



The Revolutionary Aesthetics of the Defiance Drama and Theatre of Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona

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Abstract: Theatre is fundamentally a collaborative enterprise, welding disparate artistic disciplines into a singular performative event. In revolutionary theatre, such as the historic collaboration between Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo on *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, multiple creative minds converge to forge a unique socio-political and aesthetic synergy. This synergy frequently yields a distinctive, structurally identifiable "revolutionary aesthetic." Such is the case with the radical collaborations of Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona in Apartheid South Africa.

This paper critically examines the revolutionary aesthetics of this trio, focusing on their landmark play *The Island* (1973), with comparative references to *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972). By analyzing their specific directorial methodologies, structural syntax, performance logic, and use of intertextual subversion, this paper demonstrates how their "defiant theatre" dismantled dominant colonial narratives and mobilized spectator consciousness under the threat of state censorship.

Keywords: Apartheid, Defiance Drama, Theatre, Poor Theatre, Athol Fugard, John Kani, Winston Ntshona, Revolutionary Aesthetics.

Introduction

When the political apparatus of a state weaponizes law to suppress human dignity, creative agents must innovate or face artistic and literal annihilation. In the dark annals of South African Apartheid, the collaborative work of Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona



stands as a monumental testament to the power of artistic defiance. This partnership bridged two starkly different racial and class realities: Fugard, an Afrikaner of English descent born in 1932, and Kani and Ntshona, Black actors born in the Eastern Cape in 1944 and 1941 respectively.

Working together meant traversing a volatile socio-legal minefield. The physical co-presence of their bodies on a single stage shattered the core tenets of the Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act, making their very rehearsals a criminalized act of political resistance.

Fugard began his theatrical endeavors in the late 1950s, initially working with the Circle Players—a mixed-race company that actively violated South African Apartheid laws of racial segregation (Worthen, 2004). The peak of this early defiance was Fugard's direct collaboration with Black actor Zakes Mokae in the 1961 production of *The Blood Knot*. The play was a devastating indictment of Apartheid policies, made even more potent by the physical co-presence of white and Black bodies on stage. Despite the subsequent enactment of harsher laws designed to suppress multiracial artistic association—such as the expansion of the Group Areas Act in the 1960s forbidding mixed casts and audiences—Fugard remained undaunted. He shifted his focus to the Eastern Cape, initiating a long-term collaboration with the Serpent Players, an amateur Black drama group in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth. It was here that Kani and Ntshona partnered with Fugard, joining forces to co-create *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972) and *The Island* (1973).

This collaborative trilogy represents a pivotal shift in South African dramaturgy, transitioning from conventional, passive representation to what scholars describe as the "theatre of witness" or "defiant theatre." Scholars frequently link the aesthetics of *The Island* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* to Jerzy Grotowski's (1968) concept of "Poor Theatre." While Grotowski advocated for a minimalist stage to strip away the "mask" of the actor and achieve spiritual purity, critics observe that for the Serpent Players, this minimalism was a matter of survival. Working under the constant threat of police raids, using blankets as costumes and bare stages allowed for the rapid "striking of the set" to evade detection—a practice often referred to as "theatre under the radar" (Kruger, 1999).



Furthermore, the integration of Sophocles' *Antigone* within *The Island* is a classic example of intertextual subversion. By embedding a Western classical text within a contemporary prison narrative, the Serpent Players engaged in what Chanter (2011) and Foley (2012) identify as "cultural hijacking." They weaponized a canonical text—one which Apartheid censors respected as "high art"—to provide a legal shield for a narrative depicting state-sponsored injustice. The trial of *Antigone* thus serves as a direct mirror for the trial of every political prisoner on Robben Island.

The unique syntax of their dramaturgy stems from improvisational workshop theatre. Unlike traditional Western dramas where a written script precedes rehearsal, these works were "lived into existence" (Walder, 2000). Scholarly analysis emphasizes that the use of the actors' real names (John and Winston) shatters the "fourth wall," forcing the audience to confront the reality that these are not merely fictional characters, but real men whose physical existence is restricted by the state.

Scholars Abdalla and Khalik (2012) argue that for Kani and Ntshona, acting was a primary strategy for survival. They posit that the stage—specifically the photographic studio in *Sizwe Bansi* and the cell in *The Island*—functions as a Foucaultian "heterotopia": a subversive, real-world space where the suppressed Black body reclaims agency against the biopolitical violence of the state. From a sociological perspective, Okoronkwo (2018) views these collaborations as historical documents reflecting 1970s South African realities, wherein the act of taking a photograph in *Sizwe Bansi* represents a desperate attempt to "fix" a disappearing identity within a system designed to erase it. Dennis Walder (2000), the primary editor of Fugard's *Township Plays*, stresses that the revolutionary power of these texts lies in their collective authorship. The dialogue carries the authentic weight of lived experience, which no solitary white playwright could have captured in isolation.

This paper examines the theatrical dynamics of this revolutionary theatre, analyzing how its structural syntax and performance logic combined to generate a highly effective form of political defiance.



Theoretical Framework: Poor Theatre and Biopolitical Heterotopias

To fully appreciate the aesthetic contributions of Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona, their performance methodology must be read through a dual theoretical lens: Jerzy Grotowski's conceptualization of "Poor Theatre" and Michel Foucault's spatial theory of "heterotopias" and "biopolitics."

Grotowski and the Aesthetic of Necessity

In his seminal manifesto *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Grotowski (1968) argued for the elimination of the "rich" excesses of Western bourgeois theatre—such as lavish set designs, complex lighting grids, and elaborate costuming. He advocated instead for a "holy theatre" centered entirely on the physical, psychological, and spiritual relationship between the actor and the spectator. However, as theatre historian Loren Kruger (1999) points out, the "poverty" of Grotowski's theatre was an artistic choice, whereas the "poverty" of the Serpent Players was a socio-economic and legal imposition.

Under the Riotous Assemblies Act and the Group Areas Act, Black actors were forbidden from performing in white municipal spaces, and multiracial gatherings were strictly illegal. Rehearsals in New Brighton were conducted in secret, often in run-down church halls, backyards, or cramped sitting rooms under the constant threat of surveillance by the Special Branch (the South African secret police).

Consequently, the minimalism of *The Island*—a set consisting of a single blanket, a bucket, and two actors—was a structural defense mechanism. If the police raided a rehearsal space, there was no complex set to dismantle. The actors could simply fold their single blanket, put on their everyday clothes, and blend back into the township streets within seconds. Thus, the aesthetic of necessity directly shaped their physical dramaturgy.

Foucault's Heterotopia and Biopolitical Subversion

In his essay *Of Other Spaces*, Michel Foucault (1986) describes a "heterotopia" as a real, physical space that acts as a counter-site—a place where the standard rules, hierarchies, and relations of dominant society are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. The prison



cell in *The Island* and the photographic studio of Styles in Sizwe Bansi is Dead operate precisely as performance-born heterotopias.

Under Apartheid, the state exercised extreme "biopolitics"—the direct control and regulation of Black bodies through passbooks, forced removals, and physical confinement (Foucault, 2008). The Black body was categorized, restricted, and systematically stripped of its agency. On Robben Island, this biopolitical control was pushed to its absolute limit: political prisoners were reduced to serial numbers, subjected to hard labor designed to break their physical constitution, and isolated from the global community.

By staging *The Island*, however, Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona transformed the performance space into a heterotopian laboratory of resistance. Within the confines of their simulated prison cell, John and Winston reclaim custody of their bodies. They run, they embrace, they mimic their warders, and they perform a classical tragedy. The stage becomes a space where the state's biopolitical machinery is short-circuited. The actors use their physical presence to expose the limits of state power, demonstrating that while the state can cage the physical body, it cannot fully colonize the imaginative, creative self (Gilbert and Tompkins, 1996).

The Theatrical Aesthetics of Defiant Theatre

The revolutionary aesthetics of this defiant theatre are defined by a radical minimalism, a highly expressive reliance on physical corporeal performance, and an organic adaptation of indigenous African oral traditions.

Revolutionary Aesthetic Elements:

Minimalist Scenography: One blanket, one bucket

Physical Corporeality: Sisyphus mime, running

Oral Narrative and Metaphor: Imaginary telephone call

Minimalist Scenography and the Power of the Object

In *The Island*, the entire scenography is reduced to a bare platform representing a cell on Robben Island. The props are minimal, yet they carry profound symbolic weight:

The Single Blanket: Functions as a bed, a partition, a privacy screen, and eventually, the royal robe of King Creon.



The Rusty Bucket: Serves as a toilet, a washbasin, and a physical marker of their confined domesticity.

The Prison Khaki Shorts: The only clothing worn for the majority of the play, exposing the bruised skin, sweat, and physical degradation of the prisoners.

By keeping the stage stripped of illusions, the performance forces the spectator to focus entirely on the raw, unmediated presence of the actors. There is no decorative distraction; the aesthetic power of the play relies completely on the actor's capacity to conjure a world out of nothing.

Physical Corporeality and the Mime of Sisyphus

The opening sequence of *The Island* is a masterclass in physical theatre. For several minutes, without a single spoken word, John and Winston perform a grueling mime of manual labor:

"The two men are in prison dress... They are doing the work of two prisoners on Robben Island: digging sand, wheeling it away in barrows, dumping it, and then returning to dig again. It is a sterile, repetitive task. The mime must be executed with absolute physical precision, conveying the heavy weight of the sand and the exhaustion of their bodies." (Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona, 1973, p. 1411)

This physical sequence transposes the classical myth of Sisyphus—condemned to roll a boulder up a hill for eternity—directly into the context of Apartheid's penal system. The sterile labor of moving sand back and forth is not intended to produce anything; its sole purpose is psychological and physical erosion. By starting the play with an extended silence filled only with the sounds of heavy breathing, groans, and dragging feet, the dramatists bypass the intellectual defenses of the audience. The physical strain of the actors' bodies is directly felt by the spectators, establishing a visceral, somatic connection before the first line of dialogue is ever uttered.

Oral Narrative and the Collapse of Spatial Boundaries

Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona reject the rigid conventions of Western dramatic realism, opting instead for a fluid performance style rooted in African oral storytelling. This is brilliantly demonstrated in the "telephone call" scene. John constructs a make-believe telephone using his hand and a piece of string, pretending to place a call to their friends and family in New Brighton:



JOHN: (Holding his hand to his ear) Hello? Operator? Please, operator, New Brighton... Yes, 4-3-2-1... Hello? Scott? Is that you, Scott? It's me, John! Yes, John! Winston is here with me...

This imaginary telephone call is a stunning linguistic and performative device. It collapses the physical distance of hundreds of miles between the isolated prison island and their home township. Through narrative improvisation, John and Winston populate the empty stage with their wives, their neighbors, and the vibrant life of New Brighton. The performance temporarily obliterates the prison walls, demonstrating how memory and oral performance can act as an instrument of liberation.

The Syntax of their Revolutionary Theatre

The structural organization—or "syntax"—of this defiant theatre is characterized by temporal non-linearity, collective workshop-based playwriting, and the radical erasure of the "fourth wall" through the strategic use of real-life identities.

Temporal Fluidity and Projected Realities

In standard Western dramaturgy, time is typically linear, marching forward toward a tragic or comic resolution. In *The Island*, however, temporal boundaries are highly porous. The action moves seamlessly between three core states:

State 1: PAST - New Brighton, Township Life

State 2: PRESENT - Robben Island, Cell Confinement

State 3: FUTURE - Rehearsal of Release, Winston as a Ghost

When John learns that his life sentence has been commuted to three years, meaning he will be released in three months, Winston is initially thrilled, but quickly falls into deep despair. He realizes that when John leaves, he will be left behind to rot on the island forever. To process this emotional crisis, they project themselves into the future of John's homecoming. Winston directs John's movements, acting out the welcoming party, the gossip, and the slow, inevitable fading of John's memory of those left behind:

"WINSTON: You will walk into the blue sky... you will walk down the streets, you will see the children running... But me? I will still be here. I will be a ghost, John. A ghost in a khaki uniform." (Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona, 1973, p. 1428)



This temporal play allows the drama to transcend the specificities of a single plotline. It captures the psychological weight of hope and despair, transforming the stage into a temporal canvas where past memories and future anxieties collide in the present moment.

Collective Authorship and the Serpent Players

As Dennis Walder (2000) highlights, the scripts of the Township Plays were not authored by Athol Fugard in a quiet study. Instead, they were collectively devised through intense, physical improvisation sessions with John Kani and Winston Ntshona. This methodology shifted the locus of creative authority from the white, educated playwright to the Black, disenfranchised actors.

Fugard acted as a "scribe" and "editor-director," structuring the material and offering dramatic shape, while the linguistic rhythms, township slang, cultural nuances, and raw emotional power were contributed directly by Kani and Ntshona out of their lived experiences. This collective authorship is what gives the dialogue its authentic weight. It is a hybrid language—a blend of standard English, Afrikaans words of oppression (like *baas* and *dompas*), and Xhosa linguistic patterns—that accurately reflects the fragmented identity of the colonized subject.

The Erasure of the Fourth Wall and Real-Life Identity

One of the most radical syntactic elements of *The Island* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* is the deliberate blurring of the boundaries between actor and character. The characters on stage are named John and Winston, and they refer to their director as "Athol" (Fugard et al., 1973, p. 43).

This is not a mere meta-theatrical gimmick. By keeping their real names, Kani and Ntshona strip away the comforting distance of theatrical representation. The audience cannot escape into the comforting thought that they are watching fictional characters in a fictional story. Instead, they are forced to confront the reality that these are real Black men—members of the community—who are physically suffering under the very laws that govern the audience's daily life. The erasure of the fourth wall turns the theatre into a literal courthouse, where the spectator is forced to sit in judgment of the state.



The Logic of their Defiant Theatre

The performance logic of Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona operates as a highly sophisticated rhetorical strategy: a three-part action plan designed to bypass censorship, disarm the spectator, and deliver a devastating political critique.

Three-Step Performate Logic:

DIVERSION: Hide the radical message under high art.

ENTERTAINMENT: Use humor to disarm the audience.

THE CONFRONTATION: Drop the mask and strike.

The Strategy of Diversion (The Trojan Horse)

Under the Publications Control Board of Apartheid South Africa, any theatrical work suspected of promoting racial hostility, communism, or subversion was immediately banned, and its creators were subject to detention without trial. To combat this, the dramatists utilized the classical canonical framework of Sophocles' *Antigone* as a "Trojan Horse."

Because the Apartheid censors were products of a Eurocentric education system, they held "Western Classics" in high regard, viewing them as safe, universal, and intellectually elevated. Staging *Antigone* inside a prison cell appeared, on the surface, to be an educational exercise. However, the Serpent Players stripped the classical Greek play of its academic distance. They mapped the structural elements directly onto their reality:

Antigone (Divine Law) maps directly to Liberation Activists (Human Rights)

Creon (State Decree) maps directly to Apartheid Regime (Unjust Laws)

Unburied Brother (Polyneices) maps directly to Silenced and Imprisoned Black Bodies

The trial of *Antigone* became a direct, legally shielded allegory for the trial of Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe, and thousands of other political prisoners on Robben Island. By the time the censors realized that the "Greek classic" was being used to mock state authority, the performance had already achieved its subversive goal.

The Weapon of Entertainment (Disarming through Laughter)

The second phase of their performance logic is the calculated use of comedy to lower the spectator's psychological defenses. During the rehearsal scenes of *Antigone* in their cell, Winston



struggles with his costume. When he puts on the wig made of rope and the artificial breasts, John explodes into uncontrollable laughter:

JOHN: (Laughing hysterically) ...Winston, you look beautiful! A real queen! Creon won't stand a chance!

WINSTON: (Furious, tearing off the wig) ...I'm not doing it! You are making a fool of me! This is not theatre, John! This is a joke! (Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona, 1973, p. 1425)

In trying to calm Winston down, John explains the precise rhetorical logic of their theatrical enterprise:

"...Yes, they'll laugh! But who cares about that as long as they laugh in the beginning and listen at the end? That's all we want them to do... listen at the end!" (Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona, 1973, p. 1426)

This is the core of their performance logic: the bait and the hook. Laughter is the bait. By presenting a humorous, deeply human portrait of two prisoners bickering over a wig and artificial breasts, the play disarms the audience—including any police officers or conservative critics in attendance. The audience relaxes, believing they are watching a harmless comedy. But this laughter is merely a preparation; once the audience has opened their minds through laughter, their defenses are down, making them highly vulnerable to the devastating political critique delivered in the final scenes.

The Climax of Confrontation (The Post-Dramatic Strike)

In the final scene, the play-within-a-play is performed before the simulated audience on Robben Island (and, by extension, the actual theatre audience). Winston, playing Antigone, stands trial before John's King Creon. As Creon demands obedience to the state's laws, asserting that the law is the only thing protecting society from chaos, Winston's Antigone delivers a fierce defense of moral justice over legal tyranny.

Then, at the absolute height of the scene's dramatic tension, Winston breaks character entirely. He tears off the wig, confronts the audience as his true self, and exclaims:



"Brothers and sisters of the Land! I go to my last journey / I must leave the light of day... / I am cold, to be lost between the living and the dead / ...my everlasting prison, condemned to a solitary death." (Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona, 1973, p. 1431)

This moment is a radical post-dramatic rupture. The theatrical illusion is completely shattered. Winston does not appeal to Greek gods; instead, he appeals directly to the audience:

"Gods of our Fathers! My Land! My Home! Time waits no longer. I go now to my living death, because I honoured those things to which honour belongs." (Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona, 1973, p. 1431)

Traditional Drama: Sustained Illusion (The Fourth Wall Intact)

Defiant Drama: Rupture (Winston Strips Wig) leading to Direct Confrontation

The play ends not with a neat resolution, but with a return to physical labor. The two men take off their costumes, bundle them up, and immediately return to their opening physical posture—hands together to suggest handcuffs, legs bound by invisible chains, running on the spot to the rising, deafening sound of police sirens as the lights fade to black. By denying the audience a comfortable, cathartic ending, the performance logic leaves them with a profound sense of unresolved tension, charging them with the responsibility to act outside the theater walls.

Conclusion

The highly oppressive political atmosphere of Apartheid South Africa was the direct catalyst for the emergence of the revolutionary "defiant theatre" of Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona. By combining Grotowski's "Poor Theatre" principles with indigenous oral narratives and a Foucaultian reclamation of the biopolitical body, they created a highly sophisticated, globally influential theatrical aesthetic.

Through their fluid structural syntax, collaborative writing methods, and a performative logic that utilized humor to disarm before delivering a confrontational strike, these artists bypassed state censorship to articulate an urgent call for racial justice and human liberation. Over fifty years after its premier, *The Island* remains a foundational text in post-colonial drama,



offering a timeless blueprint for how the stage can be weaponized to challenge systemic oppression and speak truth to power.

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