

## Black Consciousness Theater in South Africa and the Committed Artist: Maishe Maponya's *Gangsters*

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The Black Theater Movement that originated in the United United States during the 1960s and 1970s, and in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s is probably one of the clearest illustrations of diaspora. Black people in the two different nations suffered similar racial oppression, cultural disruption, social fragmentation, and economic exploitation but within different sociohistorical and political contexts. The African ancestors of black Americans had been taken by force as slaves to the United States three centuries earlier, whereas black South Africans were dominated by white British and Dutch colonial rule in their own country. The Black Theater Movement developed in the United United States as a complement in drama to the political struggle of African Americans in the 1960s against white racism and for the social justice and equality guaranteed to all citizens in the United States Constitution; whereas the Black Theater Movement in South Africa developed in response to its racial apartheid system.

It is important to point out that during the 1960s and 1970s South African and African American plays were successfully produced in the United States and African American and African plays were introduced to South Africa. Wole Soyinka's plays were produced in both countries. Similarly, Athol Fugard's *The Blook Knot* or *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* (these two latter plays written in collaboration with Winston Ntshona and John Kani) were successfully performed in the United United States. In South Africa, plays by Ed Bullins, Douglas T. Ward and Amiri Baraka were equally well known and popular on the stage.<sup>1</sup> The South African critic Mshengu has observed many similarities between African American and black South African theater. Both theatrical expressions—African American and black South African—were political in subject matter and exclusively urban in idiom. Mshengu has insisted that because African American theater had «a far greater impact than the rest of Africa» on black South African theater, theater in South Africa was quite different from any other theater in Africa (Mshengu 1977, 64).

Questioning the relevance of Western theater and greatly activated by the Black Power Movement in North America and the Black Consciousness Movement in South

<sup>1</sup> Western plays were also produced in both countries in the black community, among them, plays by Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Antonin Artaud, Jean Genet and Bertolt Brecht.

Africa, black theater emerged to celebrate the black community as the protagonist of this new born theater. Western theater artists, such as Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht, had already observed the need to create a new theatrical language and asserted the importance to engage the theater audience in a dialectical process with the action taking place on the stage. The artists of the Black Theater Movement were aware not only of the passivity played by the audience but especially the passive role imposed on the black community in a society governed by white rule. Black artists initiated then a double task: the revival of a black theater audience and acknowledgement and celebration of black culture against Western imperialism—both political and intellectual—which negated its existence. The artists of the Black Theater Movement in the United States and in South Africa launched a number of artists who were completely committed to becoming voices for the needs of their black communities.

Black artists took a political stand which was inextricably connected to their commitment to the liberation struggle and to the creation of Black Consciousness Art. Black South African playwright Maishe Maponya in his play *Gangsters*, written and performed in South Africa at the beginning of the 1980s, condemns the South African penal system by dramatizing the murder and death of the Black Consciousness Movement's main philosopher and leader, Stephen Biko, while he was in detention. Through the main character, the poet Rasechaba, Maponya dramatizes his own experience, as well as that of others who had been arrested for opposing the oppressive regime of apartheid in South Africa. *Gangsters* then is one of the most evident manifestations of theater committed to the Black Consciousness Movement didactic goals of making black people aware of their oppressed situation and encouraging them to take action and to struggle for their self-assertion and freedom. This essay will briefly examine the connections between the Black Theater Movement in the United States and in South Africa to focus subsequently on the South African Black Consciousness and Black Theater Movements. I will also analyze Maponya's play *Gangsters* as a distinct expression of the Black Consciousness theater in South Africa, showing the relationship between art and the artist's commitment under the apartheid system.

As Genevieve Fabre claims, the emergence of African American theater is «above all a sociocultural phenomenon and must be examined as such» (1983, 1). And Fabre's assertion can be equally extended to the emergence of Black theater after the 1960s in South Africa. In her opinion, African American theater in the 1960s restored the lost link between theater and black community, and gave the central roles not to the bourgeoisie but to common people (1983, 8). The Black Theater Movement in the United States originated parallel to the political and freedom movements and to the declaration of independence of many African countries during the 1950s and 1960s. According to Amiri Baraka, its main leader, the Black Arts Movement

[was] radically opposed to any concept of artist that [alienated] him from his community. Black arts [was] the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it [envisioned] an art that [spoke] directly to the needs and aspirations of Black Americans. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement [proposed] a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It [proposed] a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology (1985, 165).

In a few lines, Baraka summarized the main goals of the Black Arts Movement as the conjunction of art and community; the philosophy of Black Power; and the creation of art for the specific needs of the African American community. Baraka advocated the development of a completely different aesthetic that reordered the Western canonical

theories and literary expressions which conveyed racist symbols and stereotypes in their portrayal of blacks.

Larry Neal, another primary African American writer of the era, emphasized that the artist needed to create a national consciousness and purpose in order to rise above the Western tradition and create a more humanistic attitude about the «relationship of art and society» (1968a, 9). The aesthetics of the Black Theater Movement envisioned art as functional. Art and life, according to Neal, were separated in the Western tradition, and for the Movement they needed to be together: «Art and life are . . . integral to each other and since life is change in this cosmological view, art must be change» (1968a, 9). Inspired by *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, a Martinican psychoanalyst and radical social theorist, African American artists began to incorporate his ideas on the need to decolonize the minds of Third World peoples through revolutionary action.

When examining the Black Theater Movement both in North America and in South Africa, however, it is crucial to consider a fundamental difference between the situation of African Americans and that of blacks in South Africa. Although blacks in both countries appraised the need to fight imperialism and colonialism, the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, led by Biko, established that the creation of a society based on African cultural systems was the Movement's fundamental and ultimate goal because they were living in Africa, not in Europe. These geographical conditions differentiated the goals of Black Power in the United United States from those of Black Consciousness in South Africa. In Biko's words: «Black Power is the preparation of a group for participation in [an] already established society, and Black Power therefore in the United States operates like a minority philosophy. Like, you have Jewish power, Italian power . . . and so on in the United United States» (quoted in Millard 1978, 99).

Mosibudi Mangena described what was understood by Black Consciousness in South Africa:

We understood Black Consciousness as a new way of life, an attitude of mind which would enable Blacks to rid themselves of the inferiority complex accruing out of living in a racist country that [had] brutalised them for centuries. It was a frame of mind through which Blacks would reject all value systems that [made] them foreigners in a country of their birth. It was held that psychological liberation was an important component of the process of physical liberation. Thus, our African names which were hidden and were capable of sparking light, if used became the pride of the day (1989, 12).

Black Consciousness in South Africa, like the Black Power Movement in the United United States, sought self-determination for blacks and proclaimed black pride and assertion of their South African traditions. The Movement had a major impact within the Black community between 1968 and 1976, especially the youth of the 1976 Soweto uprising.

The Black Consciousness Movement intended to confront the fragmentation that had resulted from the apartheid policy (which maintained people separated according to the categories of coloreds, Indians or Africans) by attempting to involve all of them in the same struggle for liberation. The final aim of their struggle would be in Biko's own words: «an open society, one man, one vote, no reference to color» (quoted in Millard 1978, 42). Biko viewed black people as *the dispossessed*—the term that black South African playwrights Matsemela Manaka and Maishe Maponya would adopt to

define black South African theater—because he realized that blacks were a disinherited group and historically, economically and politically dispossessed.

According to Biko, the method used by Black Consciousness to mobilize black people, gave them hope by making them aware of their oppressive situation (1989, 115). In, *I Write What I Like*, Biko recalled the importance of the *soul* rhythms by African Americans that had been a hit in the 1960s and had excited millions of blacks all over the world, for they could read a truthful meaning in that music that proclaimed: «Say it aloud: I am Black and I am proud (1989, 25).»<sup>2</sup> Biko, however, underlined that what had really influenced the liberation and artistic movements both in the United States and in South Africa had actually been the independence achieved by different African states in a short time (Mangena 1989, 54). Like the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in the United States, it was the Black Consciousness Movement that prompted the formation of theater groups<sup>3</sup> in the early seventies in South Africa, which unfortunately were continuously harassed and destroyed by government action (Orkin 150-51). The Theatre Council of Natal (TECON) published in the black theater magazine *S'ketsb* underlining their pride in black culture and the need of black theater organizations, which should no longer «hang onto another culture for survival or growth» (quoted in *TQ-Theatre Quarterly* 28: 61).

Hope and celebration of blackness, together with the activation of the audience's consciousness on their sociopolitical conditions, became pivotal elements of a new theater aesthetics which totally rejected the demarcations dictated by the Western canon. African American artists spoke of the the creation of black aesthetics; black South Africans spoke of black consciousness aesthetics and the Theater of the Dispossessed. However, in contrast to the Black Theater Movement that emerged in North America, the targets and artistic goals of the Black Theater Movement in South Africa could not be transferred into a written pronouncement, due to the continuous censorship and imprisonment of theater artists.

In spite of the lack of a written manifesto, the plays produced from the 1970s through the 1980s reveal clear characteristics that link all of them to a Black Consciousness aesthetics. Although the Black Consciousness Movement was banned in 1977, another organization created in 1978 (the Azanian People's Organization—AZAPO) inherited the ideology of the former Movement. The best two exponents of commitment to this ideology, were the playwrights Matsemela Manaka and Maishe Maponya. Manaka explained the type of theater they produced:

Our theatre is here to search for the truth about the history of the dispossessed and see how freedom can be accomplished. Our creative thoughts shall, all the time, focus on the life of our people, as seen through our own lives—and obviously, the politics of this country cannot be avoided because they constitute part of our lives. . . . Our people are engaged totally by resistance struggles—the liberation of the mind and the liberation of the being (quoted in Larlham 1985, 86).

<sup>2</sup> Two important recordings were James Brown's «Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud,» and Nina Simone's «To Be Young, Gifted and Black.»

<sup>3</sup> Groups such as the Theatre Council of Natal (TECON), founded in 1969, aborted in 1973; People's Experimental Theatre (PET), founded in 1973 in the Indian location of Lenasia, outside Johannesburg, ended with the assassination of the author of *Shanti*, performed by the group; or Workshop '71, whose members decided to remain abroad after a world tour, due to continuous persecution by the Police Security. For further information on these theater groups, see Martin Orkin, *Drama and the South African State* (1991).

To a great extent, Maponya supported Manaka's ideas: «My theatre is the theatre of the dispossessed. Theatre educates and enlightens—in this case heightens the awareness of Black consciousness» (quoted in Larlham 1985, 90). Both playwrights' works attempted to be a manifestation of social commitment and art as inseparable elements; and both believed that as artists they needed to commit completely in the liberation struggle through theater, i.e., Maponya's *Gangsters*. The artist's political activism is very important in African societies; and theater, more than any other genre, encompasses a fundamental social function within African societies.

Black Consciousness theater artists were distinctly influenced by the «didactic thrust in oral poetry performance as well as by the interaction between poet/performer and audience» (Orkin 1991, 155). Maponya has successfully combined his theatrical skills with his poetic style in his works, especially in *Gangsters*, whose protagonist, the poet Rasechaba, recites his poetry during the course of the play. *Gangsters* reflects how the Black Consciousness artists, infuriated by the blood shed by the children of the Soweto uprisings in 1976 and Stephen Biko's death in prison, dramatized that rage and the spirit of the dead into their artistic work. Maponya's *Gangsters* is the testimony of his anger and denunciation of Biko's murder.

Maponya himself had been detained and interrogated on various occasions by the Security Police, and after *Gangsters* was produced in 1984 Maponya received a restriction order that prevented him from producing it in township cinemas and halls (Orkin 1981, 214). *Gangsters* is focused on Maponya's own experience as a poet, writer and activist who had been in detention. He uses that experience to dramatize Biko's imprisonment, subsequent torture and murder. Referring to *Gangsters*, Maponya stated that his play was *theater in the fist*, like the poetry written by the poet character, Rasechaba. In the play the police officer, Major Whitebeard, tells Rasechaba: «We feel your poetry is inflammatory . . . [Y]ou stand in front of a hall full of people and you've just recited one of your poems and the people start screaming and waving their fists in the air» (1986, 63). This reference is reminiscent of Larry Neal's words referring to the poem «Black Art» by Amiri Baraka: «Poems are physical entities: fists, daggers, airplanes and poems that shoot guns» (1968b, 32). Thus, poetry, becomes one of the main characters and liberating tools within *Gangsters* to reach the audience and call for their action.

Maponya's dramatic expression of anger in confronting the forces of oppressive white domination (Major Whitebeard) and the oppressed (Rasechaba), is similar to Baraka's presentation of racism in the United States in plays such as *Dutchman* and *The Slave*. *Gangsters* is direct and aggressive in confronting those forces in poems that Rasechaba addresses directly to the audience. The triangle formed by Major Whitebeard (white police officer), Jonathan (black security policeman) and Rasechaba (black poet) is symbolic of the situation created by apartheid. It is not only the oppression suffered under white rule (Major Whitebeard); it is also the problem of black South Africans defending the same system that oppresses them (Jonathan). These Africans are called sell-outs by other Africans, and Rasechaba, the poet, acts as the mediator to present the whole picture of the situation in South Africa.

Maponya's attempt to raise the consciousness of South Africans contemplates not only a black/white but also a black/black dialectic. Jonathan is therefore portrayed as a traitor to his own people. The playwright is saying that everybody needs to be involved in and committed to the same struggle for freedom. Excuses such as the one given by Jonathan to Rasechaba are highlighted as acts of moral cowardice and racial betrayal:

JONATHAN: Remember Rasechaba that I'm doing a job like any other person who wakes up in the morning to go to town for a white man.

RASECHABA: . . . the difference is that your salary is dirty. It is enveloped with the blood of your own brothers . . . . You're a sell-out . . . , who has no conscience (68-69).

Jonathan's character conveys the contradiction the apartheid system expresses in itself as he says: «I'm also convinced that we must stand aloof from politics. We are servants of God, and God does not wish for us to enter the political arena» (69). Jonathan represents the self-destruction perpetrated by a regime that kept blacks as illiterate people so that they could easily be brain-washed to obey blindly the rules that oppressed them.

One of the differences between Manaka's and Maponya's theater is that Manaka's theater is more lyrical and metaphorical; Maponya's deals more specifically with facts (Seligsohn 1986, 15). A few examples of these facts reflected under apartheid rule are the squalid, demeaning, brutal conditions under which blacks live in South Africa. As Rasechaba recites:

Look deep into the ghetto . . .  
 And see the modernized graves  
 Manacled with chains  
 So as not to resist . . .  
 Others are undergreed  
 Unread, underpaid  
 And deprived of the rights to quench  
 Their education thirst.  
 . . . The motto reads thus  
 Divide and rule (72-73).

The poet passionately denounces these brutal facts and conditions directly to the audience with the intention of making them aware of the unfair system that rule their lives under the motto *divide and rule*, which was keeping blacks apart and rewarding them for turning on each other rather than turning on their oppressors.

The poems used in the play become a way of showing self-assertion under a system that was eroding people's dignity and humanity. When Whitebeard asks Rasechaba why he does not write poems that do not make people feel angry and violent, Rasechaba responds: «The manner in which I write my poetry is decided by the situation and inspiration at a given time. . . . If the spirit of the nation moves within [the poet], he will write about the nation. . . . If I don't feel anything, I don't write anything» (64). Like humor, poetry becomes the liberating force through which the poet denounces his oppression.

Although Maponya's work focuses mainly on the specific issues of transmitting the principle of Black Consciousness to his community, he was aware of the exposure that black South Africans had had to Western cultures and forms. He not only realized that both Western and traditional South African forms are combined in his country, but also acknowledged the impact that Brecht's political theater had on his development as an artist. Maponya's plays, like Brecht's, intended to be not dogmatic but didactic in reaching the black audience and making them aware of a situation they needed to change. Also like Brecht's characters, Maponya's characters, according to South African theater

critic Ian Steadman, do not convey any moral or psychological complexities, since Maponya «concerns himself with themes which affect the black working class in general» (1985, 497). The characters in Maponya's plays, like those in Brecht's, are types found in their societies rather than characters with an individual and more developed psychology.

The production of *Gangsters* requires performances in two different staging areas. One of the areas is used for the prison cell, and the other one represents various settings. A red crucifix the size of a person is set on a platform in the cell. In the opening scene, the audience sees a man—the poet Rasechaba—dead on the cross, dressed in black, including a black hood. The biblical image of the cross and Christ's blood are also used by Maponya in *The Hungry Earth*, in which one of the characters states: «But our Black blood will flow to water the tree of freedom» (1987, 155). Thus, like Christ's blood redeemed human beings, the blood of heroes such as Biko would be the black South African sign of sacrifice for the liberation of Black South Africans. Blood always conveys a double meaning: death and life. And the blood shed by innocent people, such as the Soweto children and Biko, had aroused the passions of the masses and enraged them to continue struggling for their freedom.

As previously mentioned, in his plays, Maponya, like Brecht, uses a clear didacticism, character types, as well as a small cast of actors who each enact different characters or directly address the audience in monologues. In *Gangsters*, though, there are two main techniques that engender the Brechtian alienation effect in the audience: flashback and poetry. The use of flashback comprises a double function as well. On the one hand, the flashback moves the audience back and forth from present to past and viceversa, disrupting a linear action which could leave room for the audience's empathy with the characters. For instance, after having seen Rasechaba dead on the cross at the beginning of the play, the audience later sees how he is being interrogated. They also can hear Jonathan referring to the day he met Rasechaba at church, before his present interrogation. On the other hand, the flashback displays a present which is the result of a past that needs to be understood and reconstructed in order to create a new future. Therefore, the content and form of the play are attuned to express the need of black South Africans to become self-aware, self-determining subjects of cultural and social change.

In addition, the use of flashback provides the playwright with the opportunity to create a play of circular structure—which is reminiscent of such African American plays such as Baraka's *Dutchman* and *The Slave*. The play begins and ends, for example, with the poet dressed in black clothes and hood hanging from a red cross. This circular structure suggests a ritualistic effect that serves to display a repetitious quality within which the need for change is implied. Change is in the audience's hands to be carried out through their actions. Yet, change is also suggested in the double connotation of the red cross seen at the beginning and the end of the play. Whereas the man who is hanging from the red cross at the beginning symbolizes the blood shed by the victims of the brutal, oppressive system of white supremacy and subjugation, the man and red cross at the end symbolize the blood of the tree of life, the blood shed by the martyrs of apartheid who, like Rasechaba's impassioned poems, have regenerated the social consciousness of the black community.

By using biblical mythology, Maponya discloses the treachery of apartheid system in order that people can understand the need to tear off the disguise which has distorted religion and African history. Maponya exposes the truth and opens the audience's eyes by directly addressing them and reciting poems that denounce their situation in South

Africa. Although in most of Maponya's plays there are neither music nor songs, poems like the following by Rasechaba, replace these two elements to become the aching cry and sorrowful laments uttered by black South Africans:

They broke one window first  
 then on all windows played sounds  
 Made by the drums of wars.  
 Both doors joined the chorus  
 The front emitting quick soprano notes  
 The back a slow dub-dub-dub.  
 . . . This is the music  
 That has become notorious  
 It plays at the first hour of the day  
 . . . While you open the front  
 within seconds  
 the musicians spit their songs into every room  
 while others guard the doors for escapers.  
 Torches flashing all over!  
 And the poet is TAKEN (81-82).

Although the songs and music of freedom were confined behind bars, they never stopped breathing in the spirit of the black community. Maponya's commitment as a black Consciousness artist is evident in his works, especially in *Gangsters*. The torch of black liberation kindled by Stephen Biko has been kept lit in Maponya's works. The playwright knew that freedom was in the hands of the people who needed to strengthen their solidarity and brotherhood. The distinct message of *Gansters*, then, is that, as Rasechaba asserts, the martyrs, the singers, and the poets are always led «by the people» (75). Like the artists of the Black Arts Movement, Black Consciousness theater dramatized the power of the voices and struggle of black people for dignity, freedom and justice.

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