



# (Re)living moments with Athol Fugard (1932–2025)

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Athol Fugard was 92 when he died, yet, for many of us, his death still felt unexpected, a shock. In the tributes that circulated directly afterwards, Janice Honeyman spoke about her shock at realising that theatre-makers like herself had lost a vital compass in Fugard's "incredible honesty"<sup>1</sup> as well as penetrating psychological insight into what makes us who we are. For Dennis Walder, a leading Fugard scholar who has interviewed Fugard and published widely on his plays over several decades, it was his sense that Fugard has always been a survivor.<sup>2</sup> However, what perhaps best explains this reaction is that, as David Attwell wrote in a personal communication (10 March 2025) on the day the news broke, Fugard had become "part of the fabric of our lives". At the same time, for those born after the 1990s, the two early plays written in collaboration with John Kani and Winston Ntshona, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1973) and *The Island* (1973), as well as *Boesman and Lena* (1969), *Master Harold and the Boys* (1982), and *My Children, My Africa* (1989), serve as cultural documents which testify to the lived realities of the everyday experience of apartheid beyond the level of historical information.

While Fugard saw these early plays as a form of testimony rather than protest, it is what he described as "the truly living moment in theatre"<sup>3(p.207)</sup>, which accounts for the lasting effect of his works on audiences. The truly living moment occurs in the affective interchange between the actor and the audience. This is not simply a spontaneous occurrence, because, as Brian Crow notes, it is linked to Fugard's existentialist perspective of self and Being, "[w]hat happens to the actors – the significance of their awareness within the moment as they perform – is at least as important as the audience's experience in witnessing the play"<sup>4(p.17)</sup>. As a writer or collaborator, director and actor, Fugard was always deeply engaged in nurturing a work to its final performance. His journal entries on the process in his *Notebooks 1960–1977*<sup>3(p.207)</sup> offer fascinating insights into the rigorously self-reflective nature of his creative practice. He was fortunate to have worked with actors who trusted the process involved in shedding social masks advocated by Jerzy Grotowski in his *Towards a Poor Theatre*<sup>5</sup>, and for audiences, experiencing these living moments is something so intense and out of the ordinary that it often stayed with one long afterwards.

One such moment was at a performance in 1972 at the Space Theatre in Cape Town, which managed, through a loophole in the law, to bypass apartheid regulations on segregated venues, casts, and audiences by forming a theatre club 'open' to all. At the end of a performance of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, instead of the anticipated blackout, Kani and Ntshona walked up to apparently random people in the audience and asked politely, but firmly, "May I see your pass, please." When approaching white people (and also those designated coloured at the time), where no pass was forthcoming, Kani or Ntshona would simply look them straight in the eye and say, "Ah, I see you do not carry one." But on approaching the most disenfranchised in the audience who were forced to carry the *dompas*, there was a strong sense of solidarity with Kani and Ntshona, resulting in a viscerally felt inversion of the racially imposed power hierarchy. At that moment, the least powerful were the most privileged (like myself), who were literally faced with acknowledging the injustice of that privilege.

Given Fugard's long and extremely productive career spanning nearly seven decades and at least 30 plays, it is useful to consider what Fugard, in hindsight, described as five defining moments at an inaugural lecture at Oxford in 2011.<sup>6</sup> Apart from what was included, it is also interesting to consider what was omitted. The first defining moment was the "gift" of his parents. His Afrikaner mother introduced him to a strong sense of justice early on, while his Irish father exposed him to the gifts of storytelling and music. His boyhood in Port Elizabeth was marked by the most unforgettably shameful moment of his life when, in an act of acute loneliness and despair, he spat (because he could) in the face of his much-loved friend Sam Samela, who worked as a waiter for his mother. Facing up to this incident lives on in *Master Harold and the Boys*. Over time, the desire to be a writer became increasingly compelling, so much so, that he abandoned his final year studies at the University of Cape Town to travel the world. At this point he referred to the influence of his anthropology lecturer, Monica Wilson, but, oddly, not Martin Versfeld, whose lectures on existential philosophy had such a profound effect on Fugard's work.

The second milestone for him was meeting Sheila Meiring (later Fugard), an aspiring writer and actor who introduced him to the world of theatre, and they soon realised that local South African stories needed to become their focus, and moved to Johannesburg to join the creative crucible that was Sophiatown. Some of his earliest attempts at writing plays stemmed from this period in the late 1950s, although it is noteworthy that he does not mention here – as he does elsewhere – the impact of working as a clerk in The Native Commissioners Court, where he witnessed first-hand the dehumanising realities of the apartheid machinery.

The Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, when 69 people were gunned down following a protest against the *dompas*, signalled the third defining moment. At the time, he and Sheila were in London where he was working on a new play, but, feeling the imperative to return, they moved back to Port Elizabeth to what he described as a very changed country. For Fugard, the new play, *The Blood Knot* (1961), was where he felt that he had found his voice as a playwright for the first time. The play examines the deeply entangled relationship between a dark and a light-skinned brother, and the absurdity of racial classification was exemplified in casting Fugard with Zakes Mokatse as his dark brother, marking the first time that a black and a white actor appeared together on stage. Although very successful locally, as a result of critique, when it initially toured overseas, Fugard later re-worked it as *Blood Knot* (1985), which established his international reputation, and was also televised. (In fact, several of his plays have been filmed, including *Road to Mecca*, and, while an early novel, *Tsotsi* was developed into an award-winning feature film (2005)). Reflecting on the decision to stay in South Africa, rather than taking the exit permit to leave for good, Fugard recalls that he felt he needed to stay, just to witness as truthfully as he could "the nameless and destitute of this little corner of the world"<sup>7(p.172)</sup>.

The fourth defining moment for Fugard was when he was approached by a group from the Port Elizabeth township of New Brighton about starting a drama group. The rest is history, as the Serpent Players (because the rehearsal space was an old snake pit) became the arena where the collaboration between John Kani, Winston Ntshona and Fugard flourished. However, Fugard describes the fifth and final defining moment as, “the defining moment that wasn’t”<sup>6</sup>. Initially, the long lines of people casting their votes in 1994 created a sense of euphoria, and he was fully prepared to be considered a redundant figure in the ‘new’ democratic dispensation, but this was gradually replaced by a sense of betrayal and disillusionment and his later plays moved inward, with strong autobiographical aspects. Amongst these are *The King’s Tiger* (1997), *Sorrows and Rejoicings* (2002), *Exits and Entrances* (2004), and *The Shadow of the Hummingbird* (2015). Although these later works did not receive the same accolades as his earlier plays (except for *The Train Driver* (2010)), it is remarkable that he continued to produce new plays, and even perform in them until his late 80s. His final play, *Concerning the Life of Babyboy Kleintjies*, was co-written with Paula Fourie, who is his second wife, and was performed in Stellenbosch in 2022.

Fugard has been called the greatest playwright of his day, but he will now never be awarded the Nobel Prize because, as Brooks Spector points out, you have to be alive to receive it.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, when Fugard in his Notebooks claimed that “only a fraction of my truth is in the words”, he was pointing to those affective aspects of the truly living moments of theatre which he called the “[c]arnal reality of the actor in space and time”<sup>8(p.171)</sup>. This carnal reality communicates a different, deeper awareness of cognitive knowledge. Walder’s assessment in 2003 of Fugard’s ongoing contribution still holds true today, because in focusing on the marginalised of a particular location, Fugard developed “a dramaturgy connecting the subjective,

interior world of the individual with the public, impersonal space of politics, broadly considered”<sup>8</sup>. In light of this, one can take comfort in the fact that, as Fugard’s plays keep being re-staged, the work of witnessing will live on, speaking to new temporal realities and subjectivities, but refracted through a past that lingers into the present.

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