

## Oral English in South African Theater of the 1980s

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In this paper I examine the role of theater in promoting a new non-racial democracy in South Africa during the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Theater performances are seen as mediations between oral and literate English, enacted in the dramatic relations of the fictional world on the stage and in the theatrical relationship between performers and their audiences in the social space of the theater. Studies of two South African plays, *Sophiatown* and *Asinamali*, demonstrate how these connections are embodied in the presentation of the plays; I also show how they direct an audience's perceptions of their social world towards creative alternatives to that world.<sup>2</sup>

South African theater in the 1980s displayed a marked vitality and purposefulness. These qualities suggest that local political and socio-economic conditions at that time created a climate in which cultural activities were central in the shaping of what contemporary political oratory now proclaims to be "the new South Africa." Certainly the recent impetus in political and business circles towards negotiating a future fundamentally different from South Africa's colonial history is matched by the energy with which ordinary people have been engaging themselves in cultural action as a means of identifying themselves within or against this vision of a restructured South African future.

Culture tends now to be popularly perceived less as a received tradition of particular beliefs and behaviors and more as a course of action. It is something you do, rather than something you inherit like a family

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<sup>1</sup> This article derives from sections of Banning 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from *Sophiatown* refer to the published edition of the script (Junction Avenue Theatre Company 1988). Quotations from *Asinamali* derive from the published version of the text (Ngema 1986) and, where specified, from an earlier unpublished manuscript predating the first performance. This latter version is lodged in the Market Theatre archives and is used with the kind permission of the Market Theatre.

heirloom. This new emphasis on enacting culture gives the performing arts a socially acknowledged value they have rarely, if ever, possessed before. This was nowhere more evident than in the inauguration of the new State President in May 1994. Both the performance of the praise-poets in the formal proceedings and the simultaneous day-long televised concert testified to the potency of the performing arts in generating and celebrating a collective vision of national unity that made the day an unforgettable experience for South Africans.

During the eighties cultural action invariably expressed political resistance: where political action was brutally repressed and silenced, cultural action became the only means of manifesting the “will of the people.” Cultural performance and political action were often indistinguishable: funerals looked more like ritual theater and sounded like political rallies; theaters resounded with the insistent stamp of the *toyitoyi*,<sup>3</sup> the harmonies of the protest song, the passionate political rhetoric that could be expressed nowhere else. In the streets, the drama of the social conflict unfolded with increasing intensity; vivid images and actions captured by the world’s press and mass media represented the political turmoil in ever more dramatic terms. Political events were framed by these representational images in newspapers and on television, creating a cultural aesthetic born out of the violence and conflict of a social order in collapse. South Africans were learning that the common feature of life and art was collective action.

The 1990s heralded the long-awaited release of Nelson Mandela, the first South African democratic elections, and the beginning of the national Reconstruction and Development Programme. A new and hopeful discourse of united, collective South African identity was heard—we could become a “rainbow nation;” “*Simunye* (“we are one”),” it declared.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was constituted to address the wrongs of the past—to hear public evidence of the terrible hidden sufferings of ordinary South Africans, to offer symbolic redress for the savage injustices that had been visited on them, and to determine who should receive amnesty in exchange for full disclosure of the concealed stories of crimes committed in the name of apartheid. The testimony of witnesses before the Commission provided moving and painful accounts of the experiences of family members of the victims. The proceedings of the TRC were disseminated through the media, as photographs, reports, and

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<sup>3</sup> The *toyitoyi* is a popular dance form used in mass protests. It is based on the military march, involves jumps and stamps from foot to foot, and is always accompanied by song.

video recordings of the Commission's hearings made every South African a spectator in a real-life drama that played to capacity audiences. It became clear that the dream of South African unity could not overcome the divisions of the past so easily. Difference, we slowly came to understand, was the single principle out of which unity might grow, if we could learn to *celebrate* our diversity. Where apartheid had recognized and used racial difference as a means of division and control, a new recognition of multiple differences might lead to a richer understanding of democracy. "Collective" no longer implied simply political solidarity; it could encompass all the varieties of relationships among multiply-cultured, multilingual individuals. The greater the number of participants, the greater the collective expression of South Africanness.

In theaters, cultural diversity is now being enacted with the same passion that drove the collective protest theater of the 1980s. New voices are emerging in small, often informal venues, telling the histories and experiences of individuals in forms that are as diverse as the performers themselves. Along with political and social change, profound cultural change is also taking place, bringing with it the beginning of new perceptions of participatory and collective identity.

### **Dramatic and Theatrical Relationships**

Of all the performing arts, theater is arguably the form most suited to expressing this urge towards collective, participatory action. It is eminently a syncretic form, forging its meanings from immediate visible and audible signs, interacting directly in the here and the now. Its subjects are the relationships among people and its mode is to create fictional (dramatic) relationships in a theatrical (social) context. The social relations between audience and performers, as well as among audience members, inescapably invite all participants to register the effects of the dramatic and the theatrical on each other, as part of the experience of performance.

A theater performance thus constructs multiple sets of relationships that are concurrently experiences. The actors present themselves in three overlapping roles to an audience: as actors (people doing work, as particular personalities); as characters (fictional representations of individual people); and as symbolic representations of a specific point of view (authoritative

role). They may also represent the “voice” of the audience, in the sense that they are acting on behalf of the audience.<sup>4</sup>

Other relationships that occur during a performance include that between the world as we “know” it (reality) and the world as it might or could be (alternative “dramatic reality”), and between individual dramatic characters contending with specific problems in a particular historical and geographic context and their symbolic representation of general experiential “truths.” Each of these relationships depends on a fundamental exchange within each participant during a performance of dramatic, theatrical, and more broadly social perspectives, each illuminating the others. Essentially, a theatrical performance constitutes an experiential process of learning—one of recognizing familiar perceptions of reality and of becoming conscious that reality itself, like dramatic reality, is a linguistic and behavioral construct. We “know” reality only through the words we have to describe it and by the relational terms we apply to it.

All the participants in a performance in a sense bear witness to the “truth” of the dramatic experience they themselves construct. For what all participants see, hear, and understand during a performance confirms their knowledge and experience of the “real” world, because it is precisely this knowledge and experience that invests the dramatic world with its “truth.” At the same time, the presentation of the dramatic world can transform their understanding of the terms and conditions of the “real” world by inviting conscious perceptions of the ways in which the dramatic world is both like and unlike the real world. This connection between the real world and the dramatic world is perhaps the most important of these relationships; it is in this arena that the functional social value of theater activity is located.

### **Orality and Literacy in the Theater**

One of the major connecting systems that fuses dramatic and lived reality in a performance is language. Both within and outside the theater, language is a powerful determinant of social identity, for it is in language, and primarily in spoken language, that all the complex terms of personal identity are negotiated and articulated. In the theater, spoken language is a primary determinant of the relations between audience and performer, through its capacity to enlarge or diminish symbolic distance between them. Where cognitive aspects of language are foregrounded, the emotional

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<sup>4</sup> There is always some form of social contract existing between performers and audience, whereby an audience agrees to allow the actors to act on their behalf.

distance between audience and performer is greater; where the expressive function of oral speech is foregrounded, empathetic exchange reduces the metaphoric distance between audience and actor, as well as actor and character. Between these two extremes, though, dramatic dialogue may be said to exert considerable influence on the kind and quality of the theatrical relationships established during a performance.

A theater performance makes demands on both oral and literate cognition. Although orality is the major medium of transmission, literate responsiveness is implied in the formalizing aspects of drama, on which dramatic structures depend to make performance recognizably different from behavior. Orality provides the spectator with the means of entering into dramatic reality and thus engaging an empathetic ally with the sensorily apprehended experience of immediate events. Literacy invokes a different kind of cognitive action, involving the processing of such sensory experience into formalized, abstracted spatio-temporal patterns that permit contemplation of the representativeness of the dramatic action. This double perspective enables an audience to expand the frame of reference beyond the immediate context of the dramatic experience in the moment. It also opens the spectator to the possibilities of recognizing dramatic structures as organizations of experience,<sup>5</sup> thereby drawing the spectator irresistibly toward a critical consciousness of the ways in which personal social experiences are constructed and organized by the often hidden or mystified political structures in which our personal experiences are located.

### **Orality and English**

Under South African conditions during the eighties—with a seemingly continuous State of Emergency and an accompanying stifling of the written word—the pressure on spoken English to express literate cultural consciousness produced a situation in which South African English appeared to be gathering a new energy and flexibility of usage from second-language English speakers.

As resistance politics in South Africa moved inexorably into open and increasingly violent conflict between the state and the disenfranchised, the theater played an increasingly important role in expressing the collective

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<sup>5</sup> This concept is adapted from Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling" (1987:18): "The effect of a whole lived experience . . . is as firm and definite as 'structure,' yet it is based in the deepest and often least tangible elements of our experience."

experience of the oppressed. It sustained a fragile link across the widening gulf between segments of a racially polarized population. English usage in the theater became particularly ambiguous and anomalous, as the tensions between its contradictory functions manifested themselves.

The historical association of English with education in South Africa is too extended to examine here,<sup>6</sup> but the legacy of this association has firmly entrenched English as the major language of both cultural dominance and cultural resistance among second-language English speakers quite as much as among native English speakers. Ndebele's incisive analysis (1987) of the effects of English's cultural colonizing of indigenous languages convincingly counters the notion cherished by South African first-language English speakers that English usage and a liberal democratic ideology necessarily go hand in hand.<sup>7</sup> As yet, though, there has been little sustained pressure to resist the ideological imperatives inscribed in English usage by actively promoting other South African languages as alternatives to English. This may just be a matter of time, though. For in other postcolonial African states such as Kenya, there has been a strongly articulated rejection of colonial language usage in favor of local languages. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, for example, has declared (1986:27): "African literature can only be written in African languages, that is, the languages of the African peasantry and working class." The dominance of English in South African literary expression has not as yet been challenged in this way.

In theater performances, however, there is evidence of a different and pragmatic solution to the question of English's hegemonic dominance in a multilingual environment. For the languages used in theater performance depend primarily on the languages of its audience. Where literature seeks a wider, less localized readership, a theater performance is most successful when it most specifically addresses its audience in terms most immediate to them. Universality is less serviceable than the particularity of representing circumstances that illuminate an audience's precise sense of their own experiences. For this reason, in South Africa the fact of English's dominance as an "official" language, as well as the tendency for theatergoing to be largely a leisure activity of the middle (and thus educated) class, is reflected in the predominance of English in theater performances. But the language preferences and competence of its audiences can be more readily accommodated because the language in

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<sup>6</sup> A very thorough account of this is given in Lanham and McDonald 1979.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Butler 1985.

theater is primarily a spoken register. So many contemporary plays exhibit an English usage in which other languages comfortably find a place.

Language purity is a concept alien to spoken usage, which relies on functionality rather than the aesthetic considerations associated with literary, textual registers. Hence, current English usage in the theater displays an easy blending of vocabulary, grammatical structure, and idiom derived from non-English popular usage. This functionality is creating a situation in which English appears to be rediscovering its own orality by creating valuable connections among previously segregated language users. Where English South African literature has tended to founder under the sheer immutability of historical standards and traditions of usage, theater performance can far more readily capture contemporary consciousness spontaneously. The ephemerality, changeability, and apparent informality of the spoken word, as compared with the fixity and inviolability of written words, make public theatrical performance eminently suitable as a means of freeing expression from prescriptive criteria. The exchange between expressive and critical discourses in performance is less critically weighted than in literature: innovations in linguistic forms of expression can occur more readily because judgments are likely to be made on social rather than aesthetic appropriateness.

Indeed, idiolectal eccentricity is highly valued in the theater. Paul Slabolepszy's dialogue in *Saturday Night at the Palace*, for example, drew praise from critics for its "authenticity." Analysis reveals, in fact, that it is a highly *theatrical* register that bears little resemblance to any existing social register. Elements from a variety of social sources are used in novel combinations that make the dialogue seem familiar to a wide range of English users. It has thus been categorized as quintessentially South African—an effect of its theatrical constructedness. Pinter's dialogue tends to function in the same way, with similar dramatic effect.<sup>8</sup> Hence, for contemporary cultural workers considerably more freedom is offered by theatrical enactments; aesthetic or political constraints generally occur only after the performance. This situation may well explain the emergence of theater in the eighties as a highly popular cultural form of expression for African users of English.

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<sup>8</sup> Deirdre Burton (1980) offers a detailed comparison of Pinter's dialogue with social forms of utterance.

## Second-Language English in the Theater

Since the beginning of the eighties, South African theater has shown a marked increase in work produced by multilingual companies from workshop processes. Concomitantly, the increasing proportion of second-language English speakers in audiences, for instance at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, has been noted by the management of that theater complex with some satisfaction (though there are no statistics currently available to support this perception).<sup>9</sup> The 1988 Amstelfest attracted good audiences too, as does the annual National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, where performances present a wide variety of English and South African languages.

The pressure for linguistic and social contact, so effectively countered in the political arena, appears to be finding an outlet in oral cultural areas, particularly in theater. Speakers of African languages are presenting more work in English, using the opportunity to introduce other (especially English) speakers to their experiences of South African conditions, and simultaneously popularizing new theatrical forms and varieties of English usage in the process. The success of productions such as *Bopha*, *Asinamali*, *Woza Albert*, *Sophiatown*, and *Sarafina*, both domestically as well as abroad, lends support to the view that native English speakers both in and beyond South Africa are as eager to learn about this alternative English usage, its speakers, and the environment from which it derives as African languages speakers are to articulate their consciousness in the new South African English. Thus, for both native English speakers and second-language English speakers in South Africa, the freedom of linguistic association that English usage in the theater provides may well be a small but hopeful sign of the possibility of a viable and inclusive (as against sectarian) new South African consciousness.

Within the theater, speakers of African languages are bringing their own language forms to bear on the “standard” forms of English cultural usage. These vary widely according to the needs of the performers themselves or of the dramatic presentation of the thematic action. For example, in Fatima Dike’s play *The First South African* (initially presented in 1977), the dialogue has a strongly “translated” feel to it. The English here accurately registers the formality of second-language English in its

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<sup>9</sup> This report derives from informal talks with members of the Market Theatre’s publicity team and Mannie Manim’s personal assistant, Regina Sebright. A list of the productions presented at the Market Theatre since its inception (Schwartz 1988) confirms the increasing number of productions created by second-language speakers.



vocabulary, which is sometimes colloquially archaic, and in its phrase structures, which are generally longer and less contextually allusive than those of idiomatic English conversation. This rendering of the carefulness of English usage embodies the lack of spontaneity that characterizes the utterances of speakers more familiar with written than oral forms of English. Much of the speech in the play is faintly anachronistic; the awkwardness here, for example, contributes to the thematic dislocations that the drama enacts (Dike 1979:17):

- Austin: Oh, you know your rights as a man when your girlfriend is involved, but when your morals as a man are involved you do as you like.
- Freda: And remember who you're talking to, this is not one of your friends.
- Rooi: Mama, tate, if you want me to be a sissy, say so.
- Austin: We don't say be a sissy. We expect all that is good and beautiful to come from you.
- Rooi: Mama, tate, I still say if that boy calls me a white man I'll beat him up and he can do what he likes. After all, I'm not the first person in this location to go to jail.
- Freda: But you'll be the first one in this family.
- Austin: Hayi ke mfo wam ugqibile, you have made yourself clear.
- Freda: Not in my house. If Zwelinzima feels that his balls are big enough, he must go. After all the council has hostels and bachelor quarters. He must go and rule himself in his own place, not here.

Compare the literary derivation of this dialogue with the orally derived dialogue of the family scenes in *Sophiatown* (first presented in 1986), where the grammatical structures are closer to idiomatic spoken English in their brevity and contextual allusiveness (Junction Avenue Theatre Company 1988:63):

- Lulu: What's going on?
- Mamariti: Hey, Lulu, tell that madman from Drum to stop die geraas.
- Lulu: Jakes, it's five o'clock in the morning.
- Jakes: You tell your mother I pay good rent. This is my bedroom. You see the chalkline on the floor?
- Lulu: So?
- Jakes: Well, I work in my bedroom, so leave me alone!
- Mamariti: (offstage): Luister! You bloody keep quiet—or out!
- Jakes: Jesus, Ma, you're like the Boere. You want me on the streets. I'm working, I pay rent, this is my space, pitiful as it is, and history is being made right now—and you want silence!

(THERE IS A KNOCKING AT THE DOOR)

Jakes: Jesus Christ! What now? Surely not today?

(ENTER FAHFEE CARRYING A SUITCASE)

Fahfee: They got me. They knocked down my shack before my eyes.

Specific differences in expression between the two scenes involve the use of different languages for degrees of emotional intensity: Mamariti uses a mixture of English and Afrikaans, where Austin uses Xhosa, followed by direct translation into English; Jakes uses solely English. There are also differences in grammatical organization: “He must go and rule himself in his own place, not here” uses sequential positive and negative contrast, whereas “You bloody keep quiet—or out” performs the same function using two positive commands. There is a metaphorical dimension in each example that invests the particular action with symbolic value, though again this occurs via different linguistic means with correspondingly different effects. In Dike’s play (“If Zwelinzima feels that his balls are big enough . . .”) the metaphor serves to confirm general social experience; in *Sophiatown* (“history is being made right now—and you want silence”) it serves to invest individual action with the significance of collective action, so that Mamariti is intended to register her demands for peace as opposing the course of history and collective action.

These linguistic differences point to cultural and historical differences between the dramatic worlds constructed in each play and, by extension, differences in the social and political conditions of each play’s genesis. The chronological time (nine years) between the two, as well as the movement from semi-urban to fully urbanized black experience, is inscribed in the language of the plays, as are the ideological perceptions of each family in relation to the oppressive structures that legislate conditions in their respective homes.

In *The First South African* the destruction of Rooi’s sanity remains a personal familial tragedy. There appears to be no way of resisting or countering the effects of imposed racial classifications. Rooi, like the others in the play, must live as best he can within the conditions created by the Population Registration Act, which makes “boys” out of men and where the white man is “my baas.” There is no relief and no hope; no weapons for defense or attack. In *Sophiatown*, on the other hand, the household is aware of a number of oppositional strategies and plans to use them in contending with the threat to Sophiatown’s survival. Plans for alternative schools established in the shebeens and for collective public defiance point

to a different consciousness.<sup>10</sup> That such resistance was doomed to failure we know from the historical facts of Sophiatown's destruction, but the play enacts a resistance consciousness not evident in the earlier play. *Sophiatown* speaks with the voice of the eighties when Fahfee declares that "they can't stop us forever" (73) and Jakes asserts more directly the means of resistance at the end of the play: "Memory is a weapon" (74). It is a weapon, one might add, forged from an oral history.

### Oral Themes and Perspectives: Two Case Studies

#### *Sophiatown: Orality as alternative history*

*Sophiatown* was first performed in 1986. It exhibits an intense concern with "the recovery of discarded areas, or the redress of selective and reductive interpretation" of the past (Williams 1987:16) and the implications of such reshaping of history for the present. Hence, like *Asinamali*, *Sophiatown* very consciously engages in "an adequate recognition of the indissoluble connections between material production, political and cultural institutions and activity, and consciousness" (80). The historical context of this play is immediately established by Jakes in his role as narrator of Sophiatown's history. Theatrically he functions as a historical mediator between the audience and the fragile construction of the mythical oral history of Sophiatown. His spoken narratives reverberate with all the techniques associated with orality: the rolling lists of names and places that conjure up a richly textured physical context; repetitions, mnemonics, and the identification of the narrator's persona with a communal "we;" and the association of identity with occupation (1-2):

Sophiatown, Softown, Koffifi, Kasbah, Sophia . . . Place of Can Themba's Place of Truth. Place of the G-men and Father Huddlestone's mission. Place of Balansky's and the Odin Cinema. And let's never forget Kort Boy and the Manhattan Brothers, and Dolly Rathebe singing her heart out—here in Sophia . . . it was grand because it was Softown. Freehold! It was ours! Not mine exactly, but it was ours. . . . Boxing was my beat, but I wanted to cover the Softown lifestyle. Anything could happen here, and if it did, I wanted to be there.

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<sup>10</sup> Shebeens are unlicensed drinking places in townships where illegal and homebrewed liquor was once sold. Shebeens are now legally permitted to sell liquor.

*Sophiatown* is preeminently a play about English and its uses. The dramatic action is predominantly linguistic action. Words are weapons against other words: official decrees can be defied only by speaking against them. For want of any other means of defense, words have to oppose the physical force with which official (written) decrees are executed. Spoken words are the only defense against “these Boers [who] are trying to take over the country with their lorries, their guns and their bulldozers” (50). English stands as the last possession of a people dispossessed of their homes, their freehold rights to the land, their history, and indeed their “lifestyle.” If, as Jakes claims, “English is the language that unifies us” (52), the relations within such unity remain desperately unequal, for the price of unity appears to be hegemonic absorption and submission to the ideological imperatives of English, and thus (white) Western dominance.

The struggle between these contending histories inevitably takes place within English itself, for the price of defying the ideologies inscribed in English is voluntarily to sever connections with the “Softown lifestyle.” For this lifestyle incorporates the European cultural history and values provided by English: “Here we listen to Bach and Beethoven. We listen to great American Jazz. We read great Russian novels. We are a brand new generation” (53). English is the language that brings *Sophiatown* into a larger, more literate community than South Africa. Locally, English words are racially inscribed; they are “sweet white words” (29). But in a wider cultural frame of reference, they become for *Sophiatown* a measure of cultural greatness: they can tell “all sorts of truths” (29) because they can tell both Shakespeare’s truths and Lulu’s. Literate English is the cultural “Softown lifestyle”: “Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane wrote their best, here in *Sophiatown*” (1)—and they wrote in English. So English is the means to gain recognition, to escape entrapment in “the Boers’s dream of a whites only world” (2) and find a place in a world that offers “freedom meeting . . . fantasy . . . access. White bohemians and black intellectuals” (2). English is also inscribed in the history of the *Sophiatown* people through their education in English. As Jakes puts it, “if there was one thing we got from our church schools, it was a love of English” (52).

English usage is thus not only critical as a weapon of resistance; it actually constitutes the disputed territory. Its use is both the vehicle for articulating the meaning of the Softown lifestyle and one of the identifying features of that lifestyle. In the difference between *Sophiatown* as a “native location” and a “freehold suburb,” English is the provider of the terminology and a measure of that difference. In this play the hegemonic influences of English’s history in South Africa are so deeply embedded that

the struggle to escape its ideological stranglehold has to be fought with the words that English provides.

The cultural dominance of English is inscribed in the ideological base of the whole play. The argument over Lulu's education provides a platform for two explicit and opposing ideological stances about language. Implicitly, powerful connections are made between language, education, and identity. All three generations in the family, Mamariti, Jakes, and Lulu, reject Ruth's proposition that "you're not illiterate if you can speak Zulu and Xhosa and Sotho" (52). The alliance between English and literacy has become a tenet of faith for them. Ruth, the sole white, native English-speaker in the play, argues for the equality of languages in South Africa, but her arguments lack specificity and conviction. They convince an audience as little as they do the characters because of her vague generalizations: "You don't want to lose your own language. . . . I just think it's a terrible thing to lose a language" (52). Jakes' counter-argument—"But you're still Jewish and you can't speak Hebrew, right? That proves my point" (52)—comes closer to rendering the ambivalences inherent in the use of English as a marker of identity in South Africa.

During the action of the play the audience is exposed to the tensions existing between Ruth's and Jakes' respective viewpoints. An audience in the nineties is invited to see their own perspectives and preoccupations in the dramatic creation of Sophiatown in the fifties and to recognize the Sophiatown perceptions as those of the eighties. History, as Jakes observes, is "right now" (63).

Characters in the play are linguistically distinguished by the ways in which they use English. Relative social status is signified by the speaker's relation to English and its usage. Those characters—Jakes, Fahfee, Ruth, and Lulu—who have the fullest range of different registers have the greatest effective power in the structure of the household. Those who have only a tentative ability to speak English and whose repertoire of registers is restricted—Mamariti, Princess, and particularly Charlie—have least control over even the most immediate conditions of their lives. Furthermore, the kind of English in which the characters are most competent determines the areas in which they can exercise their power. Jakes, for instance, can claim the authority of the written word over the spoken, for he is the one who creates public identities for Ruth and the others through his articles in *Drum* magazine. He is the mediator between the characters in the dramatic work and the audience in the theatrical world.

A clear linguistic hierarchy that privileges the written word above the spoken word is established in the play. And within this literate dominance there are refinements of status. In the written word category, the "special

notice” (the public decree announcing imminent eviction) is paramount; its power to determine the social, economic, and political conditions of people’s lives is unchallengeable. In a descending scale of value, Jakes’ articles for *Drum* come next. At this level, factual reporting is valued less than writing stories, which “don’t have to be true” (39). Boxing reports are “banging out a living” (2), while “dealing with socialites” (38) will make Jake “the talk of Softown,” and will give him his “big break.”

The printed word has more prestige than the more informal handwritten one. Lulu’s account of her family for her school essay, which contradicts Jakes’ account of the same people, focuses on those aspects of their actions that are not otherwise acknowledged; Mingus steals goods from the railways and Mamariti is “just a cheeky old woman, breaking the law, working on her beer, and planning for a future which never comes” (30). Fiction is more potent than truth, it appears, for Ruth criticizes Lulu’s essay for being only one of “all sorts of truths” (31). The whole play in a sense promotes its own mythologizing fictions and enacts them, in the same way that the special notice enacts the apartheid myths that sustain the dominant ideology. As Lulu declares, “Everything in this house it’s just fiction, fiction, fiction” (32). But the fictions of written language are ultimately stronger than the mythologizing power of the spoken word. The potency of the opening speech referred to earlier is finally diminished by Jakes’ urgent sense that such orality is more effective when transformed into a written record. “Memory is a weapon” (74) for him, but as a journalist it is a more effective weapon when it is written down.

This hierarchy of literacy over orality sets up a conflict between the dramatic and theatrical elements in the play. Theatricality is always expressed in orality; yet the dramatic techniques that make Jakes, a journalist, the custodian and constructor of a mythical, alternative past also deny the theatrical medium its defining characteristic. Ironically, the dramatic action embodies the defeat of spoken language by the force of governmental decree. Theatrically the success of the play depends on the degree to which the spoken language of the play is “memorable.” Only if the oral features of its performance are richly realized can the alternative ideology of the drama be registered.

To a certain extent the imbalance between theatrical orality and dramatic literacy is redressed in Fahfee’s role as the bringer of the “news of the day.” For him “words on paper [are] useless” (65). Words, like the guns that oppose them, must be active. Like Mingus, who is illiterate, Fahfee functions in an oral world of doing and speaking. Theatrically he enacts the values proposed by the dramatic world. History is alive as long as the anger, despair, and faith of the people are expressed. Unlike Jakes,

the lines between official and people's history are clearly drawn for him. People's history is oral, whereas official history traps the lived experience of the present in the immobility and intransigence of literacy.

So we see that throughout the play the written word is privileged over the spoken word and this privileging is thematically embedded in the dramatic action. Written language skills, particularly in English, are valued and shown to be effective in social action, where oral skills are not. Congress's call for action against forced removals fails, partly because it cannot organize its "call" into printed instructions. Mingus' exercise of social power as a member of the Americans gang is limited by his illiteracy, for he too sees authority as vested in the written word. Where matters of significance have to be dealt with, he insists on having them written down, even though he must enlist Jakes' aid to do so. Because Mingus' sexual and personal identity is tied to his public identity as a gangster, his literary incompetence makes Jakes appear a serious rival for power both in the public world and in his private relations. Hence his jealousy of Jakes over his relations with Ruth and his sneers at Jakes' literacy: "You bloody situations, you're full of words" (65). Mingus adopts a strategy for diminishing the power of literacy by translating it into orality. As Lulu confides to Ruth, "Do you know, Mingus and the Americans stop the intellectuals, they make them recite Shakespeare?" (30). Mingus can appropriate the power and mystery invested in the written word in this way. The literary myth of Shakespeare is more potent than the myths he can construct out of orality.

English is thus a central site for the ideological struggle, the war waged between Sophiatown and Yeoville, a war fought with the weapons of oral and literate English. But the weapons are unequal. Written words are supported by the force of "guns and tanks" (65), spoken words by "blood" (36). Even Jakes' typewriter, symbol of power in the household, cannot withstand the anonymous and reductive power of the printed words or the State's decrees.

*Asinamali: Oral history in the making*

Whereas *Sophiatown* is concerned with the effects on the present of recovering and articulating the silences of history, *Asinamali* engages itself predominantly with the present as the history of the future. Its characters recount their personal stories, describing the events that have brought them as prisoners to Durban Central Prison. Bongani is a migrant laborer who has killed his girlfriend; Thami is a farm laborer who was seduced by his white employer's wife and convicted under the "Immorality" Act; Bhoyi is

an activist friend of Msize Dube, a popular leader of the Lamontville “*asinamali* campaign;” Solomzi is a victim of Bra Toni, a confidence trickster whom he admires; and Bheki finds himself convicted of “political” crimes and sentenced to seven years after a police raid on the house of his common law wife.

The play invites its audiences into a dramatic world where survival is a question of evading for as long as possible the legal system and its representatives who make criminals of us all. Inevitably, though, the state and its machinery impinge on all the characters and point down an inevitable path through the law courts and the prison system. As the prison officer sings (193),

buti omuhle sewuzawufela ejele  
 sewuzafela ejele butu omuhle  
 Mina nawe siboshwa sofela la

A handsome guy will die in jail.  
 Go on, you'll die in jail. Me and you,  
 prisoner, we'll die here.

The language usage in the play—its multilingualism as well as the inconsistencies in its functional use of English—are indicative of more fundamental ambivalences in the theatrical relationship between audience members and performers. Theatrical questions frame themselves in insistently sociolinguistic terms: how the characters present themselves to their audiences; on whose behalf they speak; to whom they speak; and in what relation audiences are invited to place themselves regarding the performers as well as the characters. The ambiguities of “we,” “them,” and “you” as they are used in the dialogue render precisely the ambiguities with which current perceptions of being South African are invested.

The dialogue is characterized by clear distinctions among the three languages used. English predominates, with a strong (though variable) proportion of Zulu and relatively little Afrikaans. Blending is not a feature of the language deployment, and the usage in each language appears to conform to current “standard” South African speech. Unlike, for instance, *Saturday Night at the Palace*, the English usage here does not feature extreme vernacular variations; nor, as in *Sophiatown*, is the English marked as that of second-language speakers. There are few distinctions between the language of the narrative sequences and that of the scenes, and likewise few idiolectal variations among the speech styles of individual characters (with the exception of Bongani, who stutters).



Narrative utterances are characterized by short sentences, simple statements relating to action, and emotional distance from the events described. The tone is reminiscent of the carefully structured narrative progression to be found in the textbooks of alternative or “people’s education” courses. For instance, Bheki’s personal testimony begins in this way (182):

I come from Zululand. I got a place to stay in Lamontville township near the white city of Durban. During that time this man, Msize Dube, a very strong leader and a powerful voice for our people, was killed. They killed him. The government spies killed him. The reason for his death was that he maintained that we have no money. A-SI-NA-MA-LI! So we cannot afford to pay the government’s high rent increase. People took up this call: “AAASSSIINNNAAMMMMAALLLIII!” and the police went to work. Many of us died and many of us went to jail, and it is still happening outside.

This speech suggests that one of the play’s functions is to serve as an oral history for the people encompassed by the “we” of the narration.

Personal testimony is providing popular historians with the material of popular history, and in this sense *Asinamali* does offer itself partly as a sociohistorical document.<sup>11</sup> As the popular history projects, it is concerned with developing a broader sense of community among geographically separated people who share similar experiences of sociopolitical conditions, and it does so by acting as the transmitter of information about regional conditions in other, similar township communities. Like the teachers in people’s education, the actors assume roles as local representatives. A certain authority is vested in them as providers of information, though this authority derives from and represents the consent of the group to construct particular perceptions of themselves. Bheki here speaks with the voice of “one who knows Lamontville.” His personal “I” is rapidly subsumed in a communal “we.”

The “simplicity” of the language here, where idiosyncrasies of utterance are avoided, focuses theatrical attention on dramatic events rather than on dramatic character, towards narrative rather than expressive purpose. Theater’s participation in the making of cultural history is thus foregrounded. For an audience each character speaks as the representative voice of a particular community, and each character’s representativeness is

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<sup>11</sup> Callinicos’ popular history books (1982 and 1987) and the National Education Crisis Committee’s *What is History?* (NECC 1987) offer examples of the use of oral testimony in popular history.

confirmed by those in the audience whose experience this mirrors. For those to whom the conditions are unfamiliar, the actors acquire a different kind of authority: they speak with the authority of “those who know to those who do not.” For these audience members the “we” is excluding and places them in another implied category of “you.” Thus it is possible for the performer to sustain different and conflicting relationships simultaneously within a single audience.

Whereas *Sophiatown*'s theatrical method was to draw an audience towards identifying (temporarily at least) with a particular group, or with an individual character within that group, *Asinamali*'s method is initially to invite an audience to survey and “place” each group represented by each of the actors—a distinction between a psychological and a sociological approach, with all the implications of theatrical genre that these approaches entail.

There is another reflective role played by the actors in *Asinamali* as well: for the duration of the play they serve as representatives of the audience itself, so that whatever the schisms operating within the audience, they are forged into a small identifiable community themselves. This mirroring effect is achieved by using actors as listeners to the stories of each of the other characters. Their role here is to serve as “crowd crystal” (Canetti 1962:192), to speak as the voice of the audience. A good example of this function is the following excerpt, where Bheki is the storyteller. The other characters interject questions to elicit further information; they make comments about the events, comments that serve to provide the norms that the audience may be expected to hold; and they deliver bursts of exuberant emotional response that direct and focus the audience's own responses.

A noticeable technique here, too, is the delighted pre-empting of the storyteller's next words, a practice that serves to confirm for the audience what has been said before. Teachers will be familiar with this response when a class is eager to show that they have remembered previous information, and its use here strengthens the educative function of the play (198):<sup>12</sup>

Bheki:	And then I came back to Durban.
Bongani:	Lamontville.
Bheki:	No, by then I had a place to stay.
Bhoyi:	[Kanti ubuhlalephi wena mfowethu?]

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<sup>12</sup> Dialogue within square brackets occurred in the original production and in the unpublished manuscript but has been deleted from the published text.

- Where did you stay?
- Bheki: E (at) Durban Station!
- All: Durban Station!
- [Bheki: For four months.
- All: Four months!]
- Bheki: Everyday I pretended as if I've missed the train, and whenever a white railway policeman came by, I would grab my suitcase, look at my watch, which was not working either,
- [All: (Laughter)]
- Bheki: shake my head and mumble some words in Zulu.
- All: In Zulu!
- [Bongani: Ubengathi usela ushiywe yistimela kanjalo.  
(As if you've missed the train.)
- Bheki: Ja mfowethu! (Yes, my brother!)  
Every morning I would go to the toilet, wash my face, and then go look for work.]
- Bhoiyi: What about your luggage?
- Bheki: [It was under the chairs in the waiting room. Phela kwase kuwumunzi warni ke loyo (because that has turned out to be my house).] And for four months I would go up and down [the street] looking for work. Standing in those long lines with my pass book in my hand and ten times a day I would get the same answer—
- All: [No vacancy!!] No jobs available.

The scenes are not distinguished sharply from the narrative monologues by different theatrical or linguistic techniques. They emerge from the narrative and become an extension of it. In the court room scene, the “pipi office” scene, and the “shoebox” scene, for example, actions are conveyed visually rather than described in words, so that the language no longer has to carry the narrative line. Freed from this responsibility, the language function shifts to non-narrative “embellishment”: character types, the technical versatility of the actors, and, most noticeably, the play of linguistic wit develop around the narrative line. It is the performance qualities of the verbal exchanges that command attention here. The assistance of all the prisoners in enacting each other's stories produces a high theatricality that defies the spatio-temporal logic of nondramatic reality. This theatricality is expressed in the extreme range of contrasts in the physical sound patterns of the actors' speech; intonation patterns extend their range towards the melodic patterns of music; syllabic contrasts in length are increased; vowel shapes are held and energy levels swiftly juxtapositioned. The interruption of sound by long silences also occurs noticeably in performance at these points.

The effect is one of bravura playing by the actors, which finds its greatest force and economy when scenes are enacted by a single actor, as, for instance, in Bheki's whispered confidences through the keyhole to Sergeant Nel (194):<sup>13</sup>

Hey, Sergeant! Sergeant! My Basie! Hey Sergeant! Sergeant Nel! My Basie! Hey Sergeant! Dankie baba! Hey you know what? This place would be shit without you, baba. We like you baba. We really do baba, cause you are the best white man in the whole world. You're the only one who puts salt in our porridge, ja. But Sergeant, that new constable from the depot Constable Schoeman, [yisifebe nja] he's a bitch. He kick me like a dog this morning. He kick Bhoyi too. [He was kicking him with those big black boots and you know what. Bhoyi had been shining those boots for him this morning. I hate him. You know what—we all hate him, baba.] He kick Thami. He kick everybody. I want to report him to you. [You must watch him. He is going to cause trouble. Hey! Sergeant, come closer now. Hey! Sergeant, you see those cells behind you. Women. Women's section. Always when he does night shift he goes there and takes out a girl and then late late we hear him come with that girl. We've been watching. Bhoyi's girlfriend is in that cell too—he took her the other night. Bhoyi protested and that's why he kicked him so hard this morning. We hate him, hey! Sergeant, you must watch him. He is going to cause trouble. But don't tell him we told you, baba. Good night Sergeant!]

Part of the effectiveness of this dramatic monologue lies in the enormous physical energy generated by the stage whisper in which this scene is played. For physical energy is theatrically the material means of embodying emotional intensity. The constraints of the dramatic situation (Bheki wants not to be heard by anyone other than Sergeant Nel)—as well as the physical demand on the actor's energy to be heard clearly in the auditorium—create a strong theatrical counter-tension that is exhibited linguistically in greatly increased articulatory and breath energy. Consonantal prominence is balanced by greater length and openness in the vowels, emphasizing the physical sound systems of spoken language and enhancing the emotional context of this speech.

At one point, some two-thirds of the way through the monologue, the utterances are recorded in the manuscript in this way: "Always when he does night shift he goes there and takes out a girl and then late late we hear

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<sup>13</sup> Bracketed text does not appear in the published version. There is an interesting divergence between the performance manuscript and the published text in this monologue, as the published text deletes altogether the section in which Bheki reports the constable's sexual misconduct with the women prisoners.

him come with that girl.” On paper this reads as continuous, rhythmically even, and primarily narrative in function. In performance, however, the actor interrupted the flow frequently with a variety of pauses; replaced the rhythmic regularity with constant variations through lengthening and shortening syllabic vowels; and on the phrase “late late” he carried the speech into the melodic range of song, repeating “late” five times in a falling, diminuendo inflection, so that the speech generated powerful emotional meaning and redirected its purpose toward expressing collective outrage at a personal level.

Such emphasis on the physical qualities of sound in language is characteristic of storytelling in oral cultures. As more than one critic has remarked, both the theatrical and the linguistic structures of this play are informed by the traditions of the storyteller. All the features by which Walter J. Ong identifies oral as against literate thought, such as “the intimate linkage between rhythmic oral patterns, the breathing process, gesture and the bilateral symmetry of the human body” (1982:470-71), were manifest in the performances of *Asinamali*. Ong discerns the difference between orality and literacy as primarily a difference in the function of language. As he puts it (32), “among oral peoples generally language is a mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought.”

Yet it would be naive to categorize *Asinamali* as simply an example of “traditional black cultural form.” *Asinamali* cannot evade the pressures of the literacy-based culture in which it has been made, nor the processes of rehearsal out of which it emerged. Both have served to exert a stabilizing influence on the dynamics of its orality.

But the continuous present in which the spoken word occurs can operate only in performance. The evidence that these records provide point to—but do not substitute for—the evanescence of language’s special relationship to time. As Ong has remarked (32), “sound exists only when it is going out of existence.” While this may be true during performance, a production is also stabilized by the relative fixity of the structures and systems in which it is constructed, marketed, and presented. The continuous repetition of rehearsal, the gradual substitution of formal dialogue for improvised exchange among the actors, the conscious selections of particular theatrical effects that determine and fix relationships within the drama and between audience and performers are all indicators of the interaction between oral and literate modes in this play. Ong describes such interactions as a general condition in a literate society (179):

It is the oral word that first illuminates consciousness with articulate language, that first divides subject and predicate and then relates them to one

another, and that ties human beings to one another. Writing introduces division and alienation, but a higher unity as well. It intensifies the sense of self and fosters more conscious interaction between persons. Writing is consciousness-raising.

Perhaps the most telling indicator of *Asinamali*'s inability to evade the effects of literacy is its insertion into the commercial, competitive market of popular theatrical entertainment, and its successes there. This complex reception precludes any attempt to assign it reductive labels such as "traditional," "ethnic," or "typically Black" to isolate it from other kinds of theater of that time or from its own contemporaneity. *Asinamali* is most particularly of its time and of urban South Africa. This has become increasingly apparent. The vehement outburst against "the bloody fucking pass laws" and the enactment of the burning of an informer may now be viewed (with some relief) as belonging emphatically to the past, but our consciousness of them as recent history informs our sense of the ways in which our here and now is different. That it may not seem so very different now is partly an effect of the theatrical intersection of orality and literacy that infuses the play with its remarkably vivid performance values.

## **Conclusion**

From these case studies it is possible to assert that South African theater during the latter half of the 1980s located itself firmly in the movement towards a "new South Africa" based on the principles of a nonracial democracy. In its vigorous dramatic investigation of historical and contemporary themes, much of its work generated sharper perceptions and understanding of the conditions of inequality that have and still do oppress the majority of South Africans, and aimed at finding creative solutions to redress them. In its theatrical methods and relationships, too, it can be seen to be actively acknowledging the current complexity and diversity of intercultural relations among South Africans and to be energetically engaging itself with celebrating these openly and consciously, both in its internal practices and in its relations between performers and audiences. Hence the value of the local theater productions is inestimable, not only for the international reputation they are forging through their touring productions to other countries but primarily for the ways in which they can and are speaking out of the silence so long imposed by the historical practices of apartheid. South African is speaking to South African, and this cultural contact corresponds to similar initiatives in political and economic fields.

The voice of the silenced has never more urgently needed to be heard. The silenced and the dispossessed need to articulate, for themselves and for other South Africans, the experiences that, made accessible to all South Africans, may serve as a means of gathering speakers and listeners together in a communal identity that is most thoroughly and characteristically South African.

South African theater, then, has a very particular and essential place in the construction of our new nation. Based on the evidence of current work, the theater is ready, able, and eager to play its part in seeking creative directions towards the future and revealing in the present all the as yet unsynthesized strands that constitute “the South African experience.” Let me close with the words of Garcia Lorca:

A nation which does not help and does not encourage its theatre is, if not dead, dying, just as the theatre which does not feel the social pulse, the historical pulse, the drama of its people, has no right to call itself a theatre.<sup>14</sup>

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