

Art and Revolution in South Africa : The Theatre of Athol Fugard

The theatre of Athol Fugard needs little introduction. He is virtually the only South African playwright well known outside South Africa. He is regarded in the capitalist countries of the west as being one of the finest playwrights writing today. What's more, he appears to have emerged from 'a theatrical vacuum' like St George to challenge single-handed the apartheid dragon.

The liberal critics have assessed Fugard and his work and the St George and the dragon image is now 'established'. Marxists will need to make their own independent assessment of his work and if that image does not measure up to facts, disestablish it.

Culture and theatre in South Africa :

The three distinctive characteristics of South African society are political oppression, economic exploitation and racial segregation. Liberal writers have traditionally attached primacy to the last of these. To them apartheid appears to be primarily a racial structure. Marxists however reject this analysis. Rather they see apartheid as a structure which ensures the provision and reproduction of cheap labour for the capitalist class and which ensures the continued domination by two minority national groups i.e. the Afrikaans and English speaking whites, of the black majority. Racial segregation and the fostering of ethnic divisions in the various black groupings are regarded as largely mechanisms created for the purpose of preventing black unity and perpetuating the 'national' domination and economic exploitation of the black majority in the interest of the white minority.

In the analysis of cultural relations within this framework the ideas of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci prove useful, especially his concepts of 'rule' and 'hegemony' and his writing about the political function of the intellectual. Admittedly Italy and South Africa are only partially comparable. For instance, the element of 'rule' or direct coercion is greater in South Africa than in Italy and the 'crisis' situation Gramsci refers to, in which the state relies on naked coercion, is virtually the 'normal' situation here. Then again the dominant group, the Afrikaaner nationalists, have not attempted to 'legitimize' their own culture in the working classes in the way Gramsci describes. Nevertheless this does not mean that the South African ruling classes do not make complex and intensive use of cultural and ideological forms of domination. Despite their reliance on direct coercion the Afrikaaner nationalists also strive for cultural hegemony in the society. In this they have competed with the English-speaking white group, which is powerful in certain fractions of capital and favours the rapid abandonment of pre-colonial forms in the industrial areas in favour of those of modern capitalist society.

2./ One must stress...

One must stress however that the cultural rivalry of these two groups has taken place within the overarching framework of their joint domination of the black groups in the context of what Steve Biko called 'Anglo-Boer' culture, which has been the common cultural weapon in the common political and economic interests of the white groups. This process becomes increasingly marked as the Afrikaaner, English and imperialist capitalists increasingly rapproche.

Crucial in the operation of cultural hegemony is the role of the intellectual. Gramsci talks of the traditional intellectuals i.e. the artists and scholars, who 'consider themselves an autonomous group independent of the ruling class' but who are tied to the establishment indirectly and in ways sufficiently subtle to permit them to maintain illusions. However this 'indirection' also 'creates room for independent thought and action'. Their true duty, according to Gramsci, is to use this independence to join the revolutionary classes.

The proletariat proper i.e. that of the black groups, along with the peasantry are, as the classes in society that fundamentally oppose the bourgeoisie, the revolutionary classes, having, as Gramsci put it 'the future in their hands'. These classes are able to produce the basis for a genuine alternative hegemony and a non-exploitative society. Fugard's work must therefore be examined as it relates to the interaction cultural, political and economic, of these classes, henceforth referred to as the majority.

It is not possible here to describe the development of theatre in South Africa - from the drama of the pre-colonial societies and the animal satires of Job Moteame and Azariele Sekese in Lesotho of the 1890s to the intense and extensive theatre activity of the years preceding the Soweto uprising in 1976 - or indicate the scope and volume of such theatre, political and non-political. If we use a method adopted from the writings of Raymond Williams we may describe the present situation in the following terms :

residual forms 1. the pre-colonial tradition of oral and dramatic forms, still active in the modern theatre, organically in the various forms of 'black theatre' and in its fossilized version i.e. so-called 'Bantu culture'.

dominant forms 2. the tradition of 'erudite' theatre, based to a large extent on European drama and practised by the intermediate classes of the black groups, often in collaboration with white intellectuals.

3. commercial mass entertainment, whether white, black or jointly controlled.

emergent forms 4. a slender tradition of socialist theatre e.g. in Cape Town in the 1930s and Andre van Ghyseghem's work in Johannesburg at the same time. This tradition is part however of the wider international socialist theatre movement.

5. organic working class theatre.

The last of these traditions is obviously crucial and therefore something needs to be said about it. Unfortunately the early cultural history of the South African working class is inadequately recorded. However the picture from the 1950s on is clearer. The state of music entertainment and dramatic activity at that time has been described by Harry Bloom, the main author of the script of the famous musical, King Kong:

3./ "There were ...

"There were... the singing groups which seemed to spring up in every shack and back alley of the townships. To most there was no hope of an audience except the end of school term concert or the crowd gathered around the brazier in the backyard. But some developed their art to a high level and made the professional circuit of shanty-town concerts and parties. They were at their best when singing of the simple (sic) things of their own world, or about events in the newspapers. There was a real vogue for this kind of popular song, often treated with sharp satire. There would be a bus boycott, and suddenly songs were circulating on the theme "Azikwela - we refuse to ride" a foot sore yet encouraging evocation of the daily ten mile walk to and from work. Or a riot in Dube township, and the whole tragedy would be celebrated in a ballad. Or it might be the Treason Trial or a rail smash that sparked off the musical invention of these groups."

In addition to music and dance there were certain forms of theatrical activity within the structure of the dance or concert programme itself:

"Because of the lack of suitable halls and plays, trained producers and playwrights, the only form of theatre that was ever seen on the township stages besides 'variety' was in the nature of impromptu, unduly protracted and boring sketches with the actors trying desperately to raise a laugh from the audience".

That these sketches were always boring and incapable of raising a laugh is contradicted by other writers. According to one, Harry Bloom and Ian Bernhardt of the Union of Southern African Artists paid a visit to Eastern Native Township near Johannesburg to listen to Tommy Ramakgopa's singing group, Lo Six: "The visitors ... sat enthralled in a little room, illuminated by flickering candlelight. Particularly stimulating was the brilliant mime of a little clown called Jabulani, who performed a series of riotous mimes".

Another writer, writing in 1979 of the 'act' which 'in the period culminating in the fabulous 50's was the in-thing' recalled:

"Victor Mkhize, Louis Rathebe were some of the popular individuals who used it. The Manhattan Brothers, the Inkspots, the Woody Woodpeckers, the Midnite Kids and other close harmony groups never ended an entertaining programme without a sketch. Many theatre-going people hold the view that today's township plays are strictly speaking extended forms of the sketch... The sketch was always part of a concert programme."

My own reading of contemporary newspapers substantiates this description.

What then emerges from the above evidence is that in the 1950's at least there was in existence in the black urban areas a genuine, independent, working class musical and dramatic culture which was widespread and relevant to the everyday experiences of the people, including the political. This culture functioned organically in the life of the community and made reference to and judgements about situations like bus-boycotts, 'riots', rail disasters and political trials and was performed at celebrations, concerts, political rallies and funerals.

Performance was not limited to a small group of specialists but as Bloom noted "singing groups seemed to spring up in every shack and back ally in the township."

This organic working class cultural activity was greatly weakened in the late 1950s when certain impresarios became aware of its commercial potential and began to package it for the consumption initially of white South African audiences and later for export. However since then, and especially after the tightening up of segregation in the theatre in 1965, the subsequent collapse of white-controlled entertainment companies and the expansion of the urban working class, working class music and drama have continued to thrive in various forms.

Athol Fugard

It is on to the above social and cultural background that we have to project the work of Athol Fugard. For instance if we make the Marxist insistence on the importance of class factors it becomes obvious that to oppose apartheid in its racial aspects alone is not necessarily to support the political aspirations of the South African majority. It can equally betoken support of capitalism in its liberal or progressive manifestations. In addition Gramsci's concept of cultural struggle and the role of the intellectual puts us on our guard concerning intellectuals who can, despite their apparent independence and even dissidence, serve the interests of the dominant classes in the society. Fugard's dissidence need not necessarily mean that he is not linked to the dominant classes or that his work does not serve their interests.

Fugard's work has been admired in accordance with certain liberal aesthetic criteria, which of course are part and parcel of the ideology of liberalism itself. For instance it is admired by some because it is not 'political' or 'protest' theatre e.g.

"Protest writing - writing which seems to illuminate a corrupt society, and implicitly calls for action - may have only an ephemeral value, but it certainly has a function in the continuing struggle for liberation. Fugard's work, however, does not belong to this category etc."

Instead it portrays the 'human condition' in general as it manifests itself in the particular circumstances of apartheid in South Africa e.g.

"Rather, he is a man whose vision of the human predicament has evolved over the years of working in the theatre... The characters in his plays are involved less in the struggle against specific political oppression,.. than in the more general attempt to understand what life is".

Marxists cannot afford to share the liberal distrust of politics or protest in art. Unlike the liberal, The Marxist artist sets out to change the world. His art is part of the struggle of the revolutionary classes. Its function is and must be political. The Marxist does not accept the generality and universality of the 'human condition' concept either. The 'human condition' is neither uniform nor static but ever-changing and determined by particular quite concrete socio-economic factors.

If we look at Fugard's non-collaborative plays i.e. excluding Sizwe Banzi and The Island, we find they reflect the human effects of migrant labour (obliquely in Nongongo), racial classification (The Blood Knot, Statements) the Group Areas Act (Boesman and Lena) and the Immorality Act (Statements). Apart from the early play, Nongongo, Fugard has chosen to deal explicitly with racial legislation. By showing the humane effects of such legislation he has effectively demonstrated its inhuman nature. Fugard's achievement in this respect is considerable. No one can surely doubt his commitment to the eradication of racial segregation of the kind these plays reflect!

The point though is that there is no depiction in these plays of other more fundamentally oppressive aspects of the apartheid system. For instance, the inability of a few white and black individuals to love each other and marry, though deplorable, cannot be compared in terms of human loss and misery with the dumping of reservoirs of cheap black labour in the undeveloped and unsustainable veld. The latter is absolutely essential to the lives of the majority of South Africans, the former on their fringes. In these plays, Fugard's opposition to apartheid confines itself to an indictment of racialism but not of the exploitative and destructive nature of capitalism as it operates in South Africa. The effect of emphasizing the form is to obscure the latter, which is especially regrettable when a playwright's work can command an audience in the capitalist countries whose ruling classes reap the superprofit produced by the creation of such labour reserves, to name but one example.

Then, if the legislation the effects of which Fugard examines in these plays shows selectivity, so does the human reaction to them. As Ursula Edmans accurately observes, in Fugard's plays his characters "tend to emerge with immense dignity. Life may be protracted misery and pain, but, somehow, one can, and must, make at least a gesture of defiance." "Stoic endurance" is the keynote. Momentary escape from the situation in dreams and charade characterise The Blood Knot. In Statements love transcends for pityfully short moments the reality of Lovers' situation. But by and large beyond endurance there is little more than a 'gesture of defiance'.

But South Africa testifies to the daily struggles of the oppressed majority. There have been and still are strikes, boycotts, uprisings, sabotage, urban guerilla actions, passive resistance, stonings, killing, creativity, music, dance, protest literature and journalism, political theatre, poems and recitations, political parties and associations - all manner of struggle. Yet where in Fugard's work is any of this? Compare for instance the battle of the people of Crossroads to resist removal with the behaviour of Boesman and Lena. Again therefore Fugard's portrayal of 'the human condition' in South Africa is partial - in both senses.

Some aspects of Fugard's ideology have been well identified by the South African writer and critic, Lewis Nkosi, whose criticism of Fugard's first three plays deserves to be better known. He notes that in the Blood Knot Zach, the 'black' brother, "lives only on the physical or sensual level and has no intellectual equipment of any sort. This brings him very nearly on the level of the subhuman." This element returns much later in Statements in the following interchange between Errol, a Coloured, and Frieda, a white, on how they would spend 43c if it was all they had:

Man: Ten cents for bread... that would last the whole day... ten cents for cooldrink.

Woman: Buy milk.

Man: No. When we're thirsty we drink cooldrink. Twentythree cents left. What would you do? What do you think you'd want? You got something to eat, you're not thirsty.

Woman: Save something for tomorrow.

Man: No. Ther is no tomorrow. Just today. (p. 81)

The racial stereotype here needs no gloss. However in Fugard's depiction of Zach and other black workers, such as Moses and Tobias in No-Good Friday and Outa in Boesman and Lena, factors of race and class are compounded. These proletarian chracters are characterized by their lack of initiative and particularly their inarticulateness. Outa in particular can only murmur unintelligibly in 'Xhosa' - Fugard provided no actual dialogue for him. Incredibly Fugard has imagined in Outa a Xhosa labourer in the eastern Cape who knows not a word of English or Afrikaans. Outa, Tobias, Moses - these are the dumb and bereft African workers, mute and suffering, with which literature written by whites and the ruling classes abounds. Even when the black man is educated, like Willy in No-Good Friday, it is the initiative of the white priest, Father Higgins, that prompts him to take action against the gangster, Shark.

It is to this early play, No-Good Friday, that we must turn for a more detailed understanding of the development of the ideology implicit in Fugard's work. In Nkosi's words, the play dealt with 'the gang protection racket in Johannesburg townships'. "An educated African(who) must provide some leadership in the community" is faced with the choice: "to defy the thugs and refuse to pay up his share or live forever in fear of the gangs." But, as Nkosi points out, Fugard poses quite the wrong questions. The choice was not as Fugard misrepresented it, "between co-opration with the forces of law and order or submitting to the lawless tyranny of the tsotsi element". The population of Sophiatown, where the action takes place, is a victim of both the forces of "law and order", who enforce the apartheid system, and the gangsters who take advantage of it. Gangsterism is merely a facet of the majority's oppression. The real enemy is the oppressor. The play obscures this fact. By concentrating resentment on the gangsters Fugard substituted a phoney struggle for the real one.

Then the nature of the action Willy takes is personal and self-sacrificial, in the actual circumstances quite futile, and not organized, communal or political. The key to this evasion is contained in the play's treatment of Watson, the nationalist politician. It is worthwhile noting that 1958, the year in which Fugard and the others prepared and then performed this play, was a portent as one in the history of political struggle in South Africa. Watson is the only evidence in Fugard's plays of a period when the African liberation struggle was at a high peak.

7./ He is presented...

He is presented as corrupt and ridiculous. He spends all day thinking up fine phrases for a speech at a meeting of the organizing committees. His solution to one of the gangster's murders is "to put forward a resolution at the next congress deploring the high incidence of crime". He talks of "the liberatory movement", "the heavy boot of oppression" he calls for action and the rejection of a £3 a week wage. He is all rhetoric and no action. Undoubtedly there were African Nationalist politicians of the Watson kind but as there is no other representative of the political organisations in this or Fugard's other, non-collaborative plays, the effect is to discredit political action and distort the legitimate accusations Watson's rhetoric contains.

The only other character in the play who raises such issues is Shark, the gangster:

"You done me dirty, Willie. You done me all wrong. You went to the police like any cheap blabbermouth to cause me trouble... To the police... The bastards who lock us up for not carrying our passes."

This is an accurate description of the South African police but it is given to Shark, a criminal and a murderer, to express it and again the truth is evaded.

Why does Fugard in his non-collaborative plays discredit or ignore the people's struggle? Why does Fugard's depiction of blacks, in particular black workers, suggest a lack of initiative, inarticulateness, an inability to do more than endure - attributes which historically are only a part of the picture?

A number of answers suggest themselves. Let us restrict ourselves to three: race class and culture.

Fugard's whiteness determined that from birth he would live separately from the majority, though through his experiences as a young man at the Native Commissioner's Court in Johannesburg, through visits to Sophiatown, his early work with black actors in Johannesburg and later with the Serpent Players, he was able to transcend to some extent his racial isolation.

As an artist or 'traditional intellectual' whose material subsistence depended on, initially, organs of state power and culture eg. the Native Commissioner's Court and the National Theatre Organisation and, later, those of the progressive sections of the English speaking group and liberal institutions and commercial establishments abroad like theatres, publishing houses, film and television companies etc, Fugard belonged to the English-speaking intermediate classes. The ideology of these classes was itself the main factor which prevented Fugard from recognising in the majority and its revolutionary potential the real hope for transforming the society whose inhumanity and injustice he portrays so vividly, if partially, in his plays.

Race and class together account for the third factor - Fugard's lack of knowledge of the culture and languages of the majority, Fugard speaks no indigenous African languages. This means that though as an Afrikaans speaker he has had entrée into the language and culture of the Coloureds in South Africa and as an English speaker into that of educated Africans, the life and culture of the majority, as previously defined, has remained for him inaccessible. His efforts to transcend racial segregation by developing contact with Africans were thus in the main confined to contact

with educated English speakers in white areas or in other words with the intermediate classes of the African group.

This limitation has had serious consequences for his work. Firstly it has inhibited his ability to see and depict South African life whole. Effectively the life and struggle of the bulk of his compatriots are removed from his experience and therefore his work. This has resulted in inauthentic depiction, the propagation of the • ppressive stereotypes and distorted political meanings. As Lewis Nkosi remarked about Nongogo: "Athol Fugard could not and really did not know anything about the life of an African prostitute." This remark could be applied to Fugard's knowledge of the life of the African majority in general. Secondly it has meant that Fugard's work, in its philosophical assumptions and artistic practice, is not organic. To an extent in fact it retains a colonial character. Fuagrhd has never contradicted Robert J. Green's basic implication that Fugard is a European in Africa, which is contained in the assumption that only European or 'western theatre' not indigenous traditions can sustain him. Rarely does Fugard indicate that African or South African thought or culture have influenced him and in his non-collaborative work there is little to suggest it has. While he makes no mention of Fanon, Cabral, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Achebe or Ngugi, he repeatedly refers to Camus, Satre, Becket, Brecht and Grotowsky as having influenced him.

Above all it has meant that he has been largely cut off from the great volume of creative effort in which the majority in his own country have expressed their own lives, especially the rich indigenous theatre traditions from the pre-colonial societies to the bustling, vital theatre in the industrial urban areas. As it is, the repertoire of dramatic techniques, tones and language he employs in his non-collaborative plays is limited. He has worn threadbare the acted out fantasy or recollection device, to name but one example. The indigenous traditions, with their rich store of music, dance, humour, characterisation, protest and satire, would surely enrich his work. The extent to which Fugard has created alone and outside these traditions has been his own choice - and, I would submit, very much to his disadvantage.

But one might ask what can Fugard as a white intellectual, separated from these traditions by race, class and culture, be expected to do in the circumstances? His isolation is surely the tragic result of the South African situation.

"Stoic endurance" in "tragic" situations is precisely the attitude which Fugard himself expresses or depicts in his plays and it is precisely this attitude for which in this essay I am criticising him. Gramsci called on the traditional intellectual to join the revolutionary classes. We must call on Fugard to accept the commission of his society and throw himself and his art whole-heartedly into the struggle of the oppressed majority in South Africa.

This more than many artists, black or white, he has done. His production N - Good Friday quite transformed the nature of "erudite" theatre of the black intermediate classes. First of all the play was South African rather than European. More particularly it dealt with the dilemmas and problems of this African people in the urban as opposed the traditional or pre-colonial milieu.

The Blood Knot was quite revolutionary in that, acted by one black and one white actor, it dealt quite explicitly with the relationship of racial groups in the modern South African context and by implication attacked their artificial separation. Fugard's work with the Serpent Players and especially Sizwe Banzi and The Island represents an extremely important and influential contribution to the development of South African theatre.

But Fugard's involvement in such theatre has only been partial and he has shown some prevarication. When theatre was more effectively segregated by Proclamation R26 under the Group Areas Act in 1965 Fugard began writing for and working in the segregated white theatre, an area in which he has operated until recently. At that time too he went so far as to attack the boycott of South Africa by overseas playwrights, which he had previously supported, in order to justify his involvement in segregated white theatre. Even his work with the Serpent Players did not originate in full-blooded commitment. As he himself described it :

" There was a knock on the door one night and in walked (some of those who were to become future members of the Serpent Players). I despaired really, I was very tired after the tour (of The Blood Knot) and I didn't really feel like getting involved with actors so soon - it's very exhausting - but they persisted, and I felt guilty...so that was the beginning of Serpent."

One can only juxtapose against this the following by Steve Biko on the question of 'white liberals' :

"How many white people fighting for their version of a change in South Africa are really motivated by a genuine concern and not by guilt ?" (I write what I like, p.65)

And what of Sizwe Banzi and The Island, the magnificent result of Fugard's transcendence of the racial delimitations ? The answer to this question requires another essay. In brief, I believe that these two works are far and away the best work Fugard has been associated with but that their effectiveness is still limited by Fugard's ideology, which dominates in the plays. Kani and Ntosha's real knowledge and masterful depiction of the life of black people in the Eastern Cape are weakened by their acceptance of Fugard's interpretation of it.

In Sizwe Banzi this means that despite the play's grounding in the proletariat's experience and its crucial exposure of international capital's responsibility for the bitterness of it, the stoicism and passivity of the early plays are not radically transformed, as for instance in the following three extracts :

Man: (turning away from Buntu to the audience)
What's happening in this world, good people ? Who cares for who in this world ? Who wants who ?

Who wants me, friend ? What's wrong with me ? I am a man. I've got eyes to see. I've got ears to listen when people talk. I've got a head to think good things. What's wrong with me ?

(Starts to tear off his clothes)

Look at me, I'm a man. I've got legs. I can run with a wheelbarrow full of cement. I'm strong. I'm a man. Look, I've got a wife. I've got four children (p.35)

and

Buntu: ...When the white man looked at you at the Labour Bureau what did he see ? A man with dignity or a bloody passbook with an N.I. number ? Isn't that a ghost ? When the white man sees you walk down the street and calls out, 'Hey, John, come here'..to you Sizwe Banzi... isn't that a ghost ?...

Stop fooling yourself. All I'm saying is to be a real ghost, if that is what they want, what they've turned us into. Spook them to hell, man. (p.38)

and

Buntu: It's like my father's hat. Special hat, man. Carefully wrapped in plastic on top of the wardrobe in his room. God help the child who so much as touches it. Sunday it goes on his head, and a man, full of dignity, a man I respect, walks down the street. White man stops him: ' Come here, kaffir' What does he do ?

(Buntu whips the imaginary hat off his head and crumples it in his hand as he adopts a fawning, servile pose in front of the white man)

'What is it, Baas ?'

If that is what you call pride, then shit on it. Take mine and give me food for my children. (p.43)

In these very strong extracts the common factor is pride or dignity. The statement is that racial discrimination is practised in South Africa sullies the legitimate sources of self esteem e.g. strength, manhood, fatherhood, humanity. Buntu, whose name means 'humankindness' in its full early meaning, persuades Sizwe that to rescue his wife and family from hunger and thirst pride is a necessary sacrifice. But once again the discussion diverts us from searching for ways to bring both starvation and humiliation to an end into ways of enduring them. To survive, to become a thorough-going ghost "if that is what they want, not to change the system, remains the burden of the argument.

At the core of The Island is the Antigone exemplum, a theme that has greatly attracted the liberal imagination both in South Africa and elsewhere and which is at the centre of Fugard's work from No-GoodFriday to Dimentos. Fugard's dominant theme is the isolation of man.

Recently he spoke of a new idea "stirring" in him - "it is a man alone again", he said. "Dimentos was a man alone. Marais, in the film The Guest, is a man alone - there are other people, but the predicament is being alone." One may leave the critique of this particular aspect of the bourgeois tragic vision to Raymond Williams and quote instead Ngugi wa Thiong'o' criticism of the work of Wole Soyinka, a criticism with little modification applies to Athol Fugard :

"Soyinka's good man is the uncorrupted individual: his liberal humanism leads him to admire an individual's lone act of courage and thus often he ignores the creative struggle of the masses. The ordinary people, workers and peasants, in his plays remain passive watchers on the shore or pityful comedians on the road."

Let Fugard therefore follow the implications of his early work and with the Serpent Players to their logical conclusion. Let him abandon his work in the theatre of white South Africa, whether so-called 'multiracial' or not, and turn his attention away from London, Paris and New York to the cultural and dramatic activity of the majority in his own country and throughout the world. Let him go beyond collaboration with the black intermediate classes i.e. the collaboration which produced No-Good Friday, Sizwe Banzi and The Island, to a real involvement in the life and art of the majority. Such an involvement would I believe lead to the artistic enrichment of his work and to the adoption of the democratic ideology of socialism. His work would then be of greater value* in their struggle for a non-exploitative South Africa than it has been up to now.

* to the people

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