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## Theatre as social critique in the South African political context: the plays of Zakes Mda

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In the past few years, especially after independence, South African theatre has not been as critical of the political process as one would have expected, given its critical attitude towards the apartheid system. Zakes Mda's plays, however, have to an extent fulfilled this role. This article investigates the critical nature of some of Zakes Mda's plays produced before and after independence.

### Die teater as sosiale kritiek in die Suid-Afrikaanse politieke konteks: die dramas van Zakes Mda

Gedurende die laaste paar jaar, veral na onafhanklikheid, was die Suid-Afrikaanse teater nie so krities teenoor die politieke proses as wat 'n mens sou verwag nie, gegewe die kritiese ingesteldheid daarvan ten opsigte van die apartheidsstelsel. Zakes Mda se dramas het egter hierdie rol in 'n sekere sin vervul. Hierdie artikel kyk spesifiek na die kritiese aard van sommige van Zakes Mda se dramas wat voor én na onafhanklikheid opgevoer is.

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Political independence did not bring about the expected change in the lives of people in most parts of Africa. In these countries, the theatre has reflected the disillusionment arising from the sense of betrayal felt by a majority of the people, who had expected independence to change their lives for the better. Writers such as Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Wole Soyinka have lived through the political changes that saw the colonial villain give way to the African tyrant and have reflected their condemnation of this transformation in their works. Ngugi (1968: vii) states in a preface he wrote for the play *Black hermit* that:

I, along with my fellow undergraduates had much faith in the post-colonial government. We thought they genuinely wanted to involve the masses in the work of reconstruction. After all, weren't the leaders themselves sons and daughters of parents and workers?

He reflects the same view in his criticism of post-independence Kenyan leadership in his play *This time tomorrow*, in the character of Kiongo, who has become a top-ranking official in the post-independence Kenyan government and not only forgot his humble roots but turned out to be an even worse oppressor than the colonial master he replaced:

Ngango: Puu. His voice makes me spit. What a tongue. Is that not Kiongo! He used to come here — every lunch time — A bowl of soup and a fleshy bone and he would go away all thanks and gratitude. A member of the youth wing, he was, in those days, and he used to whimper with hunger. Now he is a King — a King!

(Ngugi 1972: 194)

What Ngugi describes here is the metamorphosis that takes place in the mindset and attitude of Africans who find themselves in positions of power after independence. Like the pigs in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* who, on assuming power, forgot that they were animals and started "walking on two legs" like their erstwhile human oppressors, these leaders adopt the insensitivity and oppressive tendencies of their former colonial masters.

In South Africa, the political scenario is no different from that in other parts of Africa, especially now that independence has been achieved. Independence has not brought about any significant change in the living conditions of the masses. If anything, their standard of

living has dropped since independence. However, the theatre's response to this phenomenon has not done justice to the enormity of the problem. It has remained relatively mute on these sensitive issues. In its defence, some very good reasons can be advanced for its rather unusual stance on political issues in the new dispensation. In an article entitled "South African theatre in crisis", Steinberg & Purkey (1995: 32) contend that:

With the demise of apartheid, the South African theatre's role disintegrated. Now old audiences see no place for it at all, even as it hesitantly forges new roles for itself. Theatre's being killed by its glorious past.

The end of apartheid left a vacuum in the creative repertoire of South African theatre. Suddenly, there were no issues to feed the creative juices of resistance among theatre practitioners and much energy was devoted to seeking other focus areas. Athol Fugard, a prominent South African playwright, once commented in an interview that, while he appreciated the post-apartheid years as the most exciting time in the history of the country, he was rather sad that he no longer had a villain to square up to (Bauer 1994: 17). He was referring to the demise of apartheid. The point is that a theatre energised by the existence of an enemy is left wanting with the destruction of that enemy.

Another reason could be that the demise of apartheid opened a "can of worms" of moral decay in society which was never attended to because everyone's focus was on apartheid. Among other things, high levels of crime, rape, domestic violence, racism, and relationships are issues that became noticeable in the post-apartheid years and dominated the attention of the theatre, to the neglect of political issues. For instance Fatima Dike's 1991 play *So what's new?*, set in a Soweto home-cum-shebeen, is a theatrical sitcom that explores the day-to-day life of women of the household — how they earn their living, their tussle with their men, the relationship between mother and daughter. Mthobi Mutloatse and Barney Simon's 1994 adaptation of Can Themba's 1963 short story *The suit* and director Jerry Mofokeng's revival of Fugard's 1959 play *Nongogo* are similarly concerned with interiority and domestic space. Both plays are set in the Sophiatown of the 1950s. Their focus, however, is not, as in Sophiatown, the political dynamics of the locality, nor the music and literature of that

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era (as in the nostalgia plays). Rather, while both are infused with the language, characters, sounds and sights of Sophiatown, their primary domain is the relationship between men and women. *The suit* explores the breakdown of a marriage due to a man's insane jealousy of his wife's lover, and *Nongogo* tells a tragic tale of an ex-prostitute's thwarted attempt to break with her past and forge a relationship with a man. Both plays are concerned with the way in which ordinary South Africans — particularly women — live, work, think, make friends and shape their destinies under difficult circumstances.

Against the backdrop of these exciting new territories that the theatre is stepping into, what should its actual role be? Mda (1983: 13) says:

Theatre has always played a vital role in reform and reflection; and in South Africa, a society characterized by racial segregation, economic exploitation and political oppression, it has become a significant voice in the resistance of the oppressed majority.

The need for the theatre to act once again as the voice of the oppressed masses in the new dispensation cannot be over-emphasised. Fortunately Mda himself has never had any illusions about his role as an artist, or about that of the theatre. In an interview with Myles Holloway (1989: 83), he states his position as an artist and that of his work:

the role I hope to play as an artist and the role I hope my work plays is that of social commentator and social commentary [...] I want my theatre to be a vehicle for a critical analysis of our situation.

Mda's distrust of post-independence governments in Africa arises from his experiences of the political situation in Lesotho, where he lived in exile for most of his life. In 1970 a post-independence election was invalidated by the then ruling Basotho National Party (BNP) when it became clear that the opposition Basotho Congress Party had won. Having invalidated the election, the ruling BNP went on to crush any opposition to this arrangement. What followed was a series of coups and counter-coups which effectively unsettled the country's political system and brought its economy to its knees. The result was that the poor masses became the victims of these power struggles, which left them more impoverished than ever before.

Although Mda has denied that *We shall sing for the fatherland* is especially concerned with Lesotho and has stressed its applicability to Africa in general, it does seem that events in this country have had a considerable influence on his choice of subject and concern.

In plays such as *We shall sing for the fatherland*, produced in 1978, Mda began to criticise what he predicted would be the state of South African society in the post-liberation era. His perception can rightly be said to have been born out of the scepticism he already developed in response to political developments in Lesotho and other African countries. Using two symbolic characters and a similar setting, Mda attempted to prophesy what the future would hold for the common man in post-liberation South Africa. He wasn't far from the truth, for in the new dispensation, South Africans have woken up to some of the harsh realities that Mda was trying to capture in *We shall sing for the fatherland* — high levels of corruption in public office, a high unemployment rate, high inflation and dereliction of duty on the part of the new leaders have all characterised everyday life since 1994.

The play revolves around the portrayal of Sergeant Major and Janabari. The sergeant is an idealist, unable to forget his role in the liberation struggle, and willing to see the best in any future regime. Janabari, by contrast, is a realist who displays an acute awareness of the neglect of the struggle masses by the new leaders. Mda imbues his characters with a roguishness and a mutual loyalty that is both appealing and satirically pointed. His use of comedy has the serious purpose of reminding us, by parodying current practices, that while we laugh at these practices, they do represent the reality in our midst. Mda thus presents his characters in a comic fashion but at the same time allows us to view our situation through their experiences. In his criticism of post-independence Africa in *We shall sing for the fatherland*, Mda cleverly combines symbolism and satire in order to emphasise the idea that political independence is not a guarantee of a better life for the majority of the poor of this country. For instance, in highlighting the issue of corruption in the police force and in society in general, Mda uses the character of Ofisiri, whose antics on stage are comical, but the grim reality of social decay lies just beneath the comic veneer:

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- Ofisiri: I have come to ask you to take your carcasses off this park. I told you last week that we are not prepared to tolerate hobos, especially in the city centre.
- Janabari: Oh, Ofisiri, we are not doing any harm.
- Sergeant: Moreover we are veterans of the war of freedom ...
- Ofisiri: I say out you go.
- Janabari: But there is a stain down there. It looks like beer — *sqo*.
- Ofisiri: A stain? (He looks at the stain on his trousers) You are right — it must have been caused by some drunkards I was arresting in a shebeen house early this morning. Dammit.
- Janabari: Your officers won't like the look of it.
- Sergeant: I say, Janabari, why don't we give Ofisiri twenty cents to buy a bottle of stain remover?
- Ofisiri: Stain remover costs fifty cents.
- Sergeant: Only last week, it was twenty cents, Ofisiri.
- Ofisiri: Things have gone up, my friend. I suppose you haven't heard of inflation.

(Mda 1980a: 9)

In the midst of this light-hearted banter between the hobos and an officer of the law, one cannot help but notice that the grave issue of corruption in the police force is being presented. Mda also expresses his criticism through the striking symbolism of the stain on Ofisiri's trousers. Ofisiri carries that stain until the end of the play. It demonstrates the permanence of corruption in the police force. It mirrors Mda's sense of hopelessness at the futility of the fight against corruption. The fact that Ofisiri fails to use the money given to him as a bribe to remove the stain is no surprise. After all, the bribe only serves to increase the stain. The audience is left wondering whether the police officer refused to remove the stain because of the benefits he was deriving from it or whether the stain had eaten so deep into the fabric of the police force that to remove it would involve a major operation.

Mda's political ideology leans towards the principles of Marxist-Leninism, which is an important difference between his social criticism and that of the monolithic nationalism of the practitioners of resistance theatre who are also disciples of the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s and 1980s in this country. It is not surprisi-

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sing to see Mda advocate a return to socialist ideals by implication in *We shall sing for the fatherland*.

His most scathing criticism is directed at leaders of post-revolutionary Africa, whom he perceives to be mere puppets of Western capitalist institutions. In *We shall sing for the fatherland*, Mafutha is used to represent this class of leaders. It is Mda's view that the source of oppression is located at the conjuncture of class, race and capital. In other words, it doesn't really matter whether it is a colonial government or a black government; whoever controls the political power and resources is bound to be oppressive. Thus, the oppression of the masses in Africa's political landscape will remain a reality for a long time. Myles Holloway (1989: 30) captures this more eloquently when he says:

In most of his pre-independence plays, Mda tries to encompass, in dramatic terms, the complex interaction of race, class and capital as the determinants of oppression and exploitation. This is in contrast to the dichotomy of black heroism and white oppression that characterize a great deal of black theatre in the 70s and the 80s.

Mafutha appears on stage with the white banker, who represents Western capitalist interests. Their dialogue shows the selfishness of the new African elite. Mafutha is negotiating the support of the banker for the chairmanship of the stock exchange, and the audience soon realises that he has sold his people out for his own selfish political interests:

Businessman: And with your backing I am sure of success.  
Banker: Why, of course. I tell you, man, all the white businessmen will support you ...  
Businessman: You don't think the white concerns will cause trouble for me when I take up the chairmanship?  
Banker: You wont, give them a chance, man. If you do your job well, how can they cause trouble for you? The only thing you have to do is to listen to our advice. I met your ministers about this. They too are quite clear about this. They know that without us they wouldn't be where they are now.

(Mda 1980a: 13).

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The criticism becomes even more scathing later in the same scene, when Janabari effectively becomes a spokesperson for Mda's perception of neo-colonial Africa:

We are not getting our share of whatever there is to be shared. That is what the learned ones call capitalism. It has no place for us [...] only for the likes of Mr Mafutha and the other fat ones in the Chamber of Commerce and Stock Exchange. Sarge, I have been trying to tell you that our wars were not merely to replace a white face with a black one, but to change a system which exploits us, to replace it with one which will give us a share in the wealth of this country. What we need is another war of freedom, Sarge, a war which will put this land back into the hand of the people.

(Mda 1980a: 22)

The merits of *We shall sing for the fatherland* cannot be accounted for solely in terms of Mda's social critique. The commentary is conveyed primarily through skilful stage presentation, and the effects of "content" and "form" are indivisible. This is clear in the final scene when, standing on the side of the stage designated as the sphere of the departed, the veterans witness their own burial, which they contrast with the ceremony of opulence in the "national graveyard":

Janabari: Do you hear the music?  
Sergeant: Yes, it is a funeral.  
Janabari: Ours?  
Sergeant: You must be joking. There is ours (pointing to the prisoners who are busy digging the grave). You can see our corpses there.  
Janabari: We look quite messy. They have wrapped us in sacks.  
Sergeant: That is our funeral.  
Janabari: You mean no church, no priest, no procession, no speeches about our heroic days, nothing?  
Sergeant: They are just going to dump us there.  
Janabari: I can't bear to look.  
Sergeant: You don't have to.  
Janabari: Let's hide. These prisoners will see us. And ah, there is Ofisiri. How miserable he looks.

(Mda 1980a: 45)

That Mafutha is accorded a state funeral at the same time as the true heroes of the struggle are despatched without fanfare is the final pointer to the distorted values with which Mda represents post-revo-



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lutionary society. The veterans' laconic response to the disparity in burial arrangements is typical of the playwright's use of comedy as a means of social criticism. We are thus compelled to empathise with the two derelicts and to condemn the selfish indulgence of the new capitalist state (cf Holloway 1989: 39).

In *Dark voices ring*, Mda creates a symbolic republic on a farm where the main character in the play (the old man) is appointed *induna* (supervisor) over the black labourers by the Afrikaner farm owners, who watch with glee as he viciously oppresses the men under him who are black like him:

Woman: The old man has always been firm with the workers, and he was no different with the prisoners. In fact his arm was even stronger when it came to them [...] he was now armed with a whip, and whenever they started their sneering tricks, they would feel his wrath on their backs.

(Mda 1980b: 62)

Mda presents a leader who sought status and material gain by ingratiating himself with his master. In the process, he unleashed a series of vicious oppressive tendencies on his own people, to the delight of his erstwhile white colonial master:

Throughout that morning the convicts worked without any rest. The boer warders sat on the verandah of the huis drinking liquor. From time to time, they came to the field to egg the old man on. Every time he wielded the whip, they cheered; when the prisoners winced with pain they went into a great frenzy, and pride swelled in the old man's chest. He had his prisoners in his hands — more power than he had ever had before — and he was enjoying it because the warders were enjoying themselves because they had someone they could trust, someone who could do what even they couldn't do.

(Mda 1980b: 41).

As with Mafutha in *We shall sing for the fatherland*, Mda here creates a neo-colonial scenario in which the black leadership remain the puppets of Western capitalist institutions, which create a black elite to serve their interests and oppress their own people. Thus, to the audience watching this play, the symbolic dimensions of the old man become clearer as events in the flashback unfold. The old man's dictatorial tendencies may be compared with those of many African

leaders — Idi Amin, Mobuto Sese Seko, Abacha, Robert Mugabe, and so on.

Mda's hostility towards the dominant system in post-independence Africa is highlighted by his symbolic use of the hut as a prison for the old man and his wife. The old man thus becomes a prisoner of his own brutality, locked in by fear and shame. At first, the audience is not sure why the old man is confined to his hut, unable to move or speak, but as the flashback unfolds, it dawns on them that he is in this symbolic prison because of the atrocities he committed against his own people. That he can neither move nor speak is symbolic of the retribution he so richly deserves. The fact that Mda chooses the man's own home as his prison represents the psychological imprisonment that Mda intends for the old man. He is thus a prisoner of his own conscience, bogged down by all the atrocities he has inflicted on his own people and it is this guilt that prevents him from socialising with the rest of the village. This is a powerful and effective symbol that expresses Mda's hostility towards a black leadership which, egged on by colonial supervisors, committed all kinds of atrocities and then went into exile, where they became virtual prisoners. Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia and the late Idi Amin of Uganda spring readily to mind. These erstwhile African leaders went into exile in Zimbabwe and Saudi Arabia respectively.

In his introduction to *And the girls in their Sunday dresses*, Bhekisizwe Peterson (1993: vii) comments on Mda's uniqueness in the South African theatre of the 1970s:

In as much as Mda's creative and theatrical works are part of the black theatre movement which crystallized in the seventies, there is no mistaking the many ways in which his works go against the grain of the performance tradition and politics of the same movement.

In the post-liberation era, when most writers' pens had run out of ideas, Mda continued to lend his voice to the plight of the common man. In earlier plays, he prophesied no benefit to the masses from the fruits of independence. Writing in the *Weekly Mail and Guardian* of February 1995, Bafana Khumalo (1995: 37) suggests that Zakes Mda's then most recent play, *You fool how can the sky fall?*, could be the beginning of a new trend in black theatre,

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[...] signifying a new phase in post-apartheid theatre where playwrights move away from the hackneyed formulae of the past, in which a half-dressed man would walk on stage and preach a guilt trip to the audience.

The point should be made, however, that Mda's earlier plays had already set this new trend.

In plays like *You fool how can the sky fall?* and *Mother of all eating*, Mda continues to express his dissatisfaction with the plight of the common man by highlighting the inadequacies of a post-liberation regime. As in most of his earlier plays, Mda employs symbolism, satire and even surrealistic images to express these inadequacies. In *You fool how can the sky fall?* he presents a Cabinet on whose shoulders lies the huge responsibility of protecting the interests of the masses, but who trivialize this responsibility. It is clear to the audience watching this play that this government has very little interest in fulfilling the hopes and aspirations of the people they govern. When they are not fighting over the attention of the female member of Cabinet (the Minister of Health), they are accusing each other of betraying the "cause". Mda's disdain is veiled in his satirical commendation of the efforts and dedication of the cabinet members:

President: You have all served this govt. well. You have served your people well, in fact since the days of our glorious revolution, until our victory when we marched into the capital and took over govt. you did not falter.

(Mda 2002a: 45)

His disgust continues in his use of filth as a symbol to highlight the rottenness of what he perceives to be a society on the brink of political, economic and moral collapse. He presents the cabinet members as being comfortable with the faeces in their cells, reflecting their rotten political vision. Whenever the bucket of faeces is removed from their cells, they become uncomfortable to the point of nausea:

[Minister of] Justice: You are right, my friend. I have noticed that since they let us take the bucket [of faeces] out once a month to the sewerage dump, on those days when they are empty, we become uncomfortable and fidgety. Some of us even throw up.

(Mda 2002a: 59).

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Notice how Mda weaves irony around the image of addiction to present the rottenness of this cabinet. By making filth their comfort-zone, Mda shows how deeply entrenched corrupt practices are in the political lives of African leadership.

In the character of the wise one, the President, Mda presents another symbolic rottenness. The president's whole leg is riddled with sores which, till the end of the play, refuse to heal. This symbolises the difficulties faced by Africa in getting rid of its morally rotten, corrupt leadership.

The most critical of Zakes Mda's plays is *Mother of all eating*. In it, Mda truly comes out "with his guns blazing". Produced in 1995, the play examines the depth of corruption in a post-independence state on a much larger scale than in any of Mda's previous plays. It centres on the activities of a principal secretary in one of the government ministries, who is referred to simply as "The Man". Using Lesotho as a symbolic setting, and through the actions and dialogue of this character, Mda exposes the chaos that characterises Lesotho's post-independence civil service and extrapolates this to a newly independent South Africa. Unlike some of his earlier plays, which portray a select group as being responsible for the corruption in society, this play points accusing fingers at everyone, saying no-one is blameless. The audience watching the play is made to understand that they, too, are part of the corruption in society:

The Man: I hear your whispers and snide remarks. Who of you here can claim to have clean hands? Now, tell me! Did you buy those BMs and Benzes that you drive with your meagre salaries? The word that we use here is that 'we eat'. Our culture today is that of eating. *Re ne re ja soft*. Everybody eats. From the most junior civil servant to the most senior guy.

(Mda 2002b: 10)

The audience is thus made to sit in judgement not only on the characters on stage but on themselves as well. The title of the play has much to do with corruption. The word "eating" is slang, used in Africa to describe embezzlement of government funds. "Mother of all eating", taken from the phrase "mother of all battles" of the Iraq/Allied Forces war of 1990, means that this embezzlement has got out of hand, which is the point Mda wishes to make in this play.

A striking difference between *Mother of all eating* and the earlier plays lies in Mda's use of symbolism and language. The symbolism is more direct than in any of his other plays. Corruption is presented as blatantly as it occurs in the civil service. The identities of the characters are not kept vague, as they are in *We shall sing for the fatherland* and *And the girls in their Sunday dresses* or even *Dark voices ring*. Instead, they are linked directly to specific posts in the civil service. The minister is presented as the Minister; the Principal Secretary as the Principal Secretary. The dialogue is also very direct. Corrupt deals are discussed openly and blatantly, unlike in the other plays, where it is merely implied:

The Man: Oh, it is you, Mr Director of Tenders [...] Ah, so you have received the five thou that I left in your pigeon-hole at the club. That is very nice, isn't it? Well, it is true that we chose that particular tender because the contractor promised to pay us a ten percent kickback if we gave him the contract [...] Yes, the contract was tendered at 10 million rands. Yes, of course, ten percent of ten million is one million [...] Let's not kill the Goose yet. We are going to get lots of golden eggs from it.

(Mda 2002b: 8)

The use of such direct dramatic devices can be attributed to the fact that the extent of corrupt dealings is such that the kid-glove approach is no longer necessary.

Mda also makes extensive use of irony in this play to present the state of corruption, the best example being the unseen character Joe, who is a close friend of the main character. Joe is presented as a contrast to The Man. He is honest and totally dedicated to his job but the irony here is that he is regarded as a villain because of his honesty. He is fired from job after job because he is honest:

The Man: Well, the big guns had had enough of Joe and his holier-than-thou attitude towards our noble tradition of eating. They fired him. After being kicked out from Power Supply, Joe moved from job to job. Every time he gets a good job with a lot of prospects for eating, he tries to be honest. So they kick him out. I have told him 'Wake up, Joe', 'Wake up', but Joe will never wake up. Right now he is unemployed.

(Mda 2002b: 24)

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By presenting this irony, Mda exposes the extent of moral decay in a society where honesty is no longer a virtue but a crime; where honesty has ceased to be the best policy. The same scenario is created in *You fool how can the sky fall?*, with the Minister of Works being lauded for his ingenuity at corruptly enriching himself and other members of the Cabinet.

The fact that corruption has eaten very deep into the fabric of society is demonstrated through the use of flashbacks, in which The Man tells the story of his “illustrious career” in the civil service. At one point in his career a new Deputy Principal Secretary was appointed. He was an honest man who wanted to clean up the corruption he found in the ministry. What happened to him typifies the extent of moral decay in the country:

He, instead, was transferred to some other department where he was going to be harmless. You see the big bosses, the ministers and all those closer to God, saw that he was a dangerous man, who was bent on exposing the so-called corruption.

(Mda 2002a: 16)

The Man was promoted to the vacated position. In fact, from that point, his promotion is so rapid that he reaches the top of the tree in next to no time. His meteoric rise is based on a simple principle:

You see, in government, when they discover your corruption, they promote you. There are two reasons for that. The first is that they want to shut your mouth so that you won't reveal what you know which may expose some of the top dogs in the government. The next reason, which is more important, is that they appreciate your brains, and want to bring you up there so that they may benefit from your expertise — learn new techniques from you.

(Mda 2002a: 16)

The question of non-development is another area on which Mda touches. Many of the infrastructures in our society are still those provided by the former colonial powers. The governments that have taken over from them have not added anything. This neglect arises from the fact that, with the high levels of corruption and nepotism which has led to a bloated civil service, the government can do little more than pay salaries. Thus no new infrastructure is added to what was left behind by the colonial master:

Our colonial masters had no intention of making us a beautiful city we could all be proud of. It seems it was meant to be a temporary administrative camp, with no potential for growth. And then we took over after independence, and reinforced the bad planning. We made it worse, in fact [...] Yet in our civil service we hail all these highly trained experts. We have our own people as chief engineers, town planners, and what have you. What the hell are they doing there? I'll tell you what they are doing. They are eating. Yes, that's our national pastime: eating. We say the spout of the kettle is facing us, so let us eat! Our engineers, our town planners, our bureaucrats of all sorts, have gained expertise in a new field altogether, that of eating.

(Mda 2002a: 19)

In conclusion, Mda can be credited with being the pioneer of the theatre as social critique in post-independent South Africa, a genre which was already in vogue in East and West Africa, led by writers like Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Wole Soyinka, respectively. The theatre of social criticism takes a hard look at society and offers a far-reaching corrective critique on specific issues affecting it. The genre evolved here from a desperate need to check the activities of the black elite who took over power in most independent African states. Their greed and insensitivity to the needs of their people and their vulnerability to the whims of Western capitalist economies drove authors in East and West Africa to speak out, through their writing, on behalf of the oppressed majority.

Mda's works of the 1970s and 1980s are as relevant to the present dispensation as his more recent plays. *You fool how can the sky fall?* and *Mother of all eating* have seen Mda develop into a more critical playwright and continue to voice his criticism of what he perceives as a vindication of his earlier scepticism, expressed in plays like *We shall sing for the fatherland*. For this reason, his approach is slightly different from that of the 1970s and 1980s. He employs a more direct symbolism and more biting satire than in his previous plays. Whether his intention is to imply that South Africa might go the same way as other independent African countries as far as corruption and mismanagement is concerned is irrelevant at this stage. The important point is that Mda's theatre is concerned with exposing the inadequacies of African governments — a role that theatre should play in South Africa's new democracy. His works have shown that the theatre

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needs to play a more active role in the new dispensation. In the words of Robert Kavanagh (1979: 38), still relevant today:

The changed political atmosphere in the country makes a re-evaluation of the role of the theatre in South Africa a painful necessity.

In South Africa, there is no doubt that theatre as social critique, for which Mda is a strong advocate, will become a dominant feature of our theatrical output. By looking ahead at the problems likely to confront the South African masses in the post-independence era in his earlier plays, as well as criticising the new government's excesses in his recent plays, Mda has paved the way for upcoming playwrights in South Africa to act as the voice of the common people and criticise the *status quo* whenever the need arises.



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