatrical genre not specific to South Africa.

Africans in general” (as cited in Walder 1993, xxix).¹³ Yet, as Shelley notes, many Western critics admired it with “fervor” (2005,157). The play was successful, despite the themes being specific to South African concerns.

Actors were “imprisoned briefly before an international outcry secured their release”, at a later performance after four years (Walder 1993, xxix). As Kruger argues, “[t]he virtual publicity of anti-apartheid theater took concrete shape in real time and space in the performance and reception” (1999,13). Shelley agrees that the play’s political emphasis was apparent when staged before “a mixed audience at the Space Theater” (2005,161).

Fugard describes in Ronald Harwood’s *A Night at the Theater* how the play was profusely received in 1974, in a black Township in St Stephen’s Hall in New Brighton: “a plain brick building and one of only two usable halls in an area with a population of 250,000” (Shelley 2005,162). Fugard includes a material example of political theater in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*:

I have never yet known an audience that did not respond to the first half-hour of the play as if it wasn’t getting its money’s-worth of laughter. New Brighton was more than just “no exception” [...] I couldn’t also help feeling that something more than just a

response to a brilliant comedy performance was involved (Fugard 1984, 30 as cited in Shelley 2005,162).

These performance histories underscore the play’s success as it was well-received amidst censorship, and as a forum of political contexts, moving beyond their entertainment aspects (e.g. Walder 2003). The production in St Stephen’s Hall also alludes to Shelley’s suggestion that what “all that poor theater, true theater, requires is an actor and an audience” (Shelley 2005,163). Shelley writes how a player (a New Brighton production), invited a person from the audience to the stage so that s/he could examine closely how a photograph is taken (Shelley 2009): this allowed to “abolish the distance between the actor and audiences, by eliminating the stage, removing all frontiers” (Grotowski 1991, 41).

Referring to a performance event of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Fugard also states that:

[a]fter watching the first few seconds of the operation [...] in stunned silence [...] a voice shouted out from the audience: “Don’t do it brother [...]” Another voice responded ...“Go ahead and try. They haven’t caught me yet.” [...] I realized I was watching a very special example of one of theater’s major responsibilities in an

¹³ This is originally from “Plays not anti-SA-Fugard”, *Eastern Province Herald*, Port Elizabeth (5 Feb 1974).

oppressive society: to break...the conspiracy of silence.... The action of our play was being matched...by the action of the audience. ... A performance on stage had provoked a political event in the auditorium (Fugard 1993, 31-32 as cited in Kruger 1999,153).¹⁴

What is staged here is an exchange of passbook photographs, a black person's passbook with that of a dead person. Fugard's reference here underscores the play's significance in informing the audience about the discrimination exercised against black people in society. It depicts how the audience responds to such politics, by "break[ing] the conspiracy of silence" towards vicious biopolitical stratagem. Inequality experienced by Black people is voiced from the audience: "[d]on't do it brother". Evidently, the play is a political struggle experienced in society. Hence, as Gordon asserts, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* "achieved an intensity of performance that may be unequalled in the history of South African theater" (2012, 384).

The Island was first produced with "the title *Die Hodoshe Span* in The Space, a fringe theater located in Cape Town, South Africa on 2 July 1973" (Raji 2005,139), "followed in December of the same year by another production, using the same cast, at the Royal Court Theater, London. In 1974, the play, together with *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, was taken on a tour of the United States. Both plays were produced at the

Long Wharf Theater, New Haven, Connecticut, and on Broadway" (Raji 2005,149).

As Gordon writes, *The Island* is "a revolutionary piece" as it constituted a new model for postcolonial South African theater (2012, 379). Raji argues that the play's success lies in its "dialectical interaction between the content and form" and the theme, which is "topical" for the era (2005,149).

Similarly to *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, the criticism levelled against *The Island* claimed it contained propaganda as it sought audience in Britain after being banned in South Africa. The aim of propaganda is justifiable as the play and the black people were subjected to the state's coercion. When it was shown many years later in South Africa, actors Kani and Ntshona claimed that every performance is an "endorsement of the local and international call for the immediate release" of Mandela "and all political prisoners and detainees" (Walder 1993, xxix). Thus, the actors were outspoken about the political message in the play, further demonstrating how theater functioned as a political platform.

As with *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, performance contexts of *The Island* are significant: the play exposes apartheid regulations and helps the audiences to understand the state's biopolitical stratagems. These plays, Ndlovu confirms, "introduced agitprop to South African audiences who looked to theater for musical entertainment" (1986, xxiii).

¹⁴ The original ellipses are used here.

Ndlovu writes that subsequent to *Woza Albert* (1979), which was “the biggest theatrical event” in South Africa produced by Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa (Ndlovu 1986, xxiv), *Asinamali!* was produced by Ngema. *Asinamali!* indicates how Ngema had “grown and developed” since *Woza Albert*, using a “pot-pourri of ideas [...], his own theatrical techniques and [...] more than thirty youngsters” in it (Ndlovu 1986, xxiv-xxv).

The premiere was staged at the MT in 1985, within two years of the rent strike and the killing of a political protestor (e.g. Lindfors 1999; Ndlovu 1986). The play “combined the rousing testimony of black men in prison with a rather blunt ridicule of white bureaucrats and black and white women that reduced differentiated testimony to a generalized call to arms” (Kruger 1999,162). The “direct address in English punctuated by song, usually in the vernacular, and the masculine testimony [...] provide the format for theater in the wake of the Soweto uprising and in the shadow of the ‘emergency’ in the 1980s” (Kruger 1999,157) for *Asinamali!* to receive much audience. Moreover, *Asinamali!* “allows a metropolitan audience to have it both ways, to pity the victim and share the sense of outrage” (Kruger 1999,168).

When interviewed by Pippa Stein at Committed Artists Johannesburg in 1989, Ngema narrates his performance experiences of *Asinamali!* Before staging it in the MT, Ngema states how they underwent the state’s harassment after a performance in Lamontville, the place where the political protest had occurred, culminating in death:

The group were supposed to do only one performance in Lamontville township, [...] but they ended up doing six. Three performances a night. People couldn’t stop saying, “We want it! We want it!” [...] On the fifth night, [...] the police just stopped the show and took one of the actors. In the end they took three actors and released two of them. The third actor, a member of the youth movement in Lamontville was sentenced to eight years (Stein 1990,104).

Ngema adds that the play became successful after these “mini” performances in black areas and under suppression:

I can’t remember how many months it took after this for us to get the final script together but eventually I worked it out and gave it to the guys. [...] We read through the script and we started our final rehearsals. [...] [We] organise[d] performances around Johannesburg: Sebokeng, Retoria and Soweto (Stein 1990,105).

What is rendered visible through these narratives and performance histories is the courage taken to perform the play amidst the state’s suppression. The play disturbs the rulers’ political reign and is received positively in black towns. What is also apparent is how Ngema’s theater is

devoted to addressing contemporary political issues, similar to Fugard's works.

The performance praxis of select plays shows how theater intervened in eliminating apartheid brutality. When the political leaders were engaged in the process of nation-building through political attempts, dramatists were engaged in this process through their plays, as supported by Kani's statement that the aim of every performance was the release of political detainees. They acquired what they fought for, as evidenced through the release of Mandela in 1989 and the end of apartheid legislations. Black theater of the apartheid period functioned as a sharp weapon, moving beyond its aesthetic and political spectacle to local and international audiences; they are narratives of biopolitical operations in the apartheid era.

4 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Anglophone theater praxis in South Africa – although originated from colonial encounters, and initially influenced by Western education and missionary teachings – underwent a transition in relation to the political ambiance of the independent domain. The actualization of this evolution in the theater is evident in South Africa. Quite parallel to the socio-political tensions, which occurred through segregation laws (yet often culminated in overt violence), political theater emerged as a response to the NP's biopolitical procedures in South Africa. As this theater drew the audiences to interrogate the state's mechanism of regulation, the state extended its dominance to dramatists and

plays. Anglophone political theater's emergence, existence, and performances in South Africa are diversely affected by the political milieu of the territory. Noticeably, Anglophone theater praxis represents how the movement from colonies to independent nationhood in the region was shadowed by a biopolitical procedure that worked to shut down the potential for more equal and emancipator societies to emerge.

The historicization of South African Anglophone theater highlighted the crucial roles Anglophone dramas play in propelling challenge to dominant biopolitical regulation. However, the problem emerges then whether biopolitics represented in the play-texts always compels their audience to attend to the plurality, the diversity, and the complexity of them in a responsive manner – to be proactive to bio-politicization and to be vigilant of it. A definite response to this is beyond the scope of this article, especially due to the feasibility aspects, and paucity in performances, as South African theater, are not performed or received in a homogeneous manner.

Irrespective of the paucity of performance contexts, English dramas from South Africa may play a noteworthy role in constructing a space for subalterns who are beleaguered through biopolitical operations. Subalterns here refers to people who are politically, socio-culturally and geographically marginalised or excluded from, and exploited by, the hierarchy of power. This is because, on the one hand, the characters serve as icons and participants in national and political

movements in ways that are both restrictive and potentially liberating.

On the other hand, English is a means to gain wider attention to the play-texts. As noted previously, South African dramas played a major part in the eradication process of the segregation laws as the plays were in English, thus were performed abroad, in European contexts to gain international attention to the national issue. Moreover, Anglophone play texts are also exposed to a considerable number of readers now, despite the absence of its performances.

Ostensibly, the plays which explicitly critique the injustice and oppression of their state and the internal biopolitical subterfuges have been censored, officially or unofficially, within the nations. Yet, dramatists have been able to gain an audience to their play-texts abroad. There is no doubt, about their potential as the plays explicitly and critically explore biopolitical violence: they encourage their audience and readers to form a response to biopolitics. Yet, it is open for future studies to explore if other genres such as films overtake the role of theater in this respect.

Future research could address issues around the divergences and convergences in characters in the corpus selected. Similar to many other readings of mainstream postcolonial literature, this article is also limited by its English-language framework. It would be enlightening to compare plays from the national languages about biopolitical phenomena, translating them into English for a wider readership. All these gestures

fall within the responsibility of further and much-needed research.

This article, however, is a space to closely understand afresh and deep the biopolitical mechanism used within the countries and universally as represented through the historicization of the select political and protest plays from South Africa.

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