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# DRAMA IN THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE IN SOUTH AFRICA

by

### Elfigio Freeborn Muronda

In a dramatic parlance, Lewis Nkosi depicts life for the black people in South Africa as a tragi-comedy. In his book, Home and Exile, he provides a graphic picture of the practical aspects of this life:

For a black man to live in South Africa in the second half of the twentieth century and at the same time preserve his sanity, he requires an enormous sense of humour and a surrealistic kind of brutal wit, for without a suicidal attack on Dr. Verwoerd's armed forces, these qualities seem to provide the only means of defence against a spiritual chaos and confusion which would rob any man of his mental health.

No newspaper report about a shooting in Sharpeville could ever convey significantly the deep sense of entrapment that the black people experience under apartheid rule. It is difficult to imagine a mode of expression that would adequately describe this sense of malaise. At best an account of what a black man goes through in his daily life sounds like an exaggerated Kafka novel.

I say this advisedly, because the total effect of the apartheid laws in South Africa is to make it almost illegal to live....

Alex La Guma confirms Nkosi's description of the desperation of black life in South Africa in his novel, In the Fog of a Season's End. In this story, an African prisoner under interrogation refuses to cooperate with the police, the agents of the South African white oppressive government; he says:

You want me to co-operate. You have shot my people when they have protested against unjust treatment; you have torn people from their homes, imprisoned them, not for stealing or murder, but for not having your permission to live. Our children live in rags and die of hunger. And you want me to co-operate with you? It is not possible.<sup>2</sup>

Life in South Africa consists of a network of legislation that enshrouds the Africans in legal restrictions every minute of their lives to such an extent that, at any time, wherever he is and whatever he may be doing in South Africa, the African will most probably be breaking some law.

To illustrate the point, the South African author, Lewis Nkosi recalls a time when he and a friend were arrested in Pretoria by the South African police:

The police officer flipped through our books and finding nothing amiss seemed a bit irritated.

Presently he grabbed a telephone and called up a local prosecutor whom he briefly informed that he had arrested some Johannesburg 'kaffirs' in a building where blacks were excluded. 'What can I charge them with?' he casually enquired.

This may sound unreal to people who live outside the system but it is a fact of life:

...in South Africa any over-zealous policeman can arrest an African and take him down to the station-house without the vaguest idea what charges to prefer against him. If he is diligent enough, he can later find something with which to charge him. There are a hundred and one laws in the country controlling the lives of black people, and at any particular time there is a fat chance that one of them is being broken. A

The South African black population is a people that white South Africa has tried to physically exterminate socially, legally, politically as well as economically. How black people have survived in such a hostile climate is a manifestation of the endurance and perseverance of their spirit. They have survived with their culture and pride, even though both have taken some heating.

their culture and pride, even though both have taken some beating.
'Traditional' black South African drama like most African
drama, is different from western drama. It is an oral drama whose
essence is in the performance. Its transmission and preservation
is a social obligation of all members of the society, unlike western drama whose creation, maintenance and perpetuation is in the
hands of a few, the scribes.

Exiled black South African author and dramatist, Mazisi Kunene, describes 'traditional' drama in South Africa as follows:

Drama in African society is an integral part of the dance, the performed or acted song and the masquerades of the festival occasions.

Unlike European drama, African drama is not dominantly conversational but rather depends on symbolic movements and demonstrations. The actor, the performer or reenactor uses his/her body movements, voice modulation, artifacts (masks), eye movements, etc. to convey the content of a dramatic event... There is never an extensive attempt to inform through action, through character development, and through the creation of a complex plot. Drama in this sense hints at things and

takes the whole setting, including the 'spectators', as part of the drama...African drama is, therefore, essentially communal. It is an open air performance, enacting interesting event or events communicated through a symbolic language of words and/or movement....5

The foregoing explanation of drama is all very well for an African society that is normal and open. However, South African society is neither normal nor open for the Africans, hence the political struggle in black South Africa.

Our task here is to examine how drama features in the political struggle in South Africa amid the desperation and near impossible conditions Africans live in. Do the Africans utilise their age-old dramatic techniques to heighten their own awareness of the evil that has befallen them? Are they creating drama to publicise their political, social, economic and legal enslavement to show the world the evils of South African apartheid?

In the literary field, South African black dramatists living within the borders of the apartheid system are unable to publish material which is truly reflective of the living conditions in black South Africa. Under the Publications Control Act (1974), no person can publish material which would arouse resentment of government policy, but which African writer does not resent apartheid?

The only literary drama to come out of South Africa of true significance and reflective of the African condition is written by black South Africans in exile. For not only has the South African white supremacist government tried to legislate Africans out of existence, they have also effectively put a choke hold on African protest literature.

Any attempt by a South African black (or white for that matter) to compose a picture of human life which is truly representative of the life in apartheid South Africa is still-born. The writer in South Africa publishes only by the grace of the government and the government shreds into the trash can of censorship any material that it deems to be against apartheid and its attendant evils. Literary expression in general is severely limited by an unscaleable mountain of legislation including the immediate apprehension and detention, without trail, of the author of any material, published or unpublished, that is anti-apartheid. Amon the most restrictive of these acts which severely limit literary expression in South Africa are:

the Bantu Administration Act (1927), Riotous Assemblies Act (1956), Entertainment (Censorship) Act (1931), Suppression of Communism Act (1950), Criminal Law Amendment Act (1953), Customs Act (1955), Extension of Uni-

versity Education Act (1959), Prisons Act (1959), Unlawful Organizations Act (1960), Publication and Entertainment Act (1963), General Law Amendment Act (1963), Criminal Procedure Act (1965), Terrorism Act (1967), General Law Amendment Act (1969). And there are more.

## As T. T. Moyana points out:

The total effect of these acts is to create an inescapable web around the proposed publication. The Publications Control Board, formed in 1963 amidst a storm of protest, decides what is to be published. But in addition to considering if the contents of the book are objectionable, it must also check if the writer is listed as a member of the Communist Party, or any banned organization, or if he is prohibited from attending public gatherings. The reason for stopping one from attending public gatherings might not at all be connected with one's work as a writer... Even if the Board acted with unwonted faithfulness to reasonable common sense, and decided to judge a book upon its contents, still it would be caught in the inescapable net of those elastic phrases that virtually allow the interpreter of the law to be the law giver.7

One fails to see, as Moyana does, how anyone can write a piece of dramatic work in the context of South Africa that will not engender feelings of hostility between the white man and black man. The reality of South Africa is a camp of hostility between the races and the literary work coming therefrom is bound to reflect that reality if the work is of any social value outside the penmanship of its author.

Thus, on the surface, the picture looks bleak for the written and published word. However, drama is alive and well and enduring a life of its own in black South Africa, for no amount of repression and censorship can kill the will of the people to release their frustrations and act out their aspirations.

Drama among Africans in the townships is a multifaceted experience. Every weekend in the ghettos of South African cities and in the countryside, traditional drama finds expression in somebody's backyard, an abandoned lot or a sportsfield. Ritual dances are performed with costumes and masks. They enact and relive the great battle victories their great grandfathers won against the European invaders. They mimic and parody their oppressors in reenactment of the daily vicissitudes of life under the apartheid system.

This drama is the drama of the people, the real victims of South African apartheid government. In this drama, the Africans regenerate their strength culturally. The execution of their roles in the performance of their dramatic dance, song, poem or play is physically and emotionally exhausting and mentally cleansing. Their enactment of the battle victories is their own version of their history in South Africa. The performance of the marriage feast, the rites of passage from childhood to adulthood for both men and women, the dance of the hunt, the celebration of birth and the mourning of their dead...all these are built in conduits of culture from generation to generation in spite of the hostilities suffered under a white oppressive rule that threatens to commit genocide against them.

The religious ceremonies continue to flourish and the drama inherent in them lives with the people and are invigorated by the depth of their struggle; the ceremonies which include the sacrifice of the fattened beast, the divination ritual, the traditional fortification of the home and personal life through the spiritual mediums are all dramatic experiences that survive and reinforce the African people's will to live and disrobe themselves of this inhuman cloak known as apartheid.

There is a tendency among people living outside oppressive conditions to look at the oppressed people as human elements who have lost the idea of the self and as a people whose life is a reaction to the oppressor's position. That assumption is inaccurate because even under the worst conditions of bondage, life goes on. True, it has to make accommodations for the adverse conditions but still it goes on, fashioning its own course and negotiating its own path. The oppressor must be constantly on guard, for the oppressed are forever dreaming of new ways to rid themselves of the evil. (Emphasis added. Ed. K.M.) The truth then is that the oppressor's life becomes the reaction; as Lewis Nkosi puts it:

Sometimes people wonder after reading about these conditions how the Africans are able to survive at all. One Englishman who attended a first night of a Johannesburg opera was surprised to find well dressed Africans who looked reasonably happy,... From that he concluded that the stories he had read about South Africa were grossly exaggerated. To my own mind that was the highest tribute anybody could pay to the indestructibility of the human spirit, the ability to absorb hurt and injury and still maintain a semblance of human dignity.

For us in South Africa, the lines by the Negro poet Langston Hughes about Negroes who 'laugh to keep from crying' arouse an immediate recognition in the heart.8 The fact of the matter is, the bully will inflict more pain to those who flinch, therefore, keeping a stiff upper lip is a survival tactic as well as a statement to the strength of their spirit.

Having established the fact that life still goes on in South Africa for the black people in spite of the evil of apartheid and also having established that traditional drama is a fact of life and that it lives with the people, the logical direction of this discussion leads towards the exposition of present day theater within the black population in South Africa.

In any political struggle, the artists gravitate into the foreground as the vanguard of the movement. They create the images and the ideological symbols which the masses adopt as their rallying points. The ideological symbols and images are in music, in the poetry and in the theater where their dedication towards the destruction of the oppressive system.

Without fear of equivocation, one could say that the theatrical drama that flourishes in South Africa among the African people in their political struggle today was not authored by the exiled South African authors such as Peter Abrahams, Bloke Modisane, Alex La Guma, Dennis Brutus, Cosmo Pieterse, Lewis Nkosi, Alfred Hutchinson, Mazisi Kunene, Keorpetse Kgositsile, Bessie Head, Jordan Ngubane, Authur Maimane or any of the lesser known South African artists in exile.

Black South Africa has its own authors (dramatists) living within the borders of South Africa but outside the innumerable constraints of the Publications Control Board. Indeed, they are harassed almost daily by the police but they survive. There is an impressive array of organizations and drama groups that serve the people's cause throughout the country. Among these groups and organizations are drama groups such as: the MADI group (MADI is an acronym made from the first letters in music, arts and drama), the group is based in Katlehong. It has brought together a number of up and coming artists, poets, writers and dramatists in the Katlehong area. One of the first plays to be performed by the group was Manaka's play, 'Egoli', (of which more will be said below); the BAYAJULA group which is essentially like MADI; the Creative Youth Association the most prolific and talented of the groups, whose aim is, '...the furtherance of Black culture, poetry, music, paintings, sculpture, songs and plays...'-- the group is based in Diepkloof; ZAMANI ART ASSOCIATION of Dobsonville; SOWETO Art Association of Soweto; KWANZA CREATIVE SOCIETY of Mabopane; MALOPOETS of Marianridge; MAROPA ART ASSOCIATION; Phanda-Ma-Afrika Arts of Chiawelo; Malimo Group of Bloemfontain and Kronstad; Allahpoets of Soweto, etc., etc.

Among these variously talented groups have emerged the new playwrights, the street corner poets whose work reflects an affir-

mation of black identity -- aimed at raising black consciousness rather than raising white consciousness to the black man's plight.

#### Matsemela Mananka writes:

Actually, it is a well-known fact that quite a number of young dramatists are not popularly known in the so-called 'theatre world', but they are very popular in our urban traditional performances. They are an integral part of those who suffer death in the dusty streets of the ghettos. When people celebrate their talent on a formal theatre platform, they commemorate their talent before the eyes of those in grief. They perform at all sorts of gatherings, and this becomes more like ritual theatre.9

These young playwrights are of a different breed.

They refuse to limit their work to a small public of school and university. Instead they produce popular drama, mostly in the city. The popular playwright is not only inspired by the life of the common man in the townships but he also writes his play for him...The work of South African drama groups in the townships of the country, especially those performed by the now banned black students' organization SASO, usually work without a text in order to avoid the problems of censorship and banning. People in the townships are very interested in this kind of consciousness-raising drama which is directly related to the local context and their own situation. 10

The dramatic groups and the playwrights work with a wide range of material all of which, however, is relevant to their situation. For example, the Creative Youth Association took the short stories of a little known short story writer, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, and adapted them for the stage. The theme in all three stories which they adapted is the same; life in Soweto under apartheid. The stories are: 'My Friend the Outcast', a story which explores the corruption and cruelty behind the scenes of a Soweto eviction; 'Call Me Not A Man', a story about thuggery by a group of police reservists and 'A Glimpse of Slavery', a story which penetrated the dark world of the labour farm.

The play, 'Egoli', by M. Manaka is one of the strongest plays to come from the present-day dramatic circles of South African black theater. The playwright himself, M. Manaka, says of the play:

Through our eyes we have seen the sufferings of our people. We have seen them being moved from fertile

lands to barren areas, we have seen them starve in squatter camps. Through our eyes we have seen the life of our people assume various shapes of humiliation and suffering. Thus the continual struggle to create 'Egoli' was for us unavoidable. Together with Soyikwa Black Theatre, the drama wing of Creative Youth Association, we felt committed to focus our creative thoughts on the plight of the workers, more especially the mine migrants.

Manaka goes on to point out that the group's success in producing drama which is based on such a strong political committment grows out of the player's belief

...in positive art, threatre of purpose, communal theatre, theatre of survival and liberation, original and relevant indigenous African theatre and, of course, creative theatre. We hope our theatre will not be mistaken for mere public entertainment. 12

James Mtoba is an actor and director who has appeared in a variety of plays since the fifties and is now even more actively involved in the theater. In 1980, together with Meshungu, Mtoba created the play, 'Uhlanga'. It is a one-man play, he indicates to Manaka, which goes back in history, all the way "...back from the ancestors, the way they see things happening and how they lived before whitey came. The play represents African life before the coming of the white man, life today and life in the future.

James Mtoba believes that there isn't any other theater for a black person like him and the groups that work as he does other than what is termed 'experimental theater' in the western world.

...I think that that is the theatre that can help us dig out our cultural past. Because in this theatre, unlike conventional theatre, an actor is given a chance to explore, to experiment without restrictive rules. 14

Like most of the dramatists in black South Africa, James Mtoba's work could not stand legal scrutiny as espoused by the South African government. In an interview after the production of his play "Visions of the Night," he said:

After the completion of the production, because we knew we were going to have legal problems [legal] in presenting it, we decided to move in backyards, just inviting people and performing free of charge.

Under the Riotous Assemblies Act, James and his audience could be arrested for being in the same place and at the same time. However, that would be a minor charge compared to the charge of 'incitement to riot' which the author and the performers could be charged with.

In the same interview Mtoba explained the mechanics of their struggle and the composition of South African society, a society of the dispossessed (the Africans) and the dispossessors (the whites). According to him, in their theatre, the African dramatists must accommodate all sectors of the dispossessed:

...the language used to accommodate all sectors of the dispossessed may be viewed as poor quality by the dispossessor and the perplexed black educated and middle class.... It is the language we shall carry along with those who will taste the dawn of a new day in our country...16

James also believes that the dramatist has an obligation to his people; he has their mandate to create relevant entertainment. The dispossessed do not need

...entertainment that shall make them oblivious of their state of subservience...entertainment that shall make them submissive to their state of poverty and servitude...entertainment that shall not respond to the call of freedom's cry.<sup>17</sup>

He believes they need

...entertainment that will give them courage to survive and forge ahead. Entertainment that will bring hope for freedom in their life-style. 18

Joe Rahube is Mtoba's contemporary but the former is an artist with a difference. We feel obligated to quote directly from the source because only within the context of the whole story can his approach be fully comprehended:

Joe Rahube has succeeded in integrating the audience with the actor. The kind of performance he gives is rooted in the origins of African theatre — which never separates the actor from the audience. An artist becomes an integral part of the experience performed. Acting is not acting for acting's sake. It is a religious act.

We all take part when Joe Rahube is on the stage. Without any decor Joe would take the stage, natural as he would be at the time when called upon to perform. He would start by singing a song: "Senzeni na?" and all the people at that particular gathering would join in. Joe with his painful gestures would start the poem:

Joe (with people singing 'Senzeni')

Looking back is the last thing a man does like you have heard those who came before you murmur in bloody tones of no despair phambili makwenkwe phambili ma-Afrika

You have overheard your mother say 'Those who once met shall meet again' after her baby was snatched away from her back like when death once crept into your home

when I talk about death
look at me
my tongue clutched to my teeth
because of my bleeding heart
this wound
my sore
keeps telling me about
those who died
and were buried by the flood
keeps telling me about
those who died miles away from home

at the hour of separation
babies are seized from mothers' bosoms
fathers sent to island
children left alone
to rot to die
despondency
shame!
It's a shame (then the audience joins in the
chorus 'It's a shame!)

What is there to cry for when mothers cry no more for their stolen babies who end up dying in the bloody mud of Soweto pavements what is there to cry for when mothers stay no more with their sons who end up dying far away from home what is there to cry for

at the hour of separation
what is there to cry for
when mothers watch nonplussed
helpless and hopeless

when their sons are sent to the gallows what is there to cry for when mothers weep no more but sing songs of hope tor their husbands who are buried on the island island of makana

At this hour of separation tell me do you keep your head straight do you draw your strength from your little brother hector

listen to the song of children
crying
stumbling
falling and being brutally killed

listen to the song
a song that was born of terrible memory
of how the breeze turned into hurricane
depriving us of every little we had
tell me
how can we smile

when our faces are forever like scars of resistance walking and falling captured and killed

We can no longer go down to our knees with our heads bared praying to an empty sky

I heard voices crying nkosi sikelel' i-afrika maluphakanyisw' uphondo lwayo yizwa imithandazo yethu nkosi sikelela i pondered and asked myself when shall nkosi hear us when shall he ever sikelela us

This is the song sung by the dispossessed in their struggle to reposses. It is the threatre that talks about me and you today. It relates to the history of the dispossessed before the colonial era and comes along with the story through the colonial era until it will ultimately dredge us out of this colonial dung. This is the theatre that will not staffride the freedom wagon: it will ride on through heavy rains

and bloody days until freedom dawns at the station of our birth. And after freedom our theatre shall celebrate our life and remain an integral part of our culture of the new day. 19

As stated earlier, it was necessary to quote the whole article including Joe Rahube poetry as it appears in <code>Staffrider</code> magazine, because only an eyewitness account of this theatrical statement can do total justice to the emotional experience that transpires on stage. And for anyone to paraphrase Joe Rahube's painful poetry would be an unpardonable sin; for the whole poetic expression is one, the words and the social conditions are reciprocal phenomena, each feeding on the other in this dramatic expression.

This is the drama that is alive in black South Africa today. All the material wealth in the world cannot equal its strength because it emanates from the depth of the people's collective spirit. It is a force that will move mountains. It spurs the people on in the face of the relentless assault from South Africa's apartheid government curse on them.

There are other dramatic groups such as the Ikwezi Players who created the play "Job Mava" $^{20}$  or the Serpent Players who created the play, "The Coat", $^{21}$  with Athol Fugard. However, to list all the dramatic groups who are active in black drama in South Africa is not within the scope of this paper.

As shown by Mtoba, Manaka, Rahube and all the innumerable drama groups that have mushroomed in black South Africa, theater is an active and important component in the process of raising the consciousness of the masses. The drama flourishing on the streets in the townships (ghettos) is the drama for the theater of liberation. It is a drama steeped in the depths of the political struggle that the Africans, alone, face in apartheid South Africa.

With all due respect to Lewis Nkosi, Alfred Hutchinson and all the other South African writers producing dramatic work in exile, even though some of their works are of political relevance to the South African masses, no one in South Africa gets an opportunity to see or read them because anything written by an exiled South African is banned within the country. Indeed their works can be smuggled into South Africa; but in the opinion of this writer, this effort is not worth the risks involved. Although Lewis Nkosi's, "Rhythm of Violence," is dramaturgically perfect it cannot stand up to plays like "Egoli" or "Job Mava" in the context of the political struggle faced by black South Africa. This is because, whereas the former (Nkosi's) deals with apartheid from a standpoint of intellectual loftiness, the latter delve directly into the heart of the matter and make

immediate protests at Goliath, the South African apartheid government. The real victims of the system know of their predicament, they do not have the facilities for, nor the patience to indulge in an intellectual discourse on the liberalness of one kind of European against another.

The most celebrated white South African dramatist is Athol Fugard, a man who has written such plays as "The Blood Knot," "Hello and Goodbye," "Boesman and Lena," 23 "A Lesson From Aloes," "Sizwe Banzi Is Dead," "The Island" and "Statements After The Arrest Under The Immorality Act." 4 He is a very interesting part of the dramatic idiom in the structure of apartheid South Africa.

Fugard is a staunch anti-apartheid writer and almost all of his work is a social commentary on the evils of the system. However, his works only prove that the victims of the sytem can best say it themselves. An outsider looking in will not see it as the people see themselves, there is a tendency to view the oppressed as living a life that is a reaction to their oppression. As already stated, that is not true. The oppressed have a life even within that inhuman system. Athol Fugard's play, "Boesman and Lena," is excellent dramaturgically in its description of life in the squatters' world in South Africa, but the play is insensitive in its portrayal of Coloreds and Africans. It caricatures the characters it tries to bring to life and in the process gives a false picture of their conditions in life. In fact, "'Boesman and Lena', is sufficiently indirect to have nearly provoked a riot against Fugard during one ghetto production."<sup>25</sup> However, credit must be given to Fugard for realizing after "Boesman and Lena" that only the people concerned can speak for themselves. He went out and collaborated with John Kani and Winston Ntshona to produce the strongest statement on apartheid, the play "Sizwe Banzi Is Dead." Although Kani and Ntshona hardly receive credit for their part in the creation of the play, the quality and quantity of their input in the play is attested to by the fact that none of Athol Fugard's other plays come anywhere near "Sizwe Banzi Is Dead" in terms of the emotional turmoil that an audience journeys through when watching the play.

There is much more to be said on the subject of drama in the struggle for black South Africa; however, only so much can be said in the absence of the participants in this theater because in South Africa black people do not write their thoughts down, it is dangerous.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Nkosi, Home and Exile, Longmans, London, 1955, p.35.

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  - 3 Nkosi, Home and Exile, p. 36.
  - 4 Ibid., p. 37.
- Mazisi Kunene, "South African Oral Tradition," in Aspects of South African Literature, Christopher Heywood, ed., Heinemann, London, 1976, p. 36.
- 6 T. T. Moyana, "Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa," Aspects of South African Literature, Christopher Heywood, ed., Heinemann, London, 1976, pp. 87-88.
- Moyana, p. 88, citing Frene Ginwala, The Press in South Africa, Unit on Apartheid, UN No. 24/72, pp. 24-29.
  - 8 Nkosi, Home and Exile, p. 39.
- <sup>9</sup> Matsemela Manaka, "Theatre of the Dispossessed; An Article Based On Discussions With James Mthoba and Joe Rahube," in Straffrider, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Sept/Oct 1980), Ravan Press, Braamfontein, p. 29.
  - 10 Ibid., p. 29.
  - 11 Manaka, in Straffrider, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Feb 1980), p. 49.
  - 12 Ibid., p. 49.
- 13 Manaka, in Straffrider, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Sept/Oct 1980), p. 28.
  - 14 Ibid., p. 28.
  - 15 Ibid., p. 28.
  - 16 Ibid., p. 29.
  - 17 Ibid., p. 29.
  - <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 29.
  - 19 Ibid., p. 30.

- 20 The Ikwezi Players, "Job Mava;" a workshop production; transcribed by Don McLennan, Cape Town, in *Straffrider*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Dec/Jan 1980-81), pp. 21-23 and 26-29.
  - 21 Athol Fugard, The Coat, Balkema, Cape Town, 1971, pp. 7-25.
- 22 Lewis Nkosi, "Rhythm of Violence," in Plays from South Africa, F. M. Litto, ed., Hill and Wang, New York, 1968, pp. 1-72.
- 23 Athol Fugard, Three Port Elizabeth Plays, Oxford, London, 1974.
  - 24 Fugard, Statements, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1974.
- 25 Robert J. Green, "Politics and Literature in Africa: The Drama of Athol. Fugard," Aspects of South African Literature, Christopher Heywood, ed., Heinemann, London, 1976, p. 169.