

Woza Albert!: The Transformation of Stage and South African Apartheid's Reality through Satire

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In black South African playwright Maishe Maponya's *Gangsters*, the figure of Christ is the main symbol, as represented by the poet who is hanging from a red cross. He uses Christ's tragic death and martyrdom to parallel the death of black South African leaders, Steve Biko specifically. Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon also adopt the same biblical image in *Woza Albert! (Raise Up, Albert!)*. Nevertheless, instead of contemplating the tragic side, they play with the possibility of a second coming of Christ and make a comic satire of it, creating an analogy of Christ's resurrection with the symbolic resurrection of dead black South African leaders, e.g. Albert Luthuli. Christ's resurrection stands up as a symbol for hope.

Woza Albert! employs the same method used by the African American playwright Douglas T. Ward to show the absurdities of racism as well, and in the same manner humor becomes a means of liberation. Black South African actor John Kani insists on the importance of entertainment -humor and laughter- as a significant ingredient in theater, for it makes people have a good time (Interview). African dramatic critic Biodun Jeyifo asserts that in many of the extant folktales in the oral tradition of West Africa,

there is a tacit understanding that only a thin line separates the comic from the tragic, an understanding that ...only the possession of a worldly-wise self-irony determines whether the negations and contradictions of life will finish the hero off (tragedy) or

humanise him and reconcile him to his fellow human beings and to society (comedy) (65).

Jeyifo notices that comedy, though, generally presents the relationship of character to circumstance, of the individual «to the real process of his social existence», more penetratingly and extensively than tragedy (66).

Humor and laughter have played a fundamental role in the African American tradition. As African American scholar Lawrence Levine points out, there is a common need to laugh at our situation, our enemies, ourselves, but it commonly exists in the people who exercise the least power in their present environment and feel hopeless. Laughter produces a liberating effect which brings a feeling of relief, for jokes embody a rebellion against authority and, consequently, liberates from its pressure. Levine adds that humor helped African Americans to minimize their suffering and to assert themselves against an oppressive environment (300, 321, 344). *Woza Albert!* accomplishes the same function of diminishing suffering and its comic elements serve as an excuse to expose the problems created by an absurd system.

In contrast to black South African playwrights Matsemela Manaka and Maiseh Maponya, Mtnwa and Ngema belong to Gibson Kente's school. South African internationally well-known playwright and theater director Athol Fugard has also influenced their work. Ngema recalls Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and how he was interested in someone like Fugard to obtain Western training as well as he was interested in meeting black South African playwright, music and theater director Gibson Kente, for his plays had some magic. Ngema addressed Kente and became one of Kente's actors in *Mama and the Load*. During the production of Kente's play, he met Mtnwa –leading dancer of the play– and both commenced to talk about the possibility of an alternative theater. Ngema emphasizes how Western theater critic and director Peter Brook's *The Empty Space* and Jerzy Grotowski's acting techniques inspired their work. Mtnwa and Ngema practiced Grotowski's exercises. Furthermore, in the United States Ngema met Chicano playwright and theater director Luis Valdez –who told him about his Teatro Campesino– and African American writer and leader of the Black Arts Movement Amiri Baraka. Out of this experience he created his next play, *Asinamali!*, Ngema's theater attempts to educate both blacks and whites (Interview).

If Mtnwa is a singer and a dancer, Ngema is a well-known musician, who used to play in a band in Zululand, and his father was a great storyteller (Interview with Ngema). Mtnwa and Ngema's background is reflected in their play, in which song, dance and music are an integral part. Like Manaka's play *Egoli*, *Woza Albert!* is firmly based on Mtnwa and Ngema's

mastery of acting skills, as noticed by Manaka: «Because of good acting in Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema's *Woza Albert!*, the audience are convinced when the two actors portray two white policemen looking for Morena [Christ], who was apparently walking on the sea». In addition, their masking, combined with good acting, says Manaka, makes people believe the characters portrayed are white (16A). It is significant to underline the fact that Ngema and Mtwa devised their play out of improvisation and Barney Simon worked with them for six weeks to help them in the directing of the play (Interview with Ngema). Moreover, like in Manaka's *Egoli*, the characters's names were the actors' real names, Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema. Mtwa and Ngema have followed the trajectory already established by different groups in South Africa of combining acting, playwrighting and directing in the creation of their plays, which was not as strongly followed by African Americans –although workshop was used by some African American groups such as The New Lafayette Players.

While touring Kente's *Mama and the Load*, out of reading the Bible Mtwa and Ngema discussed the idea of what would happen if Jesus visited South Africa at that moment of political confusion when apartheid was still enforced. They worked for seven months on the idea. Both had been put in jail as political suspects for thirty-three days and when they came out of prison they did not have any money and were housed by several friends living in different parts of the country (Interview with Ngema). They rehearsed in kitchens, bedrooms, buses, cars, backyards, wherever they could. Finally they approached the Market Theater in Johannesburg and were helped by Simon, giving them financial support to perform *Woza Albert!*, which obtained an Obie Award in the United States (they performed in Harlem and off-Broadway in New York) (Ndlovu xxiii-xxiv).

Literary critic Piniel A. Shava asserts *Woza Albert!* is as politically charged as *Egoli*, and fits «into the category of contemporary drama in which symbolism, allegory and satire play a greater role in the criticism of the system than plain political statements», more characteristic of the plays that emerged in the Black Consciousness period (159). Shava's assertion coincides with black South African playwright Credo Mutwa's idea of suggestive realism (to differentiate it from photographic realism), in which an actor with a real baton or a police cap may suffice to communicate the audience the idea or character the actors are portraying (Mshengu 64). Mtwa and Ngema describe that in *Woza Albert!* the actors are bare-chested, wear grey track-suit bottoms and running shoes; and around their necks there is «a piece of elastic, tied to which is half a squash ball painted pink –a clown's nose, to be placed over [their] own nose when [they] play a white man» (3). Similarly to the symbolic use of the nose, a shawl is used to

portray a woman; or two boxes placed on a bare stage are transformed into a train, a bus or a barber shop.

All the musical sounds, as well as train, sirens, helicopter sounds, are created by the two actors themselves. Lighting equally transforms the stage into different places, time of the day and mood. In the twenty-one scenes that the play is composed of, the two actors switch roles continuously, enacting all sorts of different characters—men, women, young and old people or white characters—and, at times, they create invisible characters to whom they speak. This structure entails a fast pace, moving from one scene to another, from one place to another without interruption—from a street with vendors, to a brickyard, a cell in Robben Island, a barber shop, or a train. An example of these fast pace observed through the actor's transformation is given in the stage direction, at the very beginning of the play:

On the first note of their music, overhead lights come on, sculpting [the actors]. They become an instrumental jazz band, using only their bodies and their mouths—double basses, saxophone, flute, drums, bongos, trumpet, etc. At the climax of their performance, they transform into audience, applauding wildly.

Percy stands, disappears behind the clothes rail. Mbongeni goes on applauding. Percy reappears wearing his pink nose and a policeman's cap. He is applauding patronisingly. Mbongeni stares at him, stops applauding (3-4).

These fast transformations create the rhythm of the play.

Gesture is equally important throughout the performance. The actors mime different situations, holding musical instruments or throwing stones, while, simultaneously, they make the sounds of sirens and dogs barking (44). Following the African theater tradition, they combine their social and political comment with gesture, music, story-telling, songs and dance. Among the dances included there is a Towsa dance (6) and a Zulu war dance, which ends with Mbongeni's «*thrusting his knobkerrie again and again at the audience in an attack*,», while both actors sing a song in Zulu announcing that black warriors will come to chase whites away (41).

The songs performed by the actors are generally sung in Zulu, and are traditional Zulu songs (17), or comment on their situation under apartheid, as well as they become the means to criticize and insult whites and call for blacks to unite against white oppression: «*Woza kanye-kanye! [Come together] / Abelungu oswayini! [whites are swines!] / Basibiza ngo-damn! [They call us damns!]*» (31). This is a work song that reminds of Levine's comment on the African American tradition in which African-Americans used work songs with encoded messages addressed to their white bosses.

The theatrical language of mime, songs, music, lighting and bare stage provide a symbolic expression of survival for black South Africans. Their survival depends on their own personal means, for they lack financial resources and adequate living conditions, which is reflected in their *poor theater*, in Grotowski's terms. The emphasis and foundation of the theatrical communication is on the actor's skills to transform the stage into a rich combination of elements which create a large variety of places, characters and situations. Furthermore, the combination of traditional and Western elements parallels the issues raised in the dialogues maintained by the different characters throughout the run of the play. Past and present are combined so that the audience can analyze their present situation. Morena (the Savior), in his second coming, brings with him a biblical history that has been distorted for apartheid's benefit, and he reconstructs it. This reconstruction of history, the disruption of false myths, and exposition of the cruel reality blacks are living in South Africa, follows the social and artistic commitment adopted by Manaka and Maponya in their theater work.

Like Manaka's *Egoli*, *Woza Albert!* is a plotless piece. There is, however, an element that connects all the scenes: Morena, the Savior. Morena becomes the justification to present and communicate the problems and conditions under which black South Africans live in what is considered to be a Christian country. Like Maponya's *Gangsters*, *Woza Albert!* presents the contradictions existing in South Africa. In this respect, Mbongeni describes that Morena has arrived and everybody is going to the airport to see him, and they are crying, singing, laughing, dancing and sweating, and people were shouting:

MBONGENI

... Morena, give me bread for my baby. The other woman was shouting: Morena, my son is in detention. The other man: Morena, give me a special permit to work in Johannesburg city. The little girl, standing next to me: Morena, give me a lollipop... (28).

Morena is, thus, the excuse to speak out the evils of apartheid. Even Morena himself becomes a victim of apartheid and is imprisoned in Robben Island and consequently killed because the government considers him a rebel. But Morena, as written in the Scriptures, after three days resurrects and helps resurrect black South African leaders such as Albert Luthuli, Robert Sobukwe, Lilian Ngoyi and Steve Biko, all heroes in the struggle for liberation.

The resurrection of Morena, of black South African heroes, symbolizes the rising of African traditions and history as well. *Woza Albert!* is a call of attention to rise from their daily deaths and take an active role which implies solidarity against apartheid. The Soweto riots, the Black

Power period, the bulldozers destroying the homes of black South Africans are recalled, as well as Zulu traditions (symbolized in traditional songs, dances and story-telling, represented by an old man who remembers what happened to Piet Retief, leader of the Afrikaners of the white men in the past, who visited Dingane, the great king of the Zulus).

The end of the play takes place in a cemetery where the black South African heroes are buried. When Morena (enacted by Percy Mtwa) arrives at the cemetery, and Mbongeni, who is working there, recognizes him, «leads Percy in a dance around the cemetery, singing,» and together they go from tomb to tomb, resurrecting all of them (52-53). They talk to all the heroes that have been raised and raise their arms triumphantly. The end is a celebration of the liberation day that is coming, and towards which people need to work together: «Sonqoba simunye» [together we will conquer] (*Woza*, 53).

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