



South African People's Plays: Ons Phola Hi (African Writers Series)

Robert Mshengu Kavanagh

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South African People's Plays consists of four plays that were seminal in the development and performance of majority theatre in South Africa during the apartheid period.

The first is a profoundly creative and ground-breaking piece of theatre by Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa - see his "Indaba, My Children" and "Africa, My Witness" - called "uNosilimela". With music and much interaction between the human and the spiritual world, this fable tells the story of uNosilimela (named after the isiLimela constellation of stars) who is the love child of a princess from the stars and a contemporary Zulu inkosi (king/chief). Through uNosilimela's picaresque adventures Mutwa projects a panorama of the life and culture of the black people not only of South Africa but Africa itself. His attempt to recreate what he considered to be a pre-colonial form of performance staging, in itself ensured for the play the important place it occupies in the development of majority theatre in South Africa.

The second of the four is probably the archetypal example of the art and drama of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, a movement which played a key role in the conscientisation of black people, especially the young, in the years leading up to the Soweto Uprising of 16th June, 1976. Mthuli Shezi, the author of the play, was vice-President of the Black People's Convention. During an altercation with a racist railway policeman at a railway station not far from Johannesburg, he was pushed onto the rails in the path of an oncoming train and died of his injuries. The play featured the political engagement and love of Thabo and Shanti, a South African of Indian descent. It underscored the concept of black solidarity between the races oppressed by apartheid racism.

The third is the only published script of that colossus of black theatre, music and dance in the years between 1964 and 1994, the prolific and immensely popular theatre entrepreneur, Gibson Mtuzeli Kente. [See Rolf Solberg's recent publication: "Bra Gib: the Father of Township Theatre"]. The play featured in this collection is "Too Late" (1975), in which Kente prophetically warns 'the powers that be' to do something before it is 'too late'. His prophecy proved accurate when the students all over the country rose up in defiance of Bantu Education and the apartheid system, an uprising which played a major part in bringing in democracy in 1994.

The last is a play by the influential Experimental Theatre Workshop '71 (Workshop '71), "Survival". The four characters who present the play are jailbirds and the central metaphor is that of prison. Through innovative 'workshop theatre' techniques, images, dance and song they demonstrate that apartheid society was in itself a prison and that therefore the real prison was simply a prison within a prison. The play was very powerful in performance and after sold-out performances in Cape Town and Johannesburg, toured on the West Coast of the USA with a run in an off-Broadway theatre in New York.

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