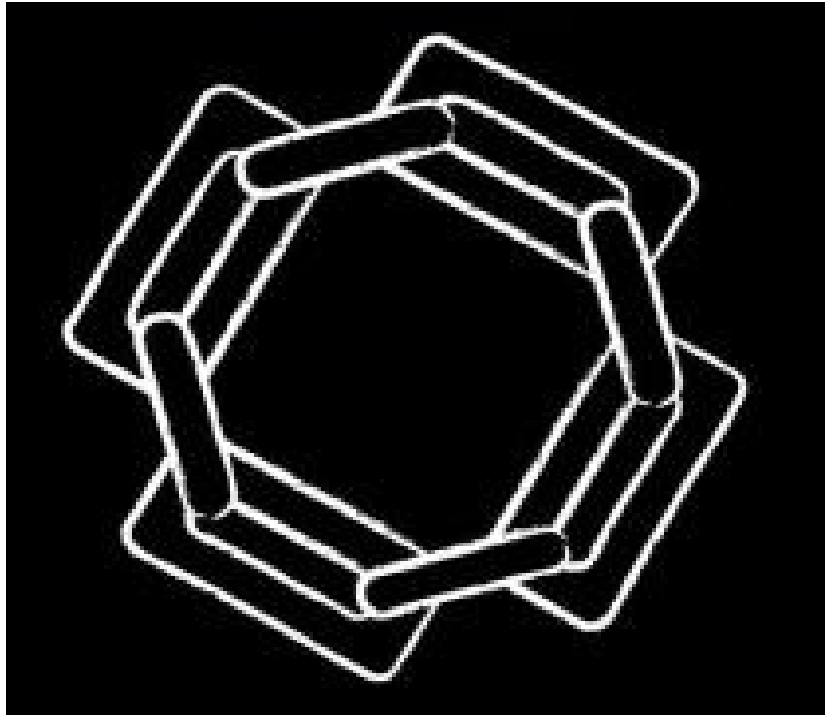


REMY BUMPPPO

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REMY BUMPPPO PRESENTS
THE ISLAND



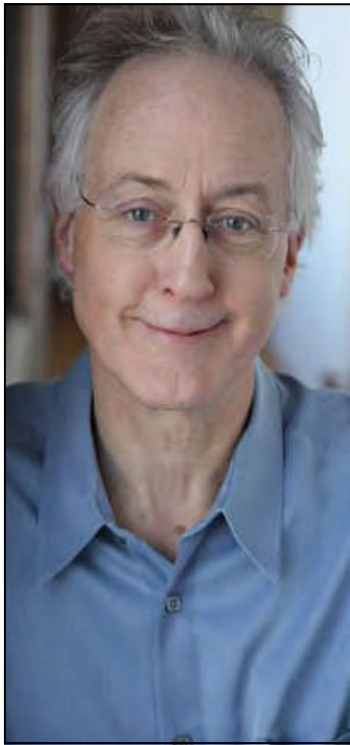
DEvised BY ATHOL FUGARD, JOHN KANI
AND WINSTON NTSHONA
FIELD GUIDE

Directed by James Bohnen
January 27 - March 7, 2010

Field Guide created by Kelli Marino
Articles contributed by Rinska Prestinary

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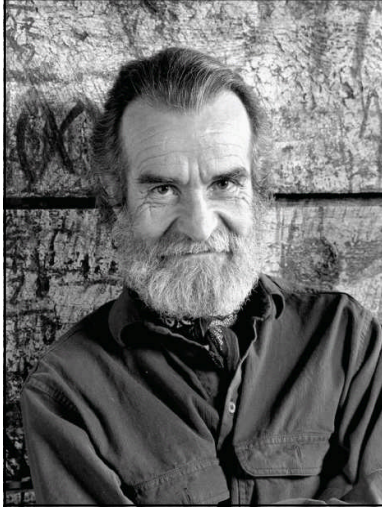
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JAMES BOHNEN: DIRECTING *THE ISLAND*

The two things that move me most about *The Island* are the essential importance of comradeship and the constant, unchanging power of the truly universal stories. The two biggest challenges are landing the two actors in the reality of everyday life in the townships under apartheid that caused these men to stand up and say “No!” and land in jail, and how to build the closeness and profound sense of brotherhood that has arisen by spending three years in a tiny cell. I want to do honor to this text which is a seminal document in the theatre/human push back against that hideous government.

ATHOL FUGARD: THE PLAYWRIGHT



Harold Athol Lanigan Fugard was born June 11, 1932, in the Karoo village of Middleburg, Cape Province, South Africa. Raised in Port Elizabeth from the age of three, Fugard deems himself the mongrel son of an English-speaking father of Polish/Irish descent, Harold David Lanigan Fugard, and an Afrikaner mother, Elizabeth Magdalena (née Potgieter). Fugard also has a brother, Royal, and sister, Glenda. Fugard's father was disabled, so to support the family, Athol's mother ran the Jubilee Residential Hotel and the St. George's Park Tea Room.

Fugard attended the University of Cape Town for two years, studying philosophy before dropping out to travel across Africa. He then served on the merchant ship the *SS Graigaur*, and sailed the trade routes of Southeast Asia. Upon returning to Port Elizabeth, he worked as a freelance journalist for the *Evening Post*. In 1956, he married actress Sheila Meiring (now a novelist and poet), with whom he founded Cape Town's Circle Players, a theater workshop where his first play, *Klaas and The Devil*, premiered.

In 1958, Fugard was a clerk in the Native Commissioner's Court in Fordsburg, the "pass law" court (where black Africans were taken when in violation of the pass laws that regulated their movement in urban areas). There he learned of the injustices of apartheid. Due to the political persecution in apartheid South Africa, he and his wife moved to London to experience theater free from racial segregation and discrimination.

While in London, Fugard penned *The Blood Knot* (1961). Upon returning to South Africa later that year, Fugard found that *The Blood Knot*, because of its interracial content, would not be permitted to play after its first performance at the Dorkay House in Johannesburg. In late 1961, he took the production to London. Fugard and his family returned to South Africa in 1967. When the English television network BBC broadcast *The Blood Knot* that year, the South Africa government seized his passport for four years and kept his family under state surveillance, which included opening their mail and tapping the phone line. Not until 1971 was Fugard allowed to leave the country.

During the 1950s and 1960s in South Africa, when interracial mixing was illegal, Fugard worked as an actor, director and playwright with Cape Town's interracial theater group, The Serpent Players. It was there he met Zakes Mokae, a black musician and actor with whom he would collaborate throughout his career. Through the company, Fugard also met John Kani and Winston Ntshona, actors who helped create some of his well-known plays.

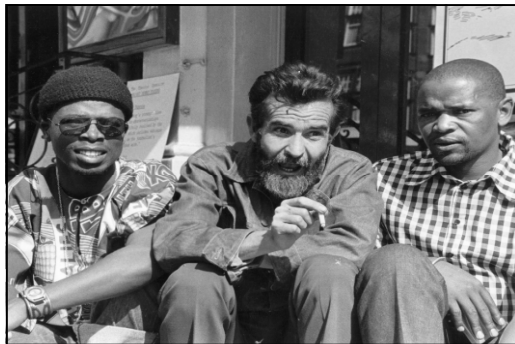
Fugard's work during his entire career, but especially with The Serpent Players, The Market Theatre, and theatres in London and the United States, has primarily focused on anti-apartheid themes. There are six play categories to which Fugard's work can be ascribed: the Port Elizabeth plays, the Township plays, Exile plays, Statements, My

Africa plays, and Sorrows. The Port Elizabeth plays (1961-1982) depict the familial and personal struggles caused by apartheid. Fugard's Statement plays (1972) directly attack apartheid. And as apartheid was ending in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Fugard's My Africa plays confront the new challenges facing post-apartheid South Africa.

Fugard's works weren't produced in South Africa until 1994, after the end of apartheid. Many premiered in London and at Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Conn. Fugard's American debut was *The Blood Knot*, produced Off-Broadway in 1964 by Lucille Lortel at the Cricket Theatre. Four of his plays have been produced on Broadway: *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* (1974), *The Island* (1974), *Lesson from Aloes* (1980), 'Master Harold' ... and the Boys (1982 and the 2003 revival). *Blood Knot* was revived in 1985 on Broadway. Other Fugard works include *The Road to Mecca* (1984), *The Captain's Tiger: A Memoir for the Stage* (1999), *Sorrows and Rejoicings* (2001) and *Exits and Entrances* (2004).

Fugard and his works have received numerous nominations and awards, including the Tony, Obie, Lucille Lortel, Evening Standard, Drama Desk and Audie. In 2005, he was honored by the government of South Africa with the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver for his "excellent contribution and achievements in the theater." He has five honorary degrees and is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He is a professor of acting, directing and playwriting at the University of California, San Diego.

JOHN KANI AND WINSTON NTSHONA



Above: Athol Fugard (center) with actors John Kani (left) and Winston Ntshona (right), 1973. Evening Standard, Hulton Archive, Getty Images

John Bonisile Kani was born on August 30, 1943 in Port Elizabeth and raised with nine siblings. Kani served as a janitor and an engine assembly line worker at the Ford car plant in South Africa, and a welfare assistant with the Bantu Administration in New Brighton. Kani joined Athol Fugard and the Serpent Players in 1965. He originated roles in the productions of *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, *The Island*, "Master Harold" ... and the Boys, and *My Children! My Africa!* for which he received an Olivier nomination. Kani has also received the Avanti Hall of Fame Award from the South African film, television and advertising industries, the 2000 Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation Award, a special Obie award

in 2003 for his extraordinary contribution to theatre in the United States, he was voted 51st in the Top 100 Great South Africans in 2004, the Olive Schreiner Prize in 2005, and in 2006 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Cape Town. Kani is now the executive trustee of the Market Theatre Foundation, founder and director of the Market Theatre Laboratory, and chairman of the National Arts Council of South Africa.

Winston Zola Ntshona was born on October 6, 1941 in King William's Town and then moved with his uncle to a Johannesburg township with his mother and siblings. Later he moved to a larger township house in New Brighton. Ntshona was brought into the Serpent Players in 1971 by John Kani. He originated roles in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island*. Ntshona has notably performed in the 1989 film *A Dry White Season*, the London theatre run of Edward Albee's *The Death of Bessie Smith* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Ntshona continues to live in South Africa as an actor and as chairman of the Eastern Cape Cultural Units Arts Agency. He was honored with a Living Treasures Award from South Africa's National Arts Council. He is the recipient of an honorary doctorate from the University of Port Elizabeth, South Africa.

Kani and Ntshona both received the 1975 Tony Award for Best Actor in a Play for *The Island* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*.

ANTIGONE: THE PLAY BY SOPHOCLES



Marie Stillman. "Antigone from 'Antigone' by Sophocles"

The sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polyneices, have killed each other in a battle over their inheritance. Since Eteocles died defending the city of Thebes, the new ruler Creon orders that he alone shall be accorded an honourable burial, while Polyneices' corpse is left to rot outside the walls of the city. Their mourning sisters Antigone and Ismene discuss this decree, Antigone resolving to defy Creon and bury Polyneices, while Ismene advises caution.

Creon arrives with the chorus and justifies his decision. A guard comes with the news that Polyneices' body has been buried, and when he returns to the body, catches Antigone in the act of reburial. Creon condemns her to death for disobeying the law, but she protests that she is obeying a higher law of religious observance and familial duty. Antigone is led away to be buried alive. Creon's son Haemon, who was to marry Antigone, threatens that he will commit suicide if she should die.

When the prophet Tiresias warns Creon that his tyranny will be punished, Creon rushes off to free Antigone. He arrives to find that Antigone has already hanged herself, and the desperate Haemon threatens his father then plunges his sword into himself. When Creon's wife hears the news of the death of her son, she too commits suicide. Creon remains mourning and alone, the chorus hoping only that one may become wiser with age.

From Michael Patterson's
The Oxford Dictionary of Plays

THE ISLAND'S INSPIRATION

In July 1965, Athol Fugard and the Serpent Players of Port Elizabeth, South Africa decided to stage Sophocles' *Antigone*. During the rehearsal process several of Fugard's black and coloured friends/actors were taken into police custody and sentenced to Robben Island, the infamous political prison. One young and eager actor, Siphon "Sharkey" Mguqulwa, who was to play Haemon, was arrested and the Serpent Players were forced to replace him in the production. But Sharkey did not let his forced and unjustified imprisonment deter him from acting in *Antigone*, even while imprisoned on the Island. Upon his release, Sharkey relayed his story of the time he staged an abridged *Antigone* for his fellow inmates in the prison's annual concert. In a 2003 lecture for University of California Television, Fugard tells the story of Sharkey's *Antigone*.

The stage offered us (the Serpent Players) a chance for breaking through that conspiracy of silence. Of allowing us to talk, albeit in code, about the terrible things that were happening in the daily life of the townships. This started us looking for plays with a strong social context, which in some way or the other, affected the urgent political realities of our own situation. We found what we were looking for in the work of playwrights like Brecht, Buchner, Camus, Shakespeare. In this way we also found that Beckett was a political writer when we put his *Waiting for Godot* on stage. In most cases, it required just minimal changes of the established text to make it obvious to our eager audiences that what was happening on stage was in fact a comment on what was happening outside on the streets of the dilapidated little church halls in which we performed in the townships around Port Elizabeth.

It was inevitable that this search for relevance should eventually lead us to Sophocles' *Antigone*, surely the greatest political play of all time. The story of that young woman's defiance of an unjust law has with time made it one of the most powerful literary weapons in the fight against political oppression. One has only to look at its performance history around the world in recent times to realize how potent its message continues to be. It need be impertinent enough to remind you that the crux of the story involves Antigone burying her brother Polyneices, in spite of an edict from the all powerful Creon forbidding it because her brother was considered a traitor to the state.

Whereas the first readings of all of the other plays we had considered had usually involved a lot of talk about whether it was the right one for us, the response to *Antigone* was a spontaneous and totally unanimous "yes" after our first reading. Her imminence of the story of that one lone voice raised in protest of what was considered an unjust law resonated in the hearts of every member of the group. We were all so in awe of this work that we did not make any attempt to tamper with the text. To the best of our ability, our audience would get *Antigone* as Sophocles had written it, albeit in the translation by [Richard] Emil Braun.

Because the group had already, by then, been targeted by the special branch, we were harassed all through the rehearsal period. They interrupted rehearsals to take names and addresses, and interrogated the actors and myself, they confiscated scripts, and in general did everything possible to intimidate us and make our work impossible.

When they realized that none of those willing tactics were going to stop us, they resorted to more brutal measures. I arrived at one of those rehearsals to be told that the young actor, Sharkey, playing the role of Creon's son, Haemon, had been taken into police custody. It was a terrible blow to us but rehearsals proceeded nevertheless.

I drafted a young factory worker who had just recently joined the group into that role. We finally got the play onto a stage in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth's black township. The audience response was the strongest we had yet received to any of our work. Talking about it afterwards, one of the members of the group remarked proudly, that Serpent Players itself had become the Antigone of New Brighton. It was speaking out against, and defying the edicts of the Apartheid Creon. But that was not the end of Antigone in our lives.

There is a sequel to our Port Elizabeth production that is even more moving and inspiring than that of the courage of the group going on stage in that play which they knew would land them all as marked men and women in books of the secret police.

After several months of not knowing what happened to him, Sharkey suddenly appeared in a Kangaroo court, on false charges, in a remote little, country town. The idea behind this, on the part of the government, was obviously to make it impossible for us to organize any sort of defense with witnesses who could testify on his behalf.

There he was falsely accused of various political offenses, summarily tried, found guilty, and sent to Robben Island for twenty years. This had been a standard procedure with many men and women who had disappeared off the streets of New Brighton.

Serpent Players was to lose a few more of its members in a similar fashion. They would all eventually land on the Island, South Africa's notorious political prison, where Nelson Mandela and the top leaders of the ANC (the African National Congress) were serving life sentences. Sharkey had been one of the most passionate members of Serpent Players and more than anyone else in the group, he had recognized and embraced its mission of giving the people of New Brighton a voice in those years when the rest of them were too frightened to even whisper their anger in the privacy of their own homes. The fact that he had been robbed of the chance to go on stage as Haemon and argue with his father for the life of someone he loved, and for her right to act in accordance with her conscience was, as he told me in a letter smuggled out of Robben Island years later, an even greater blow than the sentence that had been imposed on him. In that same letter, he described the extraordinary way he found of releasing himself from his intolerable frustration.

One of the few treats allowed the prisoners on the Island was an annual concert for which each of the cell blocks had to provide a ten to fifteen minute item. Sharkey persuaded his cell block to allow him to make their contribution. That done, he then bullied one of them into assisting him in staging of a two man, pocket version, of Sophocles' immortal classic. Having no course to a library, of course, all he had to go on was his memory of the text, in facing up to the challenge of reducing the play to its required fifteen minutes. With a stroke of genius, and as a working playwright I still humbly admire, Sharkey put all his passion, energy, and craft into focusing on and reducing the play to the final confrontation between Creon and Antigone. He decided

that he would play Creon and his hapless cellmate, after much bullying and blackmail, was persuaded to stuff false breasts inside his bulky shirt, wear a wig made out of a mop, and risk the ridicule of the entire prison when he appeared onstage as a woman. As it turned out, his fears on this were groundless. There wasn't even a titter when he made his appearance as Antigone.

Sharkey's pre-publicity, which consisted mainly of whispers passed from cell to cell at night, or in working gangs as they laboured under the sun during the day, had prepared the black audience for what was to come. The scene in the prison hall during the concert must have been a striking parallel to the famous production of (Jean) Anouilh's production of *Antigone* in Paris during the Second World War. It was the time of the German occupation, and on that occasion, a front row of German army officers had sat back to enjoy an evening of classical French culture with the audience of Parisians behind them. For that audience of Parisians behind them, that same play was a subversive message of courage and defiance. Similar to the one on Robben Island.

The South African prisoners' warders sitting in the front were no doubt a little surprised at what the prisoners had cooked up for their entertainment. But behind them, the few hundred living Antigones were like that audience in Paris, given a message of courage and hope. Each and every one of them must have remembered his own moment in a courtroom somewhere in South Africa when Sharkey as Creon passed sentence on Antigone with these words: "Take her away, at once and wall her up inside a cavern as I have commanded. And leave her there alone in solitude. Her home shall be her tomb. There she may live or die as she may choose. My hands are clean, but she shall live no more among the living." And in reply, Antigone cries out, "Brothers and sisters of the land, I go now on my last journey. I must leave the light of day forever for the island, strange and cold. To be lost between life and death. So to my grave, my everlasting prison, condemned alive to solitary death. God's of our fathers, my land, my home, time waits no longer. I go now to my living death because I honored those things to which honor belongs."

Those fifteen minutes during that Robben Island prisoners' concert must surely rank as one of the most extraordinary productions of Sophocles' magnificent play.

University of California Television
Series: "Burke Lectureship on Religion & Society" [4/2003] [Humanities]
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kk8J7v13_2Y

THE ISLAND PRODUCTION HISTORY



Winston Ntshona & John Kani in *The Island* at the Market Theatre, 1977. Photo Ruphin Coudyzer

Kani brought Ntshona to Athol Fugard and the Serpent Players in 1971 and when the two men performed together in Camus' *The Just*, re-titled *The Terrorists*, at Cape Town's Space Theatre, their onstage camaraderie was undeniable. Both men resigned from their jobs to become full time actors; Kani and Ntshona became "domestic servants" for Fugard (Kani a gardener, Ntshona a chauffeur) so they could work solely as actors.

The three men then began collaborating on a devised piece called *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, and while awaiting permission to leave for London from the South African government to produce *Sizwe* at London's Royal Court, the men began creating a new play inspired by two former Serpent Players who had been imprisoned.

"Initially, Kani says, [...] Athol came up with the idea that there is a place we never talk about, no one can write about, the press cannot talk about, not even white South Africans, free as they are, can talk about. It is the nightmare of every member of Parliament. What will happen to it in the end? That is Robben Island."**

In March 1973, Fugard wrote in his *Notebooks*, the beginnings of what soon became *The Island*:

"Robben Island: the two men arrived on the Island handcuffed together. Their friendship forged in the long trip down, standing hand-cuffed together all the time, from the Rooi Hel (Red Hell, the prison in Port Elizabeth originally "royal") to the Cape Town docks. Somewhere tonight, two men — shackled together — have started that journey. They will stand for all the 500 miles, pressed close together in the over-crowded prison van. There is a bucket in the dark suffocating cabin, but there are so many of them they cannot use it; they shit and piss as they stand, together. In the first grey light of tomorrow morning they will crawl out of the van at the Cape Town docks and be herded on board a tugboat and taken to Robben Island. Somewhere tonight the same two men confront each other, shocked over the simple fact that one has had his sentence reduced through a legal appeal, and can start to count days, while the other..."

The play's process began as an improvisational exercise where

"Fugard took a large blanket and spread it outside his house on the ground, asking Kani and Ntshona [...] to explore its space, to stand in the centre, to walk around the edge. Then he folded the blanket again, and again, until there was just room for the actors to stand. Then he asked them, 'What do you think this means?' They realized it was a cell, and knew instantly where the exercise was leading them: 'To take the island and say something about it. We joined hands, closed the garage door and after two weeks, we were on stage in Cape Town.'"**

There has been some back and forth about exactly how long the creation process took.

Kani says that it took only “one day with Fugard and six days with [just the two black actors]”^{*} because of the strict laws restricting the time black South Africans could visit white men. Fugard recalls the men working together everyday. The play was initially called *Die Hodoshe Span* or *The Hodoshe work-team* (Hodoshe was a famous Robben Island warder; also Xhosa for ‘carrion fly’).

The play premiered in Cape Town’s Space Theatre in June 1973, the Royal Court theater in London in 1974, followed by its 1974 Broadway premiere at the Edison Theatre. It was revived eleven years after its debut in Cape Town, and Kani and Ntshona “declared that every performance was an ‘endorsement of the local and international call for the immediate release’ of Nelson Mandela ‘and all political prisoners and detainees.’”^{**}

After returning to South Africa in 1976 from performing abroad and winning the Tony Awards for Best Actors in *The Island* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* in 1975, Kani and Ntshona were taken into solitary confinement and detained for twenty-three days because they continued to use theatre to contest apartheid South Africa.

In 1995 President Mandela asked Kani and Ntshona to remount *The Island*. Performing before “nearly 300 ex-Robben Island inmates, we tried in that performance to remember the suffering of the people at that time,” says Kani. “When President Mandela stood up, there was 15 minutes of applause.”⁺

The Island was revived again in 2000 for its 25th Anniversary at the National Theatre in London. Michael Billington of *The Guardian* said of the performance:

“The piece is now inseparable from its two superb performers...the passing years have enriched the relationship between Kani and Ntshona...This revival has become a piece of living theatre: it transcends the moment of its creation to express permanent truths about strategies of survival wherever oppression and unjust imprisonment prevail.”

^{*} “Collaboration Culminates and Ends.” *Truths the Hand Can Touch*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985. 126-32.

^{**} Walder, Dennis. “Introduction.” Introduction. *Township Plays*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. ix-xxxiv.

⁺ Hood, Sarah B. “John Kani Embraces the Political Stage: South African theatre artist speaks to the world.” *Word Mag*. Web. 29 Dec. 2009. <<http://www.wordmag.com/>>.

APARTHEID IN SOUTH AFRICA

In 1948 the new race policy, Apartheid, institutionalized and enforced the already racially segregated South Africa. For the next fifty years, South Africans would be forced apart, imprisoned, and murdered in the name of white domination. By the end of apartheid in 1994, hundreds of thousands of South Africans would be detained, tortured, or murdered.

Arriving in South Africa in 1652, the Dutch settlers established the Cape of Good Hope and utilized the Dutch East India Company to import slaves from Malaysia, Madagascar, India, Indonesia, Mozambique, and East Africa. In 1795 when gold was discovered on tribal lands, British forces seized control of the Cape colony. Soon, many citizens of the English Isles were immigrating to South Africa, leaving the Dutch settlers, now renamed Afrikaners, struggling to retain and regain power over their territories, resulting in the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). Through a peace treaty, the Boers lost their independence, Britain retained domination, and the British abolished slavery.

The British, who had negotiated with the Boer generals, created the South African Native Affairs Commission, proposing racial segregation in the areas of land, labor, education, and politics. In 1910, South Africa gained dominion status within the British Empire and over the next ten years the Union government passed proposals into law which instituted several Acts that would keep South Africa's blacks away from its whites. One Act in particular, the Native Areas Act (passed in both 1913 and 1936), forced native Africans (non-white) to live on less than fourteen percent of the land, even though they made-up roughly eighty-five percent of the country's population.

By the 1930s the increasingly strong National Party (an all-white party) segregated African natives and used them as a means of cheap labor. Their efforts proved fruitful as the 1940s brought World War II and a boom in urban industrial companies. With the Second World War in full effect, and South Africa joining the Allied forces, jobs, wages, and trade unions were on the rise for both whites and blacks. Consequently, with all South Africans moving toward the cities for work, the rural areas became impoverished; farms and farmers suffered. To retain their income, Afrikaner farmers unified as the Afrikaner Nationalist Alliance, demanding more political control over

Terminology

Apartheid: Afrikaner for separateness; apartness.

Petty Apartheid: Everyday racial discrimination such as marriage restrictions, segregated facilities (including park benches and beaches), jobs, elevators, cinemas, restaurants, housing, and education.

Grand Apartheid: Political and racial discrimination.

Four major points: "Separate development" of South Africa's four racial groups; Total white control; The overruling of black interests for white interests; The categorization of whites (Dutch/Afrikaner/English/European).

Four racial groups: The Africans/Blacks: comprised of nine distinct nations (Zulu, Xhosa, Venda, Tsonga, Pedi, Tswana, Swazi, Ndebele, and Sotho); The Coloureds: mixed black, Malayan, and white descent; The Asians: Indian in ancestry; The Whites: Dutch (Afrikaner/Boer) and British Isles (Anglo) descent.

black South Africans. In 1948, the Afrikaner farmers would get what they wanted.

When the National Party and Daniel F. Malan won the 1948 election (ousting predecessor General Jan Smuts who “undermined” racial segregation), Apartheid’s “total segregation” was enacted. This first period of apartheid, known as *baaskap*, Afrikaner for mastery and white supremacy, resulted in an all-white South Africa where blacks, coloreds, and Asians were sent out of major cities to ethnic “homelands” and lost all citizenship rights in the “white” areas of South Africa. Once the non-whites were far removed, white miners, farmers, and industries realized that their cheap labor came from those whom they had recently exiled. Greedy for their businesses to continue operations, the white businesses “allowed” the non-white South Africans to return to the “white” areas to work. To keep tabs on the non-whites in white territory, four significant Acts were passed into law: the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages (an amendment to the Immorality Act (1949)), the Population Registration Act (1950), the Group Areas Act (1950) which would forcibly relocate 3.5 million by the late 1980s, and the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953).

Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act outlaws interracial marriages.

The Population Registration Act classifies people into three racial groups: white, coloured (mixed race or Asian), and native (African/black).

The Immorality Act forbids all sexual relations between whites and non-whites.

The Suppression of Communism Act prohibits any acts or strategies that might promote political, social or economic changes. The law also allows the minister of justice to ban any person posing a threat to the state’s control.

The Preservation of Separate Amenities Act establishes "separate but not necessarily equal" parks, beaches, post offices, and other public places for whites and non-whites.

When Hendrick Verwoerd, Apartheid’s chief architect, became South Africa’s Prime minister in 1958, Verwoerd rephrased Apartheid from the crass *baaskap* to the more sophisticated “separate development.” Through “separate development” non-whites could lead socially, economically, and politically free lives within their assigned “homeland,” but this systemized segregation also made every part of a South African’s life determinable by race. Africans, Coloreds, and Asians still could not vote, own land, move freely from one country to another, or choose their employment. Those who were able to live on “white” land as a result of work had to do so with a permit and without their family, thus breaking down the “races” strength in numbers. Passbooks or “Books of Life” were mandatory for all non-whites to carry, and consisted of marriage and driver’s licenses, birth certificates, and work permits. To be caught without ones passbook was punishable by imprisonment and in extreme cases torture and beatings.

The 1950s also saw anti-Apartheid growth. The African National Congress (ANC), an organization whose members included Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, and 1961 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Albert Luthuli, focused on the political and social conditions of South Africa’s black community and staged the peaceful Defiance Campaign of Unjust Laws. During this campaign, the ANC adopted the Congress of

the People's Freedom Charter (notable for its opening phrase "The People Shall Govern!") which demanded full civil rights and equality for all South Africans. In December 1956, after several protests in addition to the Defiance Campaign, more than one hundred activists were arrested and charged with high treason in the "Treason Trial" of 1961; all of the accused were acquitted.

The newly formed Pan Africanist Congress (PAC; known for its African nationalism, socialism, and continental unity) soon began its anti-Pass Laws campaign against Apartheid. Their first attack resulted in March 1960's Sharpeville Massacre, where sixty-nine people were shot after responding to a PAC call to turn in passes and submit to arrest. By 1963, the African National Congress had formed its military, *Umkonto we Sizwe* or "Spear of the Nation"; Nelson Mandela and other leading activists had been imprisoned or exiled; anti-Apartheid resistance was outlawed under the Unlawful Organizations Act.

South Africans in defiance of Apartheid's laws were now kept in custody without trial or were assassinated. As protests grew, so did the world's interest in Apartheid. In response to South Africa's call for emergency help to the rest of the world, many countries began challenging South Africa's regime. As a result, Prime Minister Balthazar Johannes Verwoerd withdrew South Africa from the United Nations in 1961, left the British Commonwealth, and South Africa was banned from the Olympic Games. In 1966, Verwoerd was assassinated and succeeded by John Vorster who relaxed some of Apartheid's petty laws; this did not stop protest, violence or brutality during the 1970s.

With Pieter Willem Botha's 1978 election to prime minister, Apartheid laws relaxed even more, granting Asians and Coloureds limited political rights and abolishing the long-standing pass system. While these restrictions were lessened, Botha continued to condemn any opposition to the government and wanted white power to remain dominant in South Africa.

By 1983, six hundred South African organizations had come together to create the United Democratic Front, an alliance of trade unions and organizations endorsing the Freedom Charter and eliminate "homelands."

As anti-Apartheid activities increased, in 1986 Botha declared a state of emergency and deployed five thousand soldiers to ban, arrest, and detain tens of thousands of South Africans, many of which were tortured and murdered. Foreign countries began pulling their business transactions, trades, and investments out of South Africa by the end of the 1980s, leaving the country in a state of economic depression.

In 1989, National Party leader Frederik Willem de Klerk became prime minister and released many of Apartheid's black political prisoners. He declared to Parliament that Apartheid had failed and all bans on political parties would be immediately lifted. But race relations continued to retain tension until 1993, and more than ten thousand South Africans were killed due to political violence. Criminal activity like murders, beatings, and explosions were on the rise. In February 1990, anti-Apartheid organizations were un-banned, political prisoners were freed (including Nelson Mandela), and resolution was in the air. Apartheid officially ended in 1994 with the democratic election, abolition of "homelands," and new interim (1994) and final

constitutions (1996), all apartheid laws were repealed and South Africa laid its foundations for a multiracial and multiparty transitional government, Nelson Mandela became the first freely elected, majority president, setting into action equality for all South Africans and the reclamation of native lands by its once native inhabitants.

SOUTH AFRICA IN THE 1970s

The 1970's apartheid regime had turned its Iron hand, into an Iron fist. The production of housing in townships like Soweto had increasingly diminished; with a growing population this became a huge problem, even though job opportunities had improved. Education soon became another problem for the black South Africans. The previous 1940s mentality of "educating the natives" is such:

There is no place for him (the black) in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour ... For that reason it is of no avail for him to receive a training which has had its aim absorption in the European community. What is the use of teaching a Bantu (Black) child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? -B. Bunting's *The Rise of South African* 1969.

In the 1970s, school subjects were segregated and limited to South Africa's non-whites, and the languages in which they were taught as well. One's race dictated your level of education: whites received the highest, and blacks received the lowest. This pattern continued to unravel in all black education. The government spent ten times as much money per white student than black student, schools were filled above capacity, and teachers were under qualified.

Between 1975-1976 the government made revisions to the legislation referencing black education. The Bantu Education Act instituted half of the subjects be instructed in Afrikaans. The first response to this came from, the Tswana School Boards (which is made of different sections of Soweto). The minutes of the meeting of the Tswana School Board held on 20 January 1976 read:

It has been decided that for the sake of uniformity English and Afrikaans will be used as media of instruction in our schools on a 50-50 basis as follows:
English Medium: General Science, Practical Subjects (Homecraft, Needlework, Wood and Metalwork, Art, Agricultural Science)
Afrikaans Medium: Mathematics, Arithmetic, Social Studies
Mother Tongue: Religion Instruction, Music, Physical Culture
The prescribed medium for these subjects must be used beginning in January 1975. In 1976 secondary schools will continue using the same medium for these subjects."

- Signed JG Erasmus, Regional Director of Bantu Education,
17 October 1974

One major problem that concerned educators was that many were not fluent in the Afrikaans language, and passing rates were all ready low. The black South African

students decided it was time to take action; this would result in the first major direct challenge to the apartheid regime in sixteen years. With living conditions being below the poverty line, and the daily lives of South Africans under apartheid's surveillance, a change needed to happen. On June 13, 1976 the Soweto Student Representative Council (SSRC) emerged in response to being asked to learn in Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor.

While thousands of students and supporters gathered against the apartheid regime, police were on duty to enact the "Internal Security Amendment Act" which gave the minister more power to say what exactly was unlawful about the protesters. (It was illegal to hold large gatherings and/or protest; the amendment of this law made it easier for the government to say their actions were within the law). The rally ended with thousands injured and hundreds dead.

"Within four months of the Soweto revolt 160 African communities all over the country were involved in the resistance. It was estimated that at least 250,000 people in Soweto were actively involved. Resistance in the various communities was located in all four provinces." -*South African History*

This was just the beginning of protests to come. The voices of the black South African people gained support, and in 1977, after the death of a famous political leader Steve Biko. Donald Woods a well known journalist and close friend of Biko uncovered the truth, of Biko's assumed prison death. Being detained in Pretoria, Biko was beaten and tortured, and was denied the opportunity to go to a hospital near by. Instead he was put in a van headed toward a prison medical facility that was more than 500 miles away. He died during the journey. His death sent a shock wave, and brought the world's focus to it.

World relations were already rocky in the beginning of the 1970's as South Africa had been banned from international social affairs such as, the Olympics and other sporting events. By 1974 Japan no longer provided visas to South Africa. New Zealand cut off visits made by sport teams. The United Nations made a recommendation 'that South Africa be excluded from participation in all international conferences under auspices of the United Nations as long as it continues to practice apartheid.'

By 1978, the South African government started to change its tune, slowly but surely by "eliminating segregation in theaters but not cinemas." This was just one step that would soon lead to a more equal South Africa.

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ROBBEN ISLAND

Located just off of the coast of Cape Town, South Africa is Robben Island (Dutch for “Seal Island”). Upon the arrival of the Dutch Settlers in 1652, the Island served as a rest stop for passing ships. While seals and birds (including penguins) were indigenous to the Island, the Dutch also integrated rabbits into the wildlife as a means of additional food for passing travelers. Though the island is beautiful by nature it is darkly tainted with cries from the past.

From 1846-1931, the Island was used as a hospital for leprosy, mentally, and chronically ill patients, keeping them isolated and environmentally safe from potential dangers just across the sea channel on the mainland. During World War II it was used as a naval training and defense station and hospital.

In 1964 the Island was transformed into a maximum security prison that held, among 3,000 others, anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela, the founding leader of the Pan Africanist Congress, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, and former South African President Kgalema Motlanthe. With Mandela’s 1990 release from Robben Island, the release of the last of the political prisoners in 1991, and the institution of democracy in South Africa in 1994, Robben Island finally closed its doors as a prison in 1996.

PRISON CONDITIONS IN ROBBEN ISLAND

The Island was divided up into different sections. The “B” section was that of the famous leaders who were kept in single cells away from most of the prisoners. Communication with anyone in general was very limited, especial with anyone inside the “B” section.

Everyone wore the same uniform all year: shorts, a shirt, and sandals. During the winter nights, this did not provide enough warmth for the prisoners who were allowed only 3 blankets each. Pending on their cell arrangements, each unit had their own limited furniture, if any at all. Some cells had a cot, a bench of some sort, and a bucket with tin cups. Others simply had blankets, the cement floor, and a bucket. During the summer months, the heat and environment provided no further comfort. Having to work in the lime quarries during the sun’s hot hours led to permanent eye damage for many prisoners. Meaningless tasks were assigned to the men such as digging a hole on one side and later having to refill that same hole with the sand they had put on the opposite side of their line. The prisoners were forced to comply to whatever bottomless task the Warden assigned, otherwise they were subjected to beatings and even being chased or hunted down by dogs, all while trying to complete their task.

The men survived through much of this meaningless abuse, and used the time spent on the lime quarry to teach “those that were illiterate.” Since they did not have paper or writing utensils, the prisoners turned to nature for help. (One man had no concept

of letters or time, and after he learned how to read and calculate, he realized what his twenty year imprisonment actually meant. Another man who was sentenced to 40 years learned the same hard truth and lost his mind.)

The quarry was the best time to have a small social life, if done carefully. Prisoners who *behaved* had access to educational material, though limitations on when they could study were strictly enforced. No one was allowed to study during the day, and bed time was at 8 p.m. Those that defied this order used their bathroom breaks to sneak in learning time.

Information from the outside world was very much suppressed. Any news or gossip that was brought to the Island was provided by the new prisoners that had been transferred in from the mainland; this helped the prisoners pass time as they exercised. Exercise was granted daily for half an hour during the morning and afternoon and proved vital to their physical and mental health. Meals, on the other hand, did not. Prisoners were given a very poor diet, which denied them bread. They were on what was called the “F diet scale,” a low-fat, high fiber diet which led to weight loss.

Censorship was very strong on the Island. Every letter that came to and from the Island prison was carefully read to make sure that information that was being sent was appropriate for the reader; anything that was not was either crossed out or thrown away. (Notes were sometimes passed through the kitchen, prisoners who worked preparing the meals would put them in with the food very discretely so that information could be past to and from the “B” section to the rest of the prison.) Prisoners were allowed one letter every six months, just as they were allowed one visitor every six months for thirty minutes. Visitors were kept far away and fenced in, unable to hold or touch their loved ones. They were forced to yell to communicate across the distance, and conversations were drowned out by other yelling families. The prisoners were left to make up news, stories or weather reports to help pass the time. Some used forms of entertainment such as dancing. This provided healthy competitions that kept their spirits up. Other entertainments included sports, this was where the political parties, took out their aggression, on one another. And games such as Scrabble, Monopoly, and Dominoes were also played.

Conditions were so bad at times that prisoners would fake stomach ulcers just to go to the main land hospital. The men would be continuously beaten and at times tortured throughout the day. Medical attention was given at times but medical doctors were pressured to have the prisoners pass their examination so they could get back to work. The only time prisoners were able to leave the Island (besides being freed), was to see a medical specialist, which according to one man proved to be one of the most humiliating things. “The prisoner was to be hand cuffed and have their legs shackled together. This created a daunting noise that focused everyone’s attention to the prisoner. Being in a hospital waiting room and hearing the iron swishing noise was unbearable. He describes a moment of having over a 1,000 pair of eyes penetrating through him, and silence comes over the room, the obvious reason being him.”

LETTERS FROM ROBBER ISLAND

Christmas Tinto, Cape Town morning 1971

His family was woken at 2 a.m. by loud banging, and found their home encircled by security policemen. With his wife and children crying, Tinto was led away: "I had a feeling I might never see them again." He was put in a freshly painted cell; the police said the previous occupant has hanged himself. A fellow prisoner, however, said the previous occupant has been beaten to death and the walls painted to cover the blood. "I couldn't sleep, I sat on the blankets all night," Tinto recalled. The next day four security policemen came to fetch him. They took him to a hall and told him to strip, "I left my underpants on. I was told to stand on top of a chair. They took chains and some wires and put them over the rafters. They handcuffed me and hooked the handcuffs to the chains, they kicked away the chair and took off my underpants, They put a cloth bag over my head. They took iron clips and attached them to my ears and feet. I was hanging there, blood pouring down my arm where the handcuffs were cutting into them. An electric shock was applied...they said: "Tinto, tell us, who is your contact in Johannesburg"- I said, " Okay I am going to tell you." They took the clips and let me stand on the chair. I said, " Gentlemen, I know nothing, I said that because this is hurting." This time they pulled out my nails one by one-"praat, praat, praat" (speak, speak, speak). They held my genitals with pliers, it was a terrible experience. I thought, they are going to kill me. I lost consciousness. On the third week I awoke in a Mental Hospital. They told me I was brought by security police and said the police had told them how I had been tortured and that I had written a statement. I couldn't remember any statement. - *Charlene Smith, Robben Island*

This Letter, written to Sylvia Name, it was smuggled out of Robben Island.

I want to try to give you a picture of some aspects of our life here though I'm sure you're well up with quite a bit already. I must emphasize that I can only speak authoritatively of life in the single cells sections, for that is where I've lived ever since our arrival. There are over 80 single cells, but our permanent population remains about 30. In this way they have effectively isolated us from the rest of the population which totals +/- 800. I believe, of these, under 400 are political. You will be surprised to learn that in all these years I have only managed to have an occasional glimpse of the chaps... My cell is about 8 x 8 feet- the only items of furniture are a table and bench. We sleep on two mats on the cement floor. It can be terribly cold. Living with the same faces day in and day out must be having adverse psychological effects on us. We do get on one another's nerves and we have long exhausted all conversation relating to our experiences outside. There are inevitable tensions arising from such a situation. But, on the whole we have coped remarkably well...wish they'd allow us newspapers... Our relationship with warders has been quite cordial and with some decidedly warm. There is considerable exchange of small talk, which is not without benefit...unfortunately they stay a very short time with us and are once again exposed to the unwholesome and brutalizing influences of prison life. Then I suppose they become ordinary white South Africans with all their prejudice, hates, fears and irrationality. Isn't it tragic?

- *Sylvia Name- sometime between 11 December 1970 and 9 January 1971*

EXCERPTS FROM NELSON MANDELA'S *LONG WALK TO FREEDOM*

As readers will discover, this book has a long history. I began writing it clandestinely in 1974 during my imprisonment on Robben Island. Without the tireless labor of my old comrades Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada for reviving my memories, it is doubtful the manuscript would have been completed. The copy of the manuscript which I kept with me was discovered by the authorities and confiscated. However, in addition to their unique calligraphic skills, my co-prisoners Mac Maharaj and Isu Chiba had ensured that the original manuscript safely reached its destination. I resumed work on it after my release from prison in 1990.

-Acknowledgment

IN JAIL, all prisoners are classified by the authorities as one of four categories: A, B, C, or D. A is the highest classification and confers the most privileges; D is the lowest and confers the least. All political prisoners, or what the authorities called "security prisoners," were automatically classified as D on admission. The privileges affected by these classifications included visits and letters, studies, and the opportunity to buy groceries and incidentals all of which are the lifeblood of any prisoner. It normally took years for a political prisoner to raise his status from D to C. As a D Group prisoner, I was entitled to have only one visitor, and to write and receive only one letter every six months. I found this one of the most inhumane restrictions of the prison system. Communication with one's family is a human right; it should not be restricted by the artificial gradations of a prison system. But it was one of the facts of prison life.

-ROBBEN ISLAND: THE DARK YEARS, PART EIGHT

They were members of the island's notorious criminal gangs, either the Big Fives or the Twenty-Eights, which terrorized other prisoners. They were brawny and surly, and their faces bore the scars of the knife fights that were common among gang members. Their role was to act as agents provocateurs, and they would attempt to push us around, take our food, and inhibit any political discussions we tried to have. One of these fellows was known as Bogart, after the American tough-guy movie actor. He had a cell opposite Walter's and Walter used to complain that he would demand Walter's breakfast from him each morning, and that he was too scared to refuse...I saw the gang members not as rivals but as raw material to be converted. There was a nonpolitical prisoner among us, nicknamed Joe My Baby, who later joined the ANC and proved invaluable in helping us smuggle material in and out of prison...One day we heard that Bogart had been savagely beaten by a warder at the quarry. I did not see the assault, but I saw the results. His face cut and badly bruised, Bogart approached me in our corridor and asked for help. I immediately agreed to take up his case...I had been emboldened by this case, so when Bogart asked for help I immediately demanded to see the commanding officer. The next day I was summoned to the head office, where the commander blandly informed me that the case had been investigated and dismissed. "That's a violation of regulations," I said. "The case must

be tried." "No," he said, "we have attempted to interview the so-called complainant and he denies that he was ever assaulted."

"That's impossible," I said. "I spoke to him only yesterday." The commander gestured to a lieutenant and said, "Then see for yourself." The lieutenant led Bogart into the room. His face was covered with bandages. The commander asked him whether or not he had been beaten. "No, baas," he said quietly, without meeting my gaze, "I was never assaulted." He was then dismissed. "Well, Mandela," the commander said. "The case is closed." The commander had succeeded in humiliating me. He had obviously bribed Bogart with extra food and tobacco to drop his charges. From that point on, I demanded a signed and written statement from a prisoner before I agreed to take up his case.

-ROBBEN ISLAND: THE DARK YEARS, PART EIGHT

To get around the restrictions on discussing non-family matters, we used names whose meaning was clear to us, but not to the warders. If I wanted to know how Winnie was really doing, I might say, "Have you heard about Ngutyana recently; is she all right?" Ngutyana is one of Winnie's clan names, but the authorities were unaware of that. Then Winnie could talk about how and what Ngutyana was doing. If the warder asked who Ngutyana was, we would say she was a cousin. If I wanted to know about how the external mission of the ANC was faring, I would ask, "How is the church?" Winnie would discuss "the church" in appropriate terms, and I might then ask, "How are the priests? Are there any new sermons?" We improvised and managed to exchange a great deal of information that way.

As always, when the warder yelled, "Time up!," I thought only a few minutes had passed. I wanted to kiss the glass good-bye, but restrained myself. I always preferred for Winnie to leave first so she would not have to see me led away by the warders, and I watched as she whispered a good-bye, hiding her pain from the warders.

-ROBBEN ISLAND: THE DARK YEARS, PART EIGHT

THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSON in any prisoner's life is not the minister of justice, not the commissioner of prisons, not even the head of prison, but the warder in one's section. If you are cold and want an extra blanket, you might petition the minister of justice, but you will get no response. If you go to the commissioner of prisons, he will say, "Sorry, it is against regulations." The head of prison will say, "If I give you an extra blanket, I must give one to everyone." But if you approach the warder in your corridor, and you are on good terms with him, he will simply go to the stockroom and fetch a blanket.

-ROBBEN ISLAND: THE DARK YEARS, PART EIGHT

I NEVER IMAGINED the struggle would be either short or easy. The first few years on the island were difficult times both for the organization outside and those of us in prison. After Rivonia, much of the movement's underground machinery had been destroyed. Our structures had been discovered and uprooted; those who were not captured were scrambling to stay one step ahead of the enemy. Virtually every one of the ANC's senior leaders was either in jail or in exile.

-ROBBEN ISLAND: THE DARK YEARS, PART EIGHT

One of the first questions to be resolved was where I would spend my first night of freedom. My inclination was to spend the night in the Cape Flats, the bustling black and Coloured townships of Cape Town, in order to show my solidarity with the people. But my colleagues and, later, my wife argued that for security reasons I should stay with Archbishop Desmond Tutu in Bishop's Court, a plush residence in a white suburb. It was not an area where I would have been permitted to live before I went to prison, and I thought it would send the wrong signal to spend my first night of freedom in a posh white area. But the members of the committee explained that Bishop's Court had become multiracial under Tutu's tenure, and symbolized an open, generous nonracialism. Within twenty feet or so of the gate, the cameras started clicking, a noise that sounded like some great herd of metallic beasts. Reporters started shouting questions; television crews began crowding in; ANC supporters were yelling and cheering. It was a happy, if slightly disorienting chaos. When a television crew thrust a long, dark, furry object at me, I recoiled slightly, wondering if it were some newfangled weapon developed while I was in prison. Winnie informed me that it was a microphone.

-ROBBEN ISLAND: FREEDOM, PART ELEVEN

Our toilets and showers were adjacent to the isolation section. Prisoners from the general section were often sentenced to isolation there and would use the same set of toilets we did, though at different times. Mac devised a method of wrapping notes in plastic and then taping them inside the rim of the toilet bowl. We encouraged our political comrades in the general section to be charged and placed in isolation so that they could retrieve these notes and send replies. The warders never bothered to search there.

In order not to have our notes read or understood by the authorities if they were found, we devised ways of writing that could not easily be seen or deciphered. One way was to write messages with milk. The milk would dry almost immediately, and the paper would look blank. But the disinfectant we were given to clean our cells, when sprayed on the dried milk, made the writing reappear. Unfortunately, we did not regularly receive milk. After one of us was diagnosed with an ulcer, we used his.

Another technique was to write in tiny, coded script on toilet paper. The paper was so small and easily hidden that this became a popular way of smuggling out messages. When the authorities discovered a number of these communications, they took the extraordinary measure of rationing toilet paper. Govan was then ailing and not going to the quarry, and he was given the task of counting out eight squares of toilet paper for each prisoner per day.

But even with all these ingenious methods, one of the best ways was also the easiest: getting sent to the prison hospital. The island had one hospital, and it was difficult to segregate us from the general prisoners while we were there. Sometimes prisoners from the different sections even shared the same wards, and men from Section B and prisoners from F and G mingled and exchanged information about political organizations, strikes, go-slows, whatever the current prison issues were... Communication with the outside world was accomplished in two ways: through prisoners whose sentences were completed and who were leaving the island, and through contact with visitors. Prisoners who were leaving would smuggle out letters in their clothes or baggage. -ROBBEN ISLAND: THE DARK YEARS, PART EIGHT

'ANTIGONE' AS A PROTEST TACTIC

By Ron Jenkins Published in the New York Times, March 30, 2003

The story of "The Island," a South African prison drama, suggests that symbolic resistance to oppression can play a role in giving birth to freedom itself.

The play's persuasiveness derives from the circumstances of its creation. "The Island" was written and performed in South Africa in 1973 in response to the country's racist apartheid laws. The white South African dramatist Athol Fugard had begun a theater company, the Serpent Players, to encourage theatrical collaboration between black and white artists. Together with the black actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona, he wrote a two-character play based on the experiences of an actor they knew who had been sent to Robben Island, the notorious prison where political dissidents, including Nelson Mandela, were held.

In 1974, "The Island" was presented on Broadway in repertory with another drama by the three men, "Sizwe Banzi Is Dead," both directed by Mr. Fugard. Mr. Kani and Mr. Ntshona shared the 1975 Tony Award for best actor for their work in the two plays. Now, nearly 30 years later, the performers, who are both 60 and who spent time in jail under apartheid, will reprise their original roles in a production of "The Island" that begins performances on Tuesday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater.

This version was conceived in 1999 when the eminent English director Peter Brook was presenting his play "The Man Who" in Johannesburg at the Market Theater, which is renowned for its daring theatrical depictions of race relations during apartheid. Mr. Kani, who is the Market's artistic director, asked Mr. Brook to help him and Mr. Ntshona restage "The Island" for a production by the Market Theater. The men worked on it at Mr. Brook's theater in Paris, Les Bouffes du Nord, and since then it has toured to Europe and America as Mr. Kani's schedule allows. It is being presented in Brooklyn by the Market Theater and the Royal National Theater in London.

Speaking recently by telephone from Johannesburg, Mr. Kani recalled the conditions that inspired the play. "Athol was directing a production of 'Antigone' by Sophocles with a black actor named Shark, who could never remember his lines. I was the prompter, and Athol arranged for me to be a soldier onstage so I could whisper his lines to him during the show, but Shark was arrested before it opened. Then we heard he was doing a one-man version of 'Antigone' in prison during lunch hour, and we wondered how he did it, because we knew he could never get the lines right."

"At that time, it was forbidden to mention that Robben Island even existed, so we knew it would be illegal," Mr. Kani said about "The Island." "But we wanted to make a play about prison because we all knew so many people who were in jail, including my brother." Mr. Kani's brother Xolile was killed by the police in the 1980's.

According to Mr. Fugard, performing "Antigone" in South Africa was just as dangerous as performing "The Island." "'Antigone' is the most powerful political play ever written," Mr. Fugard said by telephone from what he calls his "home away from home"

in San Diego. "It is the first play that raised the issue of standing up and being counted in a situation that involved oppression and injustice. The entire time we were working on it, the government was harassing us, barging into rehearsals and confiscating manuscripts. Several members of the group were arrested and sent to Robben Island on trumped-up charges."

The central action of "The Island" is the effort by two prisoners to stage "Antigone" as a form of protest in prison. The story of a grieving woman forbidden to give her brother an honorable burial, the play has always resonated with political dissidents, as has Antigone's choice to sacrifice her life in a challenge to the unjust laws of Thebes. "The Island" works on three different levels that heighten its universality: Antigone's burial of her brother defies the repressive state, just as the characters in "The Island" denounce apartheid by performing "Antigone" for their guards and fellow inmates on Robben Island, at the same time that Mr. Kani, Mr. Ntshona and Mr. Fugard were risking arrest by staging a play that challenged the government.

Mr. Fugard remarked on the parallels to another performance of the play in a different time and place. "During the German occupation of France," he said, "Jean Anouilh produced a version of 'Antigone' in Paris. In an exact parallel to the situation on Robben Island, the first five rows of German jackbooted officers admired what they thought was a straightforward piece of classical culture, but the French audience behind them knew what it was about."

Speaking of the actor Shark's performance of "Antigone" at Robben Island, Mr. Fugard continued, "the Boers were in the first row and enjoyed it, but the prisoners were the ones who got the real message."

Now that apartheid no longer exists in South Africa, Mr. Fugard said, "The Island" has "become a much more general statement about the question of political prisoners."

In London (where the current production was presented at the Royal National Theater in 2000 and again at the Old Vic in 2002), Mr. Fugard said: "The press made the point that the play had not dated because it was about political prisoners and, God knows, there are enough of them in the world at this time. You can talk about Guantanamo Bay or about what Saddam Hussein does to prisoners on his side but there is resonance on both sides of the fence."

Putting on theater in prison may seem inconsequential. But seeing Mr. Kani and Mr. Ntshona perform "The Island" in 2001 at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington made me recall informal performances I had seen in a South African jail where I was briefly held after observing a protest demonstration in Johannesburg in 1992.

Like the characters in "The Island," the several hundred black men I shared a cell with refused to be dehumanized by the squalor of their conditions. First, they sang, joining their voices in rough and vital renditions of protest songs they had grown up with. Then they danced, hopping to the relentless beat of a step known as the *Toyi Toyi*. In a recent documentary film about the significance of South African protest music, "Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony," a white former South African police officer recalls the fear he felt when he saw throngs of black demonstrators dancing

this simple step. In jail in South Africa, I sensed that the officers who guarded us also felt intimidated by the performance they saw through the bars.

It was a demonstration of solidarity that unified the prisoners into what seemed like a single organism of shared opposition to the system that gave the guards their jobs, their power and their identities. Even if they did not hear the scatological insults directed against them, or pretended not to hear, the guards could not help but know that the rhythms of protest were undiminished by conditions meant to silence them.

As the only white man in the cell, I was surprised to be invited to join in and exhilarated by the energy of people whose actions were animated by unwavering faith in the justice of their cause.

After hours of song and dance, one exhausted man asked if we could take a break. A voice in the crowd shouted back: "Why should we be quiet? We can do anything we want. We're in jail!" The man yelled "We're in jail!" as if it were a cry of emancipation. The men had used songs, dances and jokes to transform the prison into a place of freedom. Outside the jail, the invisible bars of apartheid restricted their every move, but inside they could do whatever they wanted, and what they wanted was to proclaim their right to be free. It was so intoxicating that when the guards asked if I wanted to leave the cell, I declined. Why would anyone want to leave a celebration like that to enter a grim world of soldiers with guns and drooling police dogs?

When Mr. Mandela was freed from Robben Island and saw thousands dancing and singing protest songs in front of the presidential palace in Pretoria, he called it a tidal wave of democracy. Two years later, he danced the *Toyi Toyi* to celebrate his election to the presidency of South Africa.

The artists who created "The Island" and the prisoners who inspired it understood that theater alone was not going to change their world. But Mr. Kani, Mr. Ntshona and Mr. Fugard built a haven in the theater for freedom that could not yet be achieved in the society at large. In jails, in theaters and on the streets, black South Africans expressed their opposition to tyranny with a sense of inevitability that transformed their collective performances into a self-fulfilling prophecy of freedom, willing their liberation into existence by performing as if it had never been in doubt.

Ron Jenkins, a professor of theater at Wesleyan University, is the author of "Artful Laughter: Dario Fo & Franca Rame," and the translator of many of Mr. Fo's plays. A version of this article appeared in print on March 30, 2003, on page 26 of the New York edition.

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