SIZWE BANSI IS DEAD

by

Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona
(1932–)

A. Play Notes, p. 276
B. How Sizwe Bansi and Mr. Buntu Complement Each Other, p. 277
C. Commentary on Clive Barnes' Review, p. 278
D. Review, p. 278
E. Objectives, p. 279
F. Program Notes, p. 279
G. A List of BBC Actors and Production Coordinators, p. 280
H. Focus in Viewing, p. 281
I. Additional Plays that Demonstrate Similar Concepts, p. 282
J. Glossary, p. 282
Play Notes

The Thesis

*Sizwe Bansi Is Dead,* "devised" by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshoma and first produced in 1972, makes a strong statement about an injustice in society with the intent of effecting change. Quite different from Ibsen's plays, the improvisational techniques cause the action to advance quickly and impressionistically as the two actors portray varied characters. The play is a strong social statement in opposition to the repressive practices and attitudes of the South African government. In particular, by focusing on the plight of a poor illiterate black man who needs a valid permit to work in Port Elizabeth, the play opposes the restrictive laws requiring Blacks to carry identity cards; but in general, the play goes far beyond suggesting a change in the police procedures or laws governing employment. It denounces racism and exploitation, without regard to place or situation, and examines the larger question of what constituted a human being.

The Title

The play title has more than one meaning. Sizwe Bansi is the native man who has left his family to find employment in the city, with the hope of eventually sending for them. When, through ill luck, he is arrested in a police search, his "dum book," vital to any business or travel arrangements, is stamped in a way which makes him unable to live or work in the city. In the exchange of his identity card for that of a dead man, Sizwe Bansi loses his name. To the world at large, he takes on the identity of Robert Zuwelzima, the dead man. When he protests to his knowledgeable mentor Buntu that he has lost his name and that of his family, Buntu points out that so long as a policeman or a white child can call any black man by any name including "John" or "Boy," there can be no pride or dignity in a name which merely allows degradation at the whim of the powerful. Sizwe is better off with the anonymity of the new name and identity number. He is dead to the bureaucracy which keeps files on the blacks. But he was already dead in the sense of human dignity before he agreed to make the change, Buntu explains.

Characterization and Set

In this play, there was only two actors but many characters. The inarticulate Sizwe—or Zuwelzima—seems comical as he poses for the photographer in Styles' studio. But as Styles and the other characters he portrays, he denounces repression, and as the audience sees flashbacks of the events leading up to the opening scene, the mood changes. The man posing for the picture is not just a country bumpkin foolishly smiling as he crosses his legs and holds a pipe; instead he becomes a man to be treated seriously and to be remembered.

Because of the improvisational technique, the sparsely furnished stage becomes any setting required by the dialogue: government office, sidewalk, church, clothing store, the home of a proud man on Sunday, the payroll office of Feltex, and the small town of Sizwe's origin on the day a letter is delivered. Changes in costume are not necessary. Through flashback and through the convention of Sizwe's voice in the letter addressed to his wife, as black-and-white still photographs replace color film, the story is told.
How Sizwe Bansi and Mr. Buntu Complement Each Other

_Sizwe Bansi Is Dead_ is intense and painful. Through one of the central characters, Mr. Buntu, there is revealed the hopeless and bitter reality of trying to exist in a country that refuses to recognize his humanity and dignity because he is black. Through the other main character, Sizwe Bansi, a glimmer of hope is shown. It is not that everything ends up rosy and wonderful for Sizwe and Mr. Buntu at the close of the play; on the contrary, it is evident that the system which oppresses both men is still in effect. The hope seems to spring, instead, from a faith in the individual.

Although regarded as a mere number and treated either as a child or a criminal by the society he lives in, Sizwe Bansi still holds on to a deeply-rooted, basic pride. He is shown as a loving husband and father. He is also capable of finer human feeling, as demonstrated by his informing the dead Robert Zuwelinzima’s family of his death, despite the risk to Sizwe.

This goodness could be taken as simple stupidity if it were not for the fact that he is presented in the play respectfully, even lovingly. He is portrayed as a simple man, uncontaminated by cynicism. This seems to point out that whereas people are often oppressed and imprisoned by complex and difficult-to-understand systems and societies’ they are, generally, simple folk like Sizwe. They do not comprehend the involved politics and psychology that robs them of security and dreams. If they are not permitted a future to plan for, then they live from day to day.

Contrasted with this simplicity is Mr. Buntu, who understands very well where his oppression originates. He is clever and witty in his bitterness and has a strong survival instinct. Sizwe has a thicker skull; Mr. Buntu has a thicker skin. Mr. Buntu’s hide was acquired through necessity. He tells Sizwe, at one point in the play, “If I could keep my pride (support his wife and children), I would keep my name. To hell with your bloody name! Take my pride and give me bread for my children.”

Mr. Buntu’s acute awareness set against Sizwe’s painful bewilderment and confusion becomes more than a mere cataloging of the daily indignities to which a black man is subjected. It is a cry for the restoration of his pride. It seems to be a plea for Sizwe’s sake. Mr. Buntu does not somehow appear to be wholly human, as Sizwe does. He is like a defense lawyer, arguing a case for Sizwe, the common man. He intervences, he protects, he advises, he explains. He explains life and its realities to Sizwe and, in so doing, explains Sizwe to us.

We can see the effects of injustice in Sizwe’s perplexed expression and his simple, hurt question: Am I not a man?

Mr. Buntu, then, gathers up the feelings of outrage, which Sizwe’s threatened self-respect has evoked, and directs them against the source of the injustice: the white, segregationist establishment.

The message that it is wrong to strip a person of his or her self-esteem and human rights transcends the specific dilemma presented in the play, which is the plight of the South African Blacks. The need for self-respect, the striving for happiness, are not peculiar to Sizwe and Mr. Buntu. They are common to all of humankind, just as the capability to be inhuman and cruel in order to maintain a social system is common to all of us. It is not an easy problem to overcome, and the play suggests no solutions. Its purpose is to make us realize how wrong this reality is.
Commentary

Clive Barnes of the New York Times describes the impact of Sizwe Bansi Is Dead in this critical review of the Royal Court's production. He compares movement in the play to a "train gathering speed." Like a train, the play moves slowly at first, bogged down by the weight of its cargo; yet as it converts its burden to the energy of a burning message, a cumbersome vehicle becomes a "thunderbolt of pain."

New York Times, November 14, 1974

"Sizwe Bansi" Is A Message from Africa

Theatrical power is a curious thing. It can start small, like a murmur in a chimney, and then build up to a hurricane. It can slide into you as stealthily as a knife. It can make you wonder, make you think. The South African play "Sizwe Bansi Is Dead" starts almost slower than slow. A black South African photographer from Port Elizabeth wandered onto the stage at Edison Theater last night and started chatting to the audience, talking nonchalantly about Ford, Kissinger, Nixon and the like.

It was beautifully acted, mildly amusing, but I must admit that I thought this improvisatory and, I now believe, deliberately, low-key introduction boded a strange evening. I realized that this play, when at London's Royal Court Theater, had been triumphantly received by audiences and critics alike, but there was a moment there when I thought that this was just a tribute to liberal Britain's guilt over South Africa. But slowly it happened, like a train gathering speed. The play, the theme, the performances, gradually took over, and the sheer dramatic force of the piece bounced around the theater like angry thunderbolts of pain. From this slow, kidding beginning there comes a climax that hits and hurts. You will not forget "Sizwe Bansi" easily.

The play comes from South Africa, was performed in South Africa, and apparently following its fantastic international success, official South Africa—by which; of course, I mean white South Africa—is rather proud of it. Which is fantastic, for this is a terrible and moving indictment against the South African government and the horrifying way it treats its black majority. Interestingly, a government that can let a play like this be shown and even exported, doesn't know its behind from its elbow, or perhaps doesn't even have the miserable courage of its own evil convictions.

The play, like "The Island," which joins "Sizwe Bansi" in repertory next week, has been devised by the white South African actors, John Kani and Winston Ntshona. Mr. Fugard has directed the play and presumably acted as some kind of umpire to its creation.

Styles, the jokingly ironic photographer, gets a customer and takes his picture, which is to be sent to the man's wife. They get into conversation, and the man tells him that he is staying with Buntu, a textile worker. And so the story of Sizwe Bansi and his death is told in flashback.

"The world and its laws leave us nothing but ourselves." This is the awful message of the play. Buntu and Sizwe are what South Africans call Buntus. As recently as 1969, the South African Deputy Minister of Justice referred to these 15 million black South Africans as "appen-

dages.” They are forced to carry a passbook, which has stamps on it saying where these “appendages” can or cannot work.

Sizwe’s passbook is wrong. Coming to Port Elizabeth for work, he will have to go back to the country or face arrest. Already he is overdue, but without getting a job in the city he has no way of supporting his wife and four children. Sadly, he and Buntu go to a bar and get drunk. Coming home, they find the dead body of a stabbed man. Buntu removes the dead man’s passbook. All they have to do is change around the photographs—and Sizwe Bansi is dead, and Sizwe himself, under a new identity, is free to live and work. After all, to South African officials a black man is not a man but a boy, not a creature but a worker.

A stirring moral message is one thing; a good play is another. And in its strange way “Sizwe Bansi Is Dead” is an astonishingly good play. From its satirically sly opening—with its corrosive remarks on the Ford factory in Port Elizabeth—to its slashing climax, where, echoing Shylock, Buntu and Sizwe insist on their human dignity, the play has a style, manner and grace of its own.

You can hardly talk about the play without talking about the two actors and its staging, because it is all of one piece. John Kani, sleek and flashing, is dynamite as both the cynical Styles and the embittered Buntu, while Winston Ntshona has just the right puzzled dignity and despair as Sizwe. Mr. Fugard’s staging is inseparable from them and the play.

There is a great deal of fun here as well as tragedy. It is human nature to fight disaster with laughter, and this play is a joyous hymn to human nature.

Clive Barnes

**Objectives**

After studying *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, you, the student should be able to

1. recognize that theatre art is a live, immediate form of communication, directly influenced by the response of the audience.
2. identify the significance of dramatic conventions used as expressive tools by the playwright, actor, and director in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*.
3. appreciate the significant contributions of black theatre, not only to theatre art but also for the facilitation of social change.

**Program Notes**

*Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*

Filmed as it was staged at the Royal Court in 1974, the play is a two-man *tour de force* on repressive laws in the Republic of South Africa. Athol Fugard’s play is humorous, ironic, and angry, as it explores the plight of a black man whose identification card prevents him from living or working at Port Elizabeth. The television drama begins after the first long monologue and continues to the play’s end.

Innovative theatrical conventions include one actor’s playing several parts, pantomime, changes from color to black and white, and from moving pictures to still photography. There is commentary by Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, reading from the works of black American writers. The original television performance (recorded in January, 1974, and first broadcast in March, 1974) is cut, with the deletion of the section about Ciskeian independence.
A Listing of BBC Actors and Production Coordinators

*SIZWE BANSI IS DEAD*

by

Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona

CAST

SIZWE BANSI ................................................. WINSTON NTSHONA
STYLES AND BUNTU ........................................... JOHN KANI

PRODUCTION

SET DESIGN ....................................................... MICHAEL EDWARDS
MAKE-UP SUPERVISOR .......................................... MAGGIE WEBB
DIRECTOR ......................................................... JOHN DAVIES
STAGE DIRECTOR ............................................... ATHOL FUGARD
Focus in Viewing

It is important to recall that all the productions we have seen so far have been interpretations of playscripts. Here the playscript is in fact an interpretation of a stageplay performance; that is, the performance came before the script since the actors and Fugard devised the play through improvisation. It, therefore, follows that this production is one version of this continuously changing play. The viewer must allow a few minutes for adjustment to the South African dialect, which is not a familiar sound to us.

Content Viewing
2. What is the main theme of the play? Why would it have meaning for you?
3. Which character most intrigued you? Why?
4. What philosophy does this character represent?
5. Do you agree with Sizwe's decision to be "dead?"
6. How does Robert change? When do you first notice the change?

Craft Viewing
1. Of these plays, which was easiest to follow? Woyzeck, Ubu Roi, Sizwe Bans Is Dead. Explain your response.
2. In what way, if at all, would you have directed the production of Sizwe differently? What in the direction and production did you find effective?
3. What was your opinion of the actors' portrayals?
4. Is there one moment or scene that stands out in your memory? Why?
5. Do you think the technical design and execution supported the stageplay? Some elements were only suggested. How did you respond to the suggestions?
6. Is there one moment or scene which stands out in your memory? More than one? Which ones, and why?

Critical Viewing: Overview
1. Now that this play and its production are part of your experience, what significance does Sizwe Bans Is Dead hold for you?

Additional Plays That Demonstrate Similar Concepts

*The Island*—devised by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona
*Statements After an Arrest under the Immorality Act*—Athol, Fugard
*The Escape, or a Leap to Freedom*—William Wells Brown
*Nat Turner*—Randolph Edmonds
*The Amen Corner*—James Baldwin
*Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*—Lonnie Elder
*A Medal For Willie*—William Branch
Idabelle's Fortune—Ted Shine
*Rosalee Pritchett*—Carlton and Barbara Molette
*Purlie Victorious*—Ossie Davis

Glossary

**ag voetsek**—GO TO HELL
**bioscope**—CINEMA
**broer**—BROTHER
**Ciskei**—ONE OF THE BLACK SEPARATIST "HOMELANDS"
**dankie**—THANK YOU
**hai**—EXCLAMATION OF SURPRISE
**hier is ek**—HERE I AM
**kie ries**—FIGHTING STICKS
**lap; lappie**—RAG
**makulu**—GRANDMOTHER
**moer**—LITERALLY, WOMB (USED AS A SWEAR WORD)
**nyana we sizwe**—BROTHER OF THE LAND
**tshotsholoza kulezondawo, yabaleka**—OPENING PHRASE OF AFRICAN WORK CHANT; LITERALLY, "WORK STEADY, THE TRAIN IS COMING."

**tsotsis**—BLACK HOOLIGANS