

## INTRODUCTION

Athol Fugard's name is synonymous with South African theatre. As early as 1966, Lionel Abrahams rated Fugard a 'native master' of the medium of drama (1982:74). A decade later John Raymer avowed that Fugard 'had almost single-handedly revitalised the moribund South African theatre and remain[ed] unchallenged as South Africa's most illustrious contribution to world theatre' (1976:1). Derek Cohen, for his part, predicted that Fugard could be assured of a place in dramatic history (1977:74). The time that has passed since then has not only proved this prediction true but has added to Fugard's prestige. Nadine Gordimer affirms that 'significant South African drama in English has been created, single-handed, by Athol Fugard' (quoted in Vandenbroucke 1986:273), and *Time* magazine has hailed him as the greatest active playwright in English (Brink 1990:75). His plays have been staged in various parts of the world. In fact, according to a television programme broadcast by the S.A.B.C. in September 1998, his plays are the second most-frequently performed after Shakespeare's in the United States. His works have been translated into a number of languages, among them French, Dutch and Afrikaans.

The reason why Fugard's dramas have won international acclaim, in Vivier's opinion, is that they fuse 'all the divided and diverse aspects of South African Theatre' (1983:23) and reflect 'African experience on both sides of the colour line' (1983:62), tapping the tensions of an existence under a contradictory and unjust government (1983:81), and in the process, shattering the 'conspiracy of silence' that surrounded the lives of Black South Africans (1983:72). Temple Hauptfleisch adds in this respect that the dramatist accomplishes the integration of

the expressiveness and the directness of the Afrikaans Theatre, the universality of the English language and the searing experience and unconventionality of the Black Theatre. Therefore, Fugard epitomises and is the initiator of a long sought after S.A. playwriting tradition - an expression of who and what we really are. (Quoted in Vivier 1983:23)

From this it is clear that Fugard's contribution to theatre cannot be overlooked,

and is worthy of close investigation. The place his works occupy in the context of South African drama is discussed in Appendix B of this dissertation.

Since Fugard is known to have been influenced by existentialist writers and their thinking permeates his oeuvre, this study will consider his plays from an existentialist perspective, with particular reference to the themes of choice and change and their relation to identity and meaning.

The philosophy of existentialism emerged from a deeply felt concern with the meaning of individual existence (Natanson quoted in Swart 1983:11). In terms of this theory, individuals define their identity and realise their potential by making choices (Grimsley 1967:33). A choice, however, calls for the recognition of personal responsibility and exposes humans to their isolated state in existence (Yalom 1980:319) - which, according to Erich Fromm, is the 'primary source of anxiety' (in Yalom 1980:357). This explains why humans tend to transfer authorship to others (Yalom 1980:230).

Yalom deems death to be the 'primordial fount of anxiety' and psychopathology (1980:29, 188). As is the case with existential isolation, one has to contemplate the transience of everything. Then one's outlook on life changes and one can appreciate life more fully (1980:31). The reward is a sense of meaningfulness (Bugental 1976:2).

Meaning may be eclipsed at times by the situation in which one finds oneself, as Camus and Sartre (in Yalom 1980:431) aver. In the face of the indifferent emptiness of the world (Peck 1992:70), there are still two choices available for human beings: either to forge meaning for themselves (Camus and Sartre in Yalom 1980:431) or to change their attitude towards despair and learn to value it (Yalom 1980:427-8). In doing so they can rise above their senseless existences (Walder 1984:53).

Because existentialist theory emphasises waiting and enduring (Peck 1992:70), it affords a useful frame of reference for dealing with South Africa in an apartheid

context, in which the oppressed could only wait (Gussow 1981:5) while others turned a deaf ear to their cry for freedom.

Major influences on his work will then be followed by a more detailed discussion of existentialist philosophy and psychology and their relevance to this study.

Athol Fugard has said that much of what he writes is autobiographical (Raymer 1976:2). His **career**, against the political context of the time, has a bearing on the existentialist concepts to be examined, and will be considered in Appendix A . Next follows a brief discussion of the political background to and critical reception of his work.

### **Political background to the plays**

For information on the political context for Fugard's plays, I owe much to Russell Vandenbroucke's *Truths the hand can touch* (1986:282-287), Judylee Vivier's *Athol Fugard as Creator: Some Aspects of Fugard's Process as a Playwright and Director in the South African Context* (1983) and Nicolas Visser's article, 'Drama and Politics in a State of Emergency: Athol Fugard's "*My Children! My Africa!*" in *Twentieth-century Literature* (1993:486-502).

Much has been written about South Africa's exclusive system of governance and jurisprudence, the cause of international censorship, consumer and sports boycotts as well as local unrest manifesting itself in a variety of ways. These ranged from strikes, race riots, urban guerilla actions, stonings and a host of other forms of violence and crime to passive resistance, protest journalism and literature, and political theatre (Mshengu 1982:171). Though racism had existed from the time of South Africa's settlement by Europeans, 'it operated in a sporadic and ill-defined manner until 1948', when the National Party gained ascendancy (Vandenbroucke 1986:286). Then, apartheid (or the separate development of races), a term coined in 1929, was elevated to an ideology and an official state policy of total segregation on each level of daily life. This state policy begat scores of statutes, turning South Africa into a police state. It brought hardship and

misery to the black people who were deprived of any political power, including the right to vote and the right to parliamentary representation, while whites enjoyed all the benefits and became more prosperous.

Apartheid legislation affected all aspects of life. All persons were assigned to racial categories and no mobility among the various categories was allowed. Sexual relations or marriage between white, 'Coloured' and black people was prohibited. Together with segregation in public places, residential and commercial segregation was imposed, even if this meant breaking down the houses of Africans and 'Coloureds', packing their belongings into trucks and removing them to other areas. Africans could not live in the city, but had to stay in townships or locations; moreover, permanent residence in the urban areas was restricted to those who could prove that they had been born in the cities, who had lived there continuously for fifteen years, or who had worked for the same employer for ten years. Should they want to live somewhere else, their 'reference' or pass books, which they had to carry on their person at all times (failure to produce it constituted a criminal offence), had to be stamped by government officials. Any form of criticism of the government was criminalised, even if that meant only being in possession of banned literature, distributing pamphlets or belonging to banned organisations. Individuals convicted of threatening the peace and inciting others to violence could be repeatedly detained for ninety days without charge and court order, without appeal or trial, and could incur anything from steep fines and corporal punishment to long, even indefinite prison sentences. Lastly, individuals furthering the aims of 'Communism' were placed under house arrest or banned for up to five years.

A more detailed description of the statutes passed during the apartheid regime in South Africa and the consequences these statutes had, may be found in Appendix C.

## Critics and politics

Critics have differing expectations about how reality should be reflected. Bowker explains that literary traditionalists have an ahistorical approach and reflect on universal experiences and values. Humanists, again, demand an 'aesthetic distance between the text and historical context'. For Marxist critics the historical setting is of consequence and the 'authority of the experience [should] outweigh [the text's] transformation into an art object' (1990:4). Literary traditionalists and humanists are interested in the 'relationship between literature and history only to the extent that it affects the status quo' (1990:4). Marxist theorists, again, give a political interpretation to Fugard's dramas and even read him as a Marxian or deconstructionist portraitist, whereas other critics see him as a 'traditional liberal or even conservative analyst ... perceiving the economic structure of the country and its class relations as central, but not exclusive elements in the making of its pain' (Amato 1984:204). Amato even advances the notion that Fugard's plays leave one's 'political universe intact' (1984:204).

It follows that authors and critics are confronted with an overwhelming social context and post-structural critical situation. In this context and situation no one discipline or discourse should be granted a privileged claim to primacy.

It is indisputable that all artists are influenced to a greater or lesser extent by their milieu. Vivier notes that 'a theatre tradition ... encompass[es] the language, the beliefs, the politics and the way of life which is practised by a particular culture' (1983:1) since 'all theatre has some social relevance because there are always social implications in a dramatic situation' (44). Ian Steadman furthermore is of the opinion that 'drama and theatre are fertilised in space and time' (quoted in Vivier 1983:44), and Hermassi that theatre cannot be 'individualised' out of its socio-political context (in Vivier 1983:202).

Divorcing drama from its context is also not Fugard's intention. 'Having once proclaimed his "regional" affinities to be the backbone of his literary creation' (Seidensspinner 1986:312), his subject matter is derived from his socio-political and socio-economic environment and the political pressures that are integral to it.

The majority of Fugard's works expose a 'microcosm of South Africa's explosive racial situation, revealing life under the prevailing system of oppression' (Green 1976:163).. Robert Green's view is that 'art produced in such hostile circumstances must be vulnerable to political temptations and aesthetic dangers which are in equal measure aesthetic temptations and political dangers' (1976:167).

It is especially the critics who fall prey to these political temptations and aesthetic dangers. Some maintain that Fugard's dramas must be read only as agitprop works denouncing the prevailing system of oppression in South Africa, and that a failure to stress the politics of these society-related statements would render them meaningless (Walder 1984:18). Russell Vandenbroucke declares that this not only does a disservice to the plays - as the use of 'political' often implies a limitation in a work of art - but also exposes the prevailing misconceptions about the relationship between 'politics' and art (1986:90).

Other reviewers, again, who evaluate the plays not on own merit, but on the basis of their personal preconception of what art 'should' be (Vandenbroucke 1992:311), upbraid the playwright for not making race the focus of his plays but human relationships (Brink 1990:75), that is, they take him amiss for an inadequate liberal and indeterminate political vision and his 'unwillingness to reduce [his country's] dilemma to a conflict of right and wrong, of free-thinking Truth battling against dogmatic Evil' (Durbach 1987:16). As Brink puts it, these critics hold that the disguise of the political statement through play-acting is 'a withdrawal into the comparative safety' of an aesthetic and/or existential response (1993:444).

Lewis Nkosi (1968), Hilary Seymour (1980) and Mshengu (1982) are three of these reviewers. All three 'pinpoint a tendency in Fugard to universalise and to ignore the specificities of the South African context' (Holloway 1993:36), so contributing to the preservation of the status quo (Walder 1984:55). These writers also deem the emphasis the artist places on human dignity and noble endurance, and the liberal appeals he makes to notions of justice and decency, as weaknesses in his work. Seymour identifies 'the promotion of humanitarian

ideals, reformist as opposed to revolutionary messages, the use of everyman figures or universal types in a limited socio-historical context, and the attachment of great importance to individual morality, as particularly limiting to the plays' political function' (quoted in Holloway 1993:37). To her, the accentuation of individual character - rather than class and economic position - is inadequate given the outrages occurring every day in South Africa (in Holloway 1993:36). This assumption of Seymour's is clearly based on the 'Marxist presupposition that a mere indictment of the apartheid system is insufficient'; dramas 'raising consciousness of oppression should indicate progressive ways forward in terms of class struggle' (Holloway 1993:38).

Zakes Mda shares Hilary Seymour's perspective. He suggests that the dramatist leaves no room for hope as he seems to say that 'South Africa is a terrible place but cannot be otherwise' (quoted in Holloway 1993:38). Peck agrees with Mda and Seymour when he posits that Fugard's pessimism is often 'so extreme that apartheid becomes part of the absurd human condition' (1992:71). Mda adds that the author does not feel bound to disclose 'the sources of the suffering he attempts to depict ... and work out ways of overcoming it, but considers it sufficient that he should indicate its existence' (quoted in Holloway 1993:38).

Mda reports that the plays of sole authorship, in particular, are not a true reflection of the experiences of the people as they do not depict the oppressive aspects of South Africa's exclusive system of governance and jurisprudence (quoted in Holloway 1993:38). Amato quotes from an anonymous article, entitled 'Art and Revolution in South Africa: The Theatre of Athol Fugard'<sup>1</sup>, which states: 'Fugard's opposition to apartheid confines itself to an indictment of racialism but not of the exploitative and destructive nature of capitalism as it operates in South Africa' (1984:203).

The rationale for this negative viewpoint of the playwright is supplied by Mshengu. Mshengu explains that while Fugard, as an Afrikaans speaker, has access to the language and culture of the 'Coloureds' in South Africa and, as an English

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was distributed at the Conference on *Culture and*

speaker, to that of educated Black Africans, his efforts to transcend racial segregation by developing contact with black South Africans have been confined in the main to contact with educated English speakers in white areas, that is, with the intermediate classes of the black African group (1982:174). That the 'life and culture of the black majority are inaccessible to him' (1982:174)<sup>2</sup> is not only due to his inability to speak any of the indigenous African languages but to also his race and class. Fugard himself lists Grotowski, Camus, Beckett, Brecht and Sartre among his influences, but 'makes no mention of Fanon, Cabral, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Achebe or Ngugi' (1982:175). Therefore, Mshengu's conviction is that the playwright does not understand the true nature of the struggle of the majority, and that his version of "'the human condition" in South Africa is partial' (1982:171).

Es'kia Mphahlele does not mince matters. According to him, Fugard's politics 'stink' because '... a white man speaks for the African' (quoted in Vandenbroucke 1992:311). Fugard's reply to those who think that his race disqualifies him from writing truthfully about blacks: 'If the nature of human experience changes with a man's skin colour, then the racists have been right all along' (quoted by Marks in Vandenbroucke 1992:311).

Another critic of significance, Dennis Walder, concurs with Amato and Mphahlele that Fugard 'sees things from the liberal point of view, and is unable to avoid that' (1984:125). Fugard's development furthermore mirrors the white liberal's failure to effect significant political change in South Africa, because he 'too often retreats into self-scrutiny, fantasy, an obsession with the psychopathology of the isolated consciousness' (1984:100). Fugard's collaborator on the workshop plays, John Kani, seconds Walder by affirming that Fugard's 'sympathy is nothing else but an extension of the imagination' (quoted in Weales 1978:2).

---

*Resistance* held in Gaborone, Botswana, in 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Probably for the sake of his argument, Amato does not cite the collaboration with The Serpent Players and the instrumental role this group of actors played in the development of the dramatist, as well as the fact that this collaboration was highly unusual in its time.



Taking these views into account, it appears that Fugard's failure to make race instead of relations (Brink 1990:75) his sole focal point inflamed both white and black left-wing critics. The latter were persuaded that even though his work has profound insight into human nature (Nkosi in O'Sheel 1978:76), an 'imaginative response was inappropriate and irrelevant' in his social situation (Bowker 1990:3). What is appropriate is that he educate the world about what goes on in his country (Raymer 1976:2).

However, there are as many opinions as there are critics. Stephen Gray, for one, states that 'the assumption that the politics in a Fugard play is an overlay, and that the human condition is somehow deeper, more profound and so absolute it is free of man-made laws and injustices, simply does not pertain in Fugard's worldview. Politics at all strata intersect within Fugard's characters at the roots of personality...' (1982:27). Mshengu points out that 'by showing the human effects of racial legislation in South Africa [Fugard] effectively demonstrates its inhuman nature' (1982:171), and Mel Gussow asserts that the dramatist's plays make 'such powerful political statements - they prove the validity of art as a social instrument' (1982:94).

In spite of his frequent harsh comments on the 'evils' of the South African political system (Seidenspinner 1986:108), Fugard's plays will probably be a bitter disappointment to those expecting an outright condemnation of Afrikanerdom and the Nationalist regime. As the author himself makes known, 'if anybody in an audience for one of my plays sits there expecting that I am going to make a political statement, or give a message, or lay out a blueprint for a better and juster South Africa, they are going to be disappointed' (1993:385).

Although regionalism is one of the 'mainstay[s]' of [Fugard's] motivation' (Seidenspinner 1986:219), most of his works being 'squarely set in South Africa' (Collins 1983:371), he firmly refutes the label of political pamphleteer, stating that he finds most protest theatre boring. In his opinion, theatre is powerful enough without political pamphlets. This induces him to pay no regard to the message and concern himself only with the story (Fugard interviewed by Fourie 1997:5).

He cannot but be a story-teller (Fugard 1993:385). Russell Vandenbroucke avers that those who malign his plays for being individualistic, despairing, uninspiring, anti-revolutionary, and so on, assume that Fugard could 'write another kind of play', that he could abandon his vision and trade it in 'for a credo compatible' with that of the critics (1992:311). As the dramatist avows: 'the moment I start to function on the level of political analysis, I think flatly, I think superficially - the magic goes out' (quoted in Amato 1984:204) and what he then writes lands up in the wastepaper basket (Fugard interviewed by Brink 1990:77-8).

On this score, the playwright is convinced that a duty may not be imposed on the writer from outside (Foley 1994:64). In this way he challenges Ernst Fischer's description of an artist as 'commissioned by his society' (Seidenspinner 1986:185). His own 'approach to writing, directing and acting is emotional and intuitive rather than intellectual' (Vivier 1983:101). As he puts it,

... what I'm out to provide an audience with is an emotional experience, not an intellectual one. Obviously ideas are involved, but my target is an emotional experience. I write and act and direct correspondingly. (Interviewed by Vivier 1983:188)

Foisting agendas on artists will limit theatre to one thing, the fulfilment of a revolutionary role, whereas it must remain multi-faceted (Warman in Vivier 1983:3). In Fugard's opinion, vociferous, strident protest writing will not survive as living literature (an idea which has also achieved currency in the post-apartheid era). Radical resistance literature has to make clear statements, and, for this reason, ambiguity, contradictions and paradox, the elements which enrich literature, are neglected (Fugard quoted in Foley 1994:63). In trying to be politically symbolic, resistance literature becomes 'distant from the real life of human individuals', 'dry and lifeless' (Fugard quoted in Foley 1994:68). Making a direct social commitment instead of writing from personal integrity and experience (Seidenspinner 1986:149) is set down by the dramatist as 'killing one's soul' (interviewed by Brink 1990:78). Theatre, too, dies when 'academics, philosophers, critics and politicians try to create agendas for art' (Fugard interviewed by Fourie 1997:5) based on their preconceptions of what art 'should' be (Vandenbroucke 1992:311).

This compels him to declare that the artist's inspiration must come from within (interviewed by Brink 1990:77). His response to an image is subjective and emotional rather than rational and intellectual (Vivier 1983:101) and his dramas make `no concessions, either to fame and fortune abroad or to the dictates of authorities at home: either to the apostles of apartheid or to the leaders of the struggle who wish to summon up the arts as "instruments of liberation"' (Fugard interviewed by Brink 1990:76).

In fact, the artist has always `aimed at transcending the "merely" socio-political' (Brink 1993:439). In spite of the fact that his dramas are `inevitably political because of the nature of the South African context in which he writes' (Vivier 1983:80), he has never been a `dissident" writer of his own accord or ... a pamphleteer for a certain cause' (Seidenspinner 1986:333). For example, in the seven-page introduction that precedes the three *Statements* works, he does not make a `single reference to [the plays'] ideological or socio-political context' (Brink 1993:439). He speaks instead of a relationship with himself and of self-exploration, and vows that he cannot `turn that necessary area of secrecy in [himself] into a public relationship with South Africa' (Walder 1984:27). That is to say, his `testimony is personal, and immediate; what matters to him is the individual experience' (1984:126) and not the education of the world (Raymer 1976:2). As he professes: `I try to celebrate the human spirit - its capacity to create, its capacity to endure, its capacity to forgive, its capacity to love, even though every conceivable barrier is set up to thwart the act of loving' (1993:390). Because he considers himself to be a humanitarian and a craftsman first, he finds the perception of himself as a political playwright so disturbing.

This dissertation will not deny that the South African framework has indeed had a great impact on Athol Fugard's works. Although he eschews the `label of political writer' (Post 1985:3), the `complexity of his position as a South African white liberal writer demands that his works be related to his socio-economic and political context' (Seidenspinner 1986:107). Apart from this, most of his writings do make strong political statements and `the reality of a statutory inhumanity is a ceaseless murmur at the level of their sub-texts' (Green 1976:168). Julien Mitchell surmises that `the truth being told is so saturated in politics that politics never has to be

mentioned' (quoted in Post 1985:3). Fugard himself is conscious that the 'notion of telling a story in South Africa and not being political is naïve since politics is inscribed in everything one does in South Africa'. Nevertheless, he still insists, 'politics is not my focus as I start out' (1993:386). His stage characters are the 'ugly', 'unloved', nameless' and 'destitute' rather than the victims of racial oppression (Seidenspinner 1986:234) and his themes are of universal relevance: the search for identity, deception, human relationships, the breakdown of communication, man's often incredible inhumanity to his fellow man, the feeling of isolation and 'lostness', the inexorability of time passing, and death (Vivier 1983:113 & Raymer 1976:2).

This is so since art, according to the author, is incapable of changing people: Only life can do that (in Vandenbroucke 1984:45). Since 'ambiguity of expression' reflects the nature of life and is 'superior to singleness of meaning' (Fugard quoted in Walder 1984:111), to put an exclusively political construction on art is impossible.

Thus, although regional material is used and the social and political aspects of South African existence are represented, Fugard transcends the particulars of the setting so that it serves only as a backdrop for the treatment of subjects of general relevance and significance, such as the human being's feeling of isolation, lostness and despair, and his/her struggle for identity, community, dignity and meaning (Vandenbroucke 1984:48), - in a nutshell, for the significance of life (Collins 1983:371). Social and political tensions which surface during the course of the dramas are but the 'byproducts and outgrowths of personal and psychic interaction' (Wertheim 1988:211), that is, the psychodynamics of human relationships. The playwright therefore recreates the tragedy of his country together with the tragedy of the world. While he laments the attitudes, values and laws of apartheid South Africa, he also mourns the 'pathetic inadequacies of individual "politics" in general' (Raymer 1976:4). Thus, his plays do not renounce 'socio-political action in favour of an aesthetic and/or existential response' (Brink 1993:450-1), but are individual as well as society-related statements (Seidenspinner 1986:284).

The critics who argue for interpreting Fugard's output as an ongoing study in politics have to view his characters as one-dimensional mouthpieces for his ideology (Vivier 1983:56-7) who, as a result, are incapable of choosing alternative lifestyles. This is not the case. In the dramas, 'interest in individual character and personal truth' overrides symbolic, metaphoric and political resonances, including the relation of the individual to class and the investigation of the nature of social associations in a historical and political perspective (Seymour 1980:278). Moreover, the delineation of the *dramatis personae* is most realistic, showing the playwright's profound insight into the human mind (Swart 1983:18).

Characters are often presented as ontologically bewildered (Vivier 1983:29) and alienated from their fellow human creatures. In some instances these characters try to establish contact with others and engage in communication with them - the 'fundamental task' before them (Seidenspinner 1986:174), but the psychological games they play and the methods they use to manoeuvre themselves into positions of power often induce a breakdown of communication and only serve to isolate them further (Swart 1983:18); the outcome is an identity crisis.

In order to discover a consistent identity, the personae 'rummag[e] into their histories' (Foster 1982:221), explore the memories and guilts of their childhood and youth (as recollecting the past may shed light on the present [Swart 1983:72]), and probe one another. Sometimes 'psychological exorcisms and traumatic revelations' ensue (1983:48) and the characters recognise themselves and their fragmented society for who and what these really are. Like *The Road to Mecca's* Miss Helen, they come to the conclusion that they do have choices and, by exercising these, display dignity even in the most inhibiting milieu. In this way they invest their futile existences with some significance. Swart puts it as follows: their 'hopes of surviving with dignity ... intact and their desperate hunger for justice and clarity ... establish their absurdity, but also their nobility' (1983:7) and that of humans everywhere (Collins 1983:371).

The focus of the research will be on characters who accept their past, seize the options the present sets before them and resolve to shape their future destinies in order to survive their almost intolerable burden, in some instances even escaping

and transcending the voids of their current existences. The characters who are apprehensive of change, owing to an inhibiting ideology or their own nature, and remain trapped in circular, futile existences will be contrasted with the characters who grasp the opportunity to change.

It has been established that Fugard's works, although recreating the 'tragedy of South Africa' (Raymer 1976:2), transcend the particulars of their setting to be about people in archetypal situations (1976:2) and become relevant to the universal dilemma of human existence (Vivier 1983:57). Therefore they are far 'too complex (and) too rich' to be simply reduced to the category of ideological dramas (1983:59). For this reason, it is crucial to get 'beyond crude ideologically-based literary criticism which is more expressive of the critic than of the author' (Munro 1982:13).

Even after the demise of apartheid, Fugard has shown reluctance to 'change art into a propaganda machine of the Reconstruction and Development Programme of the A.N.C.' (Raghavan 1995:56). He avers that he refuses to 'take orders from a cultural commissar' (Brink 1990:78), and will not advance a particular, narrow political cause by delivering 'didactic, propagandistic (Marxist) literature' that toes a party line and thumps a 'particular political drum' (quoted in Foley 1994:63). He regards it as his responsibility to 'remain vigilant on behalf of the people' (Raghavan 1995:56), to keep on questioning life and theories. Lastly, he promises to remain what he has always been, a 'person with both artistic integrity and a social conscience' (Brink 1993:440).

### **Influences on Fugard**

During his career as a dramatist, Athol Fugard has been influenced by several individuals, theories and schools of thought. These will be discussed with a view to exploring how they have shaped the playwright's perception of the notions of identity, meaning, choice and change.

As a philosophy student at the University of Cape Town, Fugard came into contact

with existentialism when he studied under the Catholic professor of Ethics, Martin Versfeld. 'The notion of dialogue [was] central to Versfeld: how it might be possible to communicate with, indeed love, one another, without exploitation' (Walder 1984:21). So, like Fugard, Versfeld was 'obsessed with the possibility of love in a hate-ridden country' (Walder 1984:21).

John Raymer contends that 'everything Fugard has written is realistic drama; sometimes it is poetic realism and sometimes it is straight "slice-of-life" realism' (1976:1). In this Fugard's inspiration came from William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams and John Synge.

Faulkner explores general conflicts within a specificity of time and place. The region is a 'starting point and locus' for his stories (Vandenbroucke 1986:282). Fugard's comment on the Southern author is 'Thank God I've read my ... William Faulkner' (interviewed by Fourie 1997:5). Because Faulkner took 'very simple, very specific stories, and ... made astonishing literature out of it (*sic*) ... (quoted in Vandenbroucke 1986:266); 'he gave me [Fugard] total security to turn around and look at the specifics, the humble specifics of an Eastern Province world - well, made me secure in my love of those specifics, made me hand myself over to my love, love of a region, of a place, of my passion for it' (Fugard interviewed by Hough 1982:126). In short, Faulkner, steeped as he was in his milieu, as were Williams and Synge, made Fugard recognise that there is enough in South Africa to 'tell a good story', a story that, by virtue of its regionalism becomes universal (Fugard interviewed by Fourie 1997:5). Plays such as *Boesman and Lena*, which draw 'on the "code" of his time and on the "rhythm" of life that surrounds him' (Seidenspinner 1986:228), demonstrate the regional approach.

It is also *Lena* who attracts attention to another similarity between Faulkner and Fugard: the existential conviction that humanity is 'capable of more than mere endurance'. In fact, an individual can prevail 'because he has ... a spirit ... capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance' (Fugard quoted in Collins 1983:370), a spirit that will not be defeated by its predicament.

The Serpent Players of New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, and their township

audiences, together with the ideas of Polish director, Jerzy Grotowski, 'mark a turning point in [Fugard's] career' (Raymer 1976:228). Fugard cites Grotowski as his *agent provocateur* (1976:229); he found Grotowski's ideas 'enormously provocative'.

Grotowski experimented with a new theatrical language: the creative potential of his actors (Walder 1984:78). The actors are no longer passive vessels holding whatever the playwright puts into them, but they are creators, who, after being given a basic object, actively fashion a story around it (Raymer 1976:228). In his treatise, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Grotowski expounds:

If the actor, by setting himself a challenge, publicly challenges others, and through excess, profanation, and outrageous sacrilege reveals himself by casting off his everyday mask, he makes it possible for the spectator to undertake a similar process of self-penetration.... The performer engages in a sort of psychic conflict with the spectator. (Quoted in O'Sheel 1978:74)

In short, the actor sacrifices himself to the spectators so as to produce in them a 'similar process of psychic discovery - the whole event to take on the intensity and significance of a religious ritual' (Walder 1984:79). This was the final objective towards which Grotowski worked (Vivier 1983:164).

Fugard's affinity for Jerzy Grotowski's actor's theatre (Vivier 1983:160) was evident as early as 1961 when he formulated his theory of 'the pure theatre experience':

... the actor and the stage, the actor on the stage. Around him is space, to be filled and defined by movement and gesture: around him is also silence to be filled with meaning, using words and sounds, and at moments when all else fails him, including the words, the silence itself.... The cathartic possibility in theatre needs nothing more than the actor and the stage. (Quoted in Walder 1984:12)

In essence, the three dimensions, space, time and silence, comprise the 'basic elements in which the actor operates' (Vivier 1983:159). Space and silence is nothingness; 'the actor's confrontation with our being and nothingness' (Benson



quoted in Swart 1983:11).<sup>3</sup> The end product of this confrontation is an 'existential moment of lonely spiritual freedom, in a particular place at a particular time' (Walder 1984:12).

In the early seventies Fugard then abandoned the writer's supremacy together with the complete, 'prefabricated' text ordinarily handed to performers at the outset of rehearsals (Green 1976:170). In place of a conventional, 'sacred' script with one identifiable author, he gave them, as in *The Coat* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, what he called a 'mandate', not the final plotted and structured version of a text but a 'cluster of images' (1976:170) on which all collaborate while the author observes. During rehearsals the actors are subjected to various forms of silence and seclusion until they begin to fill the silence with meaningful sound and action.

In creating their own texts, they are under 'no constraint from the exigencies of (a pre-existing) plot and sequential dramatic logic' (1976:170) but are free to improvise. The actors - to Fugard, 'the most significant and vital "ingredient" of a theatrical experience' (Vivier 1983:84) - authenticate their roles (Walder 1984:3) by relating them to their own unique truths, experiences, history, personality, even the 'very shape of their bodies' (1984:78) and communicate these to a live audience with whom they have an immediate and direct relationship. This is 'poor' theatre as opposed to 'pure theatre', and Dennis Walder is certain that 'such a theatre is capable of bearing witness' (1984:95).

In attempting to utilise the full potential of the actors, Grotowski made use of only minimal staging. For Fugard the 'trappings of the institutionalised, illusionistic theatre - buildings, props, costumes, lighting and so on' - have always been of interest only 'in so far as they aid the primary function of drama: to find the "truth" of the "living moment"' (Fugard quoted in Walder 1984:4). Because he uses as few such resources as possible, Fugard's dramas have never been part of the conventional, mainstream theatre; in this way they implicitly challenge the prevailing assumptions about theatre in general.

---

<sup>3</sup> Swart (1983:11) comments that the concepts of being, nothingness and meaninglessness confirm that Fugard's dramatic perspective is that of an existentialist.

Fugard has said that he admires Samuel Beckett more than any other dramatist (Raymer 1976:237). This Irish post-war existentialist dramatist is acclaimed by him as 'a poet in the theatre' (Fugard quoted in MacLennan 1982:221). Fugard came into contact with Beckett's works when he directed a black cast in a Johannesburg production of *Waiting for Godot* in the autumn of 1962, and himself in June 1967 in *Krapp's Last Tape*. After having read *Malone Dies*, he confessed:

I wanted to start writing again the moment I put it down. Beckett's greatness doesn't intimidate me. I don't know how it works - but he makes me want to work.... I suppose it's because I really understand, emotionally, and this cannot but give me power and energy and faith. (Quoted in Vanderbroucke 1984:47)

Fugard senses a strong kinship with Beckett. In the latter's works he discerns a reduction of all problems to the 'borderline situation of being human' (Huber 1989:50). The South African dramatist feels that Beckett succeeds in 'making man naked again' (quoted in Benson 1983:67) by portraying the disoriented, dislocated, alienated, bruised and absurd carnality of 'estranged being(s) in an alien universe' (Swart 1983:2). These 'socially undefined and clownish pieces of humanity', wander aimlessly, endlessly around (Raymer 1976:236). They 'divert their fears to the physical concern with the "right place" and the "right time"' (Fugard quoted in Seidenspinner 1986:275), and the right somebody or something to furnish them with an identity and give meaning to their lives. Yet, all they are left with in the end is a sense of all-encompassing and eternal despairing futility. To a certain degree, the lot of Beckett's personae is similar to the social and political position of black South Africans: all the oppressed can do is to wait for the miracle of emancipation which never seems to come. According to Mel Gussow (1981:5), the Irish writer's works could therefore be read as an objective correlative of the black person's dilemma in a 'country where the colour of the skin decides its citizens' social opportunities and where a lack of pigmentation is held to be a measure of superiority' (Seidenspinner 1986:252).

It is therefore not surprising that soon after Fugard's rise to fame, critics drew parallels between his work and Beckett's. Fugard's allegiance to the Irish

playwright is confirmed by his search for simplicity and purity (Vandenbroucke 1986:269). For instance, especially since *Boesman and Lena*, with its unity of time, place and action (Vivier 1983:35), his works have dispensed with a conventional plot with an 'exposition and logical development through a climax to a dénouement' (Hough 1979:29). As in *Waiting for Godot*, physical action is at a minimum; a static situation is the focal point. Fugard's dramas, furthermore, nearly all use sparse sets with a limited number of properties; these sets represent a drab, featureless and even spaceless, inhuman 'wasteland' or no-man's-land which does not seem to have 'any inherent and consistent purpose, justice or value' (Swart 1983:6). The dank, dingy and 'rubbish-strewn' settings (Raymer 1976:236, 141) are projections of the characters' state of mind; characters who are often in an 'extreme situation' of metaphysical anguish (Vandenbroucke 1986:269), isolated and alienated, not only from others but also from their real natures, reason and reality. The decor contributes to the rendition of the misery, meaninglessness and irrationality of the '*condition humaine*' (Seidenspinner 1986:176) and existence. So does the repetitive and absurd language with its allusive connotations and the 'taut and terse' dadaist dialogue (Raymer 1976:236) which serves the purpose of evasion instead of communication (Swart 1983:39).

Like Beckett, Fugard has a 'penchant for one, two or three character' casts (Raymer 1976:236). *Boesman and Lena* and the brief one-act drama, *The Occupation*, like *Waiting for Godot*, feature a couple of tramps who carry their existential rubbish - dredged-up irrelevant memories of the past - with them (Vandenbroucke 1986:269).<sup>4</sup> These poverty-stricken social outcasts who do not amount to more than rubbish themselves (Raymer 1976:237) (the dehumanisation of people being an important Fugard theme [Seidenspinner 1986:186]) function as the embodiment of the alienation between individual and individual. Caught up in a state of anguished flux between time and eternity, they are not only homeless and friendless in a 'virtual cosmic void' (Arthur 1992:10), but also without a stable

---

<sup>4</sup> As Marieken Swart (1983:72) notes, virtually all Fugard's characters try to establish a consistent identity through memory. This is because the past explains the present and remembering it may sustain one in the present.

identity and consequently 'unpredictable in terms of a given psychological make-up' (Hough 1979:30).

The 'endless cross-talk' (Walder 1984:55) in which the human derelicts, of especially the three Port Elizabeth plays, engage together with the questions they ask, which are phrased in a jerky and fragmented fashion, is indicative of the fragmentation of their psyches at the same time as it is a desperate attempt to break free from the 'maze' of their confusion (Seidenspinner 1986:332) and make sense of their existences. These questions are never satisfactorily answered, and, like the displaced vagabonds' conversations and actions, are only exercises in filling time and are ultimately pointless. The catalysts, persons appearing for a brief moment on the stage, make very little difference to the drifters' destinies. After these catalysts leave, the drifters just "drift on", neither saved nor damned but left alone to face eternity' (Vandenbroucke 1986:269) - that is, the 'ordeal of daily survival ... without hope' (Hewes quoted in Raymer 1976:236) - and the ineluctable absurdity of all matter in the universe.

It was especially Beckett's early plays that influenced Fugard, Huber avers (1989:50). In *Literator* (1989:51-3) Huber lists three motifs from *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape* which recur in Fugard's plays and determine their plot and structure. The first is the nexus motif: 'a formula describing a close, complementary relationship between two characters', which is held to be both necessary - even vital - yet 'inhibiting and threatening' (1989:51). The characters do not really belong together and fervently desire to go their separate ways, but they are unable to do so because, in their search for their selves, they need to have their existence affirmed by another person (Laing quoted in Hough 1979:32). Boesman and Lena, Morris and Zach, Millie and Ahlers and numerous others all find that they are each other's fate.

The second Beckettian motif Fugard employs is that of being possessed by the past. Characters feel that they are caught up in 'the calamity of yesterday' (Beckett quoted in Huber 1989:51). Time, to them, is a repetitive, shapeless, unpredictable and interminable void which denies them access to, control of and ultimately deliverance from it (Brinkley 1988:360). They are 'victims and

prisoners' of their past lives and are deformed by them (1988:359). In contrast to Beckett's characters, some of Fugard's personae confront their personal history and their wasted lives, so coming to terms with and emancipating themselves from these (Huber 1989:52). When linear time is interrupted by or substituted for circular time and habit, suffering is the outcome. Suffering, in turn, grants characters a vision of their own lot: their decay and death (Brinkley 1988:356, 362). Nonetheless, in the process they are rewarded by procuring an identity for themselves.

The third motif is the play or game-model (Huber 1989:52). In Fugard's dramas characters 'play at enhancing dialogue in stichomythic brevity, or like children, they imagine, recreate and relive scenes and experiences from real life' (1989:52) or past incidents. These make-believe scenes are enlisted as time-killers or as a survival mechanism. Often they are revelatory enterprises which 'acquire a therapeutic function' for the 'marked and scarred' characters (Fugard quoted in Seidenspinner 1986:317) or 'they suggest links with the world outside of the text' (Huber 1989:52), for example life under the 'pain-inflicted bondage of South Africa's apartheid legislation' (O'Sheel 1978:71).

Relevance to the outside world is where Fugard and Beckett are in opposition. While it is easy to impose diverse frameworks onto Beckett's general and unspecified text, Fugard's purpose in writing is 'more specific, more social (and) more political than Beckett's (Walder 1984:55). This lies at the root of his reliance on concrete details (with the exception of *Dimetos*) which 'restricts and focuses one's perceptions so that it is difficult to see more than a single context' (McLuckie 1993:423). In other words, an audience can read its own world into *Waiting for Godot*, but it can read only Fugard's world out of *Boesman and Lena* (1993:423). This is because Fugard translates a 'closed Beckett-like situation ... into a context in which the stage game finds its relevance' (Weales quoted in Raymer 1976:236) in a specific political regime. As he is committed to analysing 'social and political injustices and their effects on the individual' (Swart 1983:6) he culls his material 'from life and from encounters with real people' (Fugard quoted in Walder 1984:10) (as is apparent from the exact information which is supplied on his characters' spatial locale [McLuckie 1993:428]). As a consequence, Beckett is

domesticated, localised and regionalised (Walder 1984:55).

In contrast, neither spatial nor temporal data play a role in the Irish playwright's dramas. In this way a stark world is created which acts as a 'universal metaphor for the absurd (and immutable) nature of existence in both the physical and metaphysical realms' (McLuckie 1993:428). Fugard, on the other hand, 'defines absurdity as a condition resulting from the human power structures that govern life' (1993:428); it is specific to a certain social or political milieu. Absurdity is not a condition of life itself. It is only a 'part of life, an obstacle to be overcome by an equitable awareness of the self and the other, and the other's reciprocation of this awareness' (1993:428). So 'Fugard turns a blind eye to Beckett's nihilism or what he considers a starkly pessimistic world-view' (Huber 1989:53). In his works positive values, like compassion, solidarity with and love for fellow human beings, are prominent. Whereas Beckett's deprived and discarded *dramatis personae* (Seidenspinner 1968:164) are 'reduced to thinghood' and even rubbish by their senseless surroundings (Raymer 1976:237), and have, 'apart from existence itself, no conceivable justification for their lives' (Seidenspinner 1986:316), Fugard's are not defeated by their own predicament (1986:337) and transcend despair when they embrace 'lurid consciousness' (Vandenbroucke 1986:268). This optimistic philosophy is closer in spirit to that of Albert Camus and is the reason for my not regarding Fugard as a true dramatist of the absurd.

Brecht's 'message', like that of Fugard, is altogether more optimistic than Beckett's or Camus's. Brecht propounds, as Fugard does in particularly his later dramas, that reality is not a fate to be born into, but one to be modified (Brink 1993:451).

Fugard directed a production of Brecht's *Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis* (*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*) in Port Elizabeth (Brinkley 1988:363). His company of amateurs, the Serpent Players, felt that this particular play had 'urgent relevance to the lives of the people in the township' (1988:163). Brecht (like Fugard) portrays the hardship of the working class, while critically and satirically reflecting on its socio-political origins.

Both Brecht and Fugard - at times - keep their audience at arm's length, turning sentimental identification into 'alienation' or 'distancing'. (*The Coat's* 'what if situation demonstrates this technique.) George Bernard Shaw suggests that the "'alienation effect" aims to create the possibility of *catharsis interruptus*, with the purgation taking place outside the theatre in the social arena' (quoted in Foster 1982:207). Some of Fugard's works, thus, are indicative of his contact with Brecht.

Brecht differs from Beckett on another point: the concept of time. Whereas Beckett's characters reconcile themselves to mere repetition, Brecht adheres to the 'Hegelian-Marxist linear concept of time' (Brinkley 1988:353). The German dramatist's characters can control time as it 'consists of a series of causally related events' (1988:361). When time is disrupted and becomes anti-linear, the purpose is didactic: the *Verfremdungseffekts* (alienation effects) serve to stress 'time's mutability by political engagement and to awaken consciousness and resolve in the spectator' (1988:362). Fugard's manipulation of time, however, is never directly didactic. He depicts time as an unrelenting, irresistible substance 'working against man's best efforts to stop its destructiveness' (Raymer 1976:195). In short, as Dimetos puts it, 'Time stinks' (51). Considered from another angle, time can also be a constructive force in that it is also redemptive (Raymer 1976:193-4).

Fugard further contrasts with Brecht in that he refuses to reconcile art with 'Brecht's rigorous political maxim, which uncompromisingly states that "it's wrong to talk about trees because it's a kind of silence about injustice", a judgement that, if applied to the South African situation, would demand that apartheid itself be the object of artistic strategies' (Seidenspinner 1986:185). Fugard observes instead the effects of apartheid on its individual victims. In addition, his 'faith in the healing nature of artistic self-creation betokens - even in his most highly politicised works - a return to the valuation of the aesthetic' (Brinkley 1988:364), a realm which the other two writers - but not Albert Camus - neglect.

Besides Beckett, Camus (1913-60) for Fugard can be singled out as the most influential source of inspiration (Huber 1989:51). It was Martin Versfeld, Fugard's



lecturer at the University of Cape Town, who initiated his student's lifelong interest in this French existentialist philosopher and writer. Fugard has recorded in his *Notebooks*: it is 'impossible to describe the excitement, the total sympathy that exists for me with Camus's thinking. In the harsh but lucid world of his writing I seem to have found, for the first time, my true climate' (quoted in Seidenspinner 1986:179). Moreover, 'Reading Camus is like finding, and for the first time, a man speaking my own language' (quoted in Vandenbroucke 1984:48).

Perhaps Fugard experienced such a rapport with Camus because both he and the French existentialist philosopher and writer were 'raised in European cultures transplanted to Africa', in families with dominant women (Vandenbroucke 1986:267). Both belonged to the 'relatively underprivileged sector' of the white community, with the South African being a member of the 'lower middle class, verging on "poor white"' (Walder 1984:6). Both became journalists and wrote and directed for amateur theatre companies founded with their assistance (Vandenbroucke 1986:267). Fugard was labelled a traitor for objecting to the oppression of South Africa's indigenous people, yet insisted on staying. Camus, a radical left-wing political thinker, was exiled because of his "'liberal" proposals with regard to the Algerian struggle for independence' (Peck 1992:81).

Camus's and Fugard's perceptions of the role of the artist are also similar. Camus records in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death* (as translated by Justin O'Brien): 'The world I live in is loathsome to me, but I feel one with the men who suffer in it... [One] ambition that ought to belong to all writers: to bear witness and shout aloud, every time it is possible, insofar as our talent allows, for those who are enslaved as we are', that is, those who live in 'poverty ... among vain or humble people' (quoted in Peck 1992:70). Fugard's purpose in playwriting, similarly, is to 'witness as "truthfully" as [he] can' to the lives of the nameless, dispossessed and destitute in his modest 'little corner of the world' (Benson quoted in Vivier 1983:52). So, while the works of the South African dramatist are set in the Eastern Cape region and the characters members of the 'poor white', 'Coloured' and occasionally African section of the community, Camus's centre on Algeria and this North African country's white colonisers and despised local slaves (Walder



1984:6).<sup>5</sup>

Camus records in his *Notebooks*:

Can one be moved by a city where nothing attracts the mind, where the very ugliness is anonymous, where the past is reduced to nothing? Emptiness, boredom, an indifferent sky, what are the charms of such places?

His answer is Fugard's too: "Doubtless solitude and, perhaps, the human creature" (quoted in Walder 1984:53). Both writers then ponder the plight of the human creature, whom they view as a lone transcendent being (Yalom 1980:427) in search of consciousness, intelligibility, and revelation, trapped as s/he is amid the devastating conditions of a meaningless, valueless, indifferent and empty world (Raymer 1976:233). Camus's solution (and perhaps Fugard's) is that humans alter their attitude and fashion a life meaning for themselves. In Yalom's words, they are to see themselves soberly and confront the 'very vortex of meaninglessness' (1980:427-8) until they arrive at a posture of heroic nihilism, and are transformed into metaphors of human endurance and survival without self-pity. (Besides Lena, Hester in *Hello and Goodbye* and Miss Helen in *The Road to Mecca* come to mind here.) In order to attain to their full stature, characters should join forces and metaphysically rebel against their absurd condition. In brief, Camus's dictates for conduct (and changed conduct at that) encompass the concepts of courage, fraternity, love, dignified defiance, secular saintliness and a certain element of transcendence.

"Overwhelmed" by Camus's writings during the years of creating the three Port Elizabeth plays (1960-8), Fugard follows him to the brink of despair, where, nevertheless, may be found "finally the only certainty, the flesh" (quoted in Walder 1984:53). Living without the traditional certainties of religion or history, confronted by a vast, indifferent emptiness, and knowing there is no escape from an eternal absurd fate, some of the South African playwright's characters are still

---

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly enough, both Algeria and the winter-time Karoo are known for their brilliant, almost harsh, sunlight and 'severe landscape' (Fugard in Brink 1990:77).

able to continue, to rise above their senseless existences and destinies by relying on the life meanings they have created for themselves or 'truths the hand can touch' (a favourite phrase of Camus's)<sup>6</sup> (Walder 1984:53). One of these 'truths' is that they, like *The Blood Knot's* protagonists, 'are indissolubly bound, one to the other, by ties of blood or love' (1984:53): '*je suis, donc nous sommes*' (I am, therefore we are) (Brink 1993:443).

Hence Camus stresses that 'a literature of despair is a contradiction in terms'. All three of Fugard's Port Elizabeth plays - *Boesman and Lena*, *The Blood Knot*, *Hello and Goodbye* - also 'hint (at) the possibility of survival, even joy' (Walder 1984:53). Fugard thus imitates the French author in his conversion from the absurd to a 'courageous pessimism', a more 'optimistic positivism', a 'philosophy of endurance' and expectation 'beyond nihilism' (Huber 1989:54, 50).

Camus and Fugard, however, differ in one respect. Camus hypothesises that the ideal tragedy illustrates 'the conflict between two powers ... each of which wears the double mask of right and wrong, good and evil' (Camus quoted in Amato 1984:208). In this way he makes provision for taking pleasure in life in the constant 'presence of death' (Peck 1992:70). Since he does not consider change to be attainable, Camus does not advocate revolution; in Seidenspinner's words, 'his inverted activism permits the individual to ignore the impending catastrophe' and turn his attention to the burden lying before him (1986:178): the absurdity of the human condition and the universe (Walder 1984:55 & Peck 1992:70). Social and political structures are simply thrown into the bargain. Such detached existentialist philosophising derives from the French dramatist's 'contempt for "propaganda plays"' (Amato 1984:208).

In contrast to Camus, Fugard is aware of a specific political context. Yet his creations are not really propagandist in nature (Amato 1984:208) (this has been discussed earlier in the dissertation). 'For all the "external", even documentary detail of his [dramas, they] always demonstrate a deeply personal concern for the

---

<sup>6</sup> *Truths the hand can touch* is also the title of Russell Vandenbroucke's book on Fugard.

[plight of] the "ordinary", anonymous, *little* people with whom [the author] most closely identifies' (Walder 1984:5).

Another influential playwright, Eugene O'Neill, like Fugard, took an interest in the average person who is a lonely 'outsider' in a valueless world. This individual's lostness is the key to his/her humanity (Raymer 1976:233). Although the anxious sufferer yearns to belong, the search for security is never successful. This is the case, because, as Raymer indicates, the structures which could provide for a secure environment - 'society, the authority of religion, of the state, of tradition' - have been invented by people themselves. They have no significance of their own 'except by virtue of [human] existence' (1976:233). It follows that humans are answerable for fashioning their own values and destinies (Falk quoted in Raymer 1976:233).

Fugard has never commented overtly on O'Neill's attraction for him, yet the latter's existential outlook is unmistakable throughout his oeuvre, particularly in the early works (Raymer 1976:233). Stanley Kauffmann thinks of *Boesman and Lena* and *Hello and Goodbye* as but another long day's journey into a very dark night. 'And the quintessential dynamics is like that in late O'Neill: drama not by the encounter of obstacle but by the stripping naked of lives' (quoted in Raymer 1976:234).

Fugard may not admit to O'Neill's appeal, but of Leo Tolstoy he says: He was my great hero in my reading youth, and he still is (interviewed by Fourie 1997:4). Like O'Neill, Camus and Beckett, the Russian writer also grappled for most of his life with the crisis of meaninglessness (Yalom 1980:419). He searched for some meaning that would not be destroyed by death but would transcend it and make him matter to posterity (1980:465). His final antidote to meaninglessness was to engage in life.

Fugard was influenced to a lesser extent by another Russian author, Anton Chekhov (1860-1904). Chekhov depicts the stagnant quality of the indolent rural gentry in Tsarist Russia. His characters do not escape from unsatisfactory conditions because the wish does not result in action.



Both Fugard's and Chekhov's plays feature domestic settings, family relationships, strong females and the influence parents exercise over their offspring even after their deaths (Vandenbroucke 1986:265). Some of their *dramatis personae* triumph in their endurance of the present - after futile attempts to flee into the past or future (1986:265) - and their acceptance of time as an 'unrelenting, irresistible force' obviates their best efforts to check its destructiveness (Raymer 1976:194).

As far as plot is concerned, both Fugard's and Chekhov's consist of a series of concatenate 'actions' (Vandenbroucke 1986:265) which are not really actions at all. The subtext is significant.

Another resemblance between the two writers is the critical misapprehension of their output due to an overemphasis on its social aspects. For example, Chekhov 'has been called, and not only by Soviet critics, a precursor of the Revolution' (Vandenbroucke 1986:265), whereas he and the South African dramatist actually 'cry out against human suffering everywhere' (to quote Collins [1983:371]) while focusing on specific individuals rooted in a particular time and place.

Like Chekhov and Fugard (not to forget O'Neill), Tennessee Williams also contemplated conflict and psychological barriers in close relationships. But 'while Williams's protagonists are often paralysed emotionally by a traumatic experience and rely on illusions to survive', several of Fugard's 'marked and scarred' personae (Fugard quoted in Seidenspinner 1986:317) 'face their traumas and illusions squarely' (Heller 1993:477),<sup>7</sup> gain insight and grow psychologically.

---

<sup>7</sup> Hester from *Hello and Goodbye*, Helen and Elsa from *The Road to Mecca* and Frieda from *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act* come to mind.

## Existentialist philosophy and psychology

Fugard's regard for authors such as Camus and Beckett reveals his affinity for the tenets of existentialism. Since his plays will be examined from an existentialist perspective - with particular reference to the concepts of identity, meaning, choice and change - it is essential to inquire into the theory of existentialism.

'Existentialism was first propagated in Germany after the First World War' by Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger (who rejected the title 'existentialist' [Grimsley 1967:9]). It was later popularised by the works of Jean-Paul Sartre (Swart 1983:10). In the seventies the realist philosopher John Wild observed that existentialism was the most influential school of contemporary thought in France and Western Germany (Bedford 1972:11).

Existentialism emphasises the Socratic idea, 'know thyself' (Bedford 1972:260). We discover our identity by exercising choice. . As Sartre puts it: 'We shall never apprehend ourselves except as a choice in the making' (1958:479). In the process of making a choice which has 'validity for the own existence' (Grimsley 1967:33), the self is constituted and the 'personality is consolidated' (Kierkegaard quoted in Grimsley 1967:25). In other words, when *Dasein* (Heidegger's term for being and being in the world) chooses itself, it grows and begins to live fully (Heidegger 1963:67).

Though there is no reliable guide or foreknowledge of a particular decision's outcome, everyone is 'condemned' to choose through action (Peck 1972:76). Intention counts for little, only action counts (1992:76). In fact, 'to "exist" means to "act" (Grimsley 1967:9) and through action [the] identity is defined' (Peck 1992:76).

Because humans have free will and free choice, full responsibility rests on them to both create and interpret their realities, to determine who they are at present and will be in future. Even though others may limit their freedom, they are still the authors of their own existences and in a position to influence their experiential worlds, alter or

interpret these differently if they cannot be changed. There are no compelling external situations; in spite of their social situation they are not morally impotent (Sartre 1947:289) and nothing foreign can ever determine who they are and how they live - in short, the reality of their lives (Bedford 1972:256).<sup>8</sup> In epitome, existentialism refutes Sigmund Freud's *à priori* theory of psychological determinism by the unconscious and the libido.

Some of Fugard's characters, however, do not trust their own judgement and, on this account, reject the freedom to exercise a choice. Like Queeny in *Nongogo*, they present themselves as 'innocent victims' (Yalom's term 1980:224), relinquish responsibility for the consequences of their actions and act on others' 'musts' instead of on their own 'wants'. Having someone else assume authorship for them is comforting and reassuring because when they are not the agent of the action - and, by extension, the master of their existences - they may lay the blame on others or on unforeseen circumstances. The drawback is that these characters become alienated from their inner selves and can neither attain to their full potential nor infuse their lives with purpose.

To acquire a purposeful existence, Bedford suggests that humans open themselves to and join forces with members of their community (1972:275). Martin Buber's opinion is that there is '... a sterile kind of heart searching ... (which) leads to nothing but self-torture, despair ...' (1958:135). This is because humankind's true environment is the universe (Tillich 1968:72). We are not 'merely "in the world" but "with others"' (Grimsley 1967:50). In other words, the world and every one in it are 'mutually included, the one in the other', and 'it is as We, ever again as We, that we 'construct and develop a world out of our experiences' in a meaningful manner (Buber 1965:107) Sartre argues in this respect:

In order to get any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person (as...) the other is indispensable to my own existence, as well as to my knowledge about myself. This being so, in discovering the other

---

<sup>8</sup> As Tillich professes in *Existence and the Christ*. 'Even deterministic explanations of man's predicament do not necessarily deny his personal responsibility' (1968:65).

person I discover my inner being at the same time (as well as the potential for transforming myself). (1947:44).

Martin Buber explains why this is so:

The inmost growth of the self is not accomplished ... in man's relation to himself, but in the relation between the one and the other, between men ... (1957:104);

that is, 'in the midst of other Existents' (Grimsley 1967:47).

Thus, a person's potentiality for being whole lies in the acceptance and appreciation of another existence (Buber 1947:168), or 'somebody seeing a little bit', as Lena puts it. The reverse is also true: a person who is lost to the world is also lost to himself.

On the other hand, there is the risk of being absorbed by the crowd (Bedford 1972:276). The crowd oppresses individuals, especially those who lack self-worth and despair at the idea of living as an 'abandoned and isolated possibility' (Grimsley 1967:66), by the 'tyranny' it exerts over the outlook (1967:51) in its persistent call for conformity. When the sense of 'mineness' is renounced and the self dispersed in participation and identification (May 1961:78) with the 'they', *Dasein* becomes an 'impersonal entity which is "everybody" and "nobody"' (Grimsley 1967:51), but not itself. It then exists in what Binswanger calls the 'anonymous mode' (quoted in Friedman 1964:516) and Deborah Foster 'medias res' (1982:220).

In order for *Dasein* not to 'fall away from itself' (Heidegger 1963:220), a balance has to be maintained between life-enriching solitude and life-affirming relations. We are individuals and apart from others at the same time as we are social beings and a part of others (Bugental 1976:101, 137). Few of Fugard's characters succeed in striking a balance between these two extremes.

Since a number of existentialists are alluded to in this dissertation, the most important of these merit further mention.

Sören Kierkegaard, of Danish nationality, is credited with being the father of



twentieth-century existentialism, and represents the Protestant Religious movement in existentialism. The German movement was spearheaded by Karl Jaspers, a cultural-religious existentialist.

In contrast to Kierkegaard's and Jaspers's, Jean-Paul Sartre's views are atheistic (1948:26). In his mind, humans are 'free and alone, without assistance and without excuse, condemned ... forever to be free' (1947:290) Even if someone lets himself 'be carried off, in helplessness and in despair, even if he let[s] himself be carried off like an old sack of coal, he [has] chosen his own damnation; he [is] free, free in every way, free to behave like a fool or a machine, free to accept, free to refuse ...' (1947:289). Thus, it is by our own agency that everything happens (1947:290); our lives are nothing but what we make of them through our various choices and actions.. Assuming the 'situation with the proud consciousness' that we are the author of it (1958:554) and that it belongs to us since it is the 'image of [the] free choice' of ourselves (in Friedman 1964:146) can lend some meaning to the most inhibiting milieu. Nevertheless, [the actualisation of the aim - making the time and place of the appointment with the self (Seidenspinner 1986:271) - is often thwarted by 'being for others' (Peck 1992:77).

Martin Heidegger, the founder of phenomenology, agrees that only through a 'rediscovery of Being can modern man be saved from the chaos which threatens him' (Grimsley 1967:38). Humans are liable for this rediscovery as they constitute themselves as well as their environment.

Martin Buber, psychologist, criticises Heidegger's notion of existence in his book *Between Man and Man* (1947). From Buber's point of view Heidegger's notion is monological: his 'man ... can no longer really live with man: he knows a real life only in communication with himself' (1947:168). In plainer terms, the self is sequestered from others.

Two contemporary existentialist psychologists share Buber's views. They are James F.T. Bugental and Irvin D. Yalom. Their views on identity, change, decision and authorship, isolation and relation will be explored.



In *The Search for Existential Identity: Patient-therapist dialogues in Humanistic Psychotherapy* (1976), James F.T. Bugental writes that humans all flee from the nothingness which is at the centre of their being. This also implies that they are evading their existential sense or 'I-ness'. To find their true identity, they must open themselves to their existential essence and be willing to change (2). Only then will they be rewarded with meaning.

Western society, however, encourages an identity that lies in one's achievements, education, titles, vocation and others' impression of one (Bugental 1976:54, 14), notwithstanding the fact that an identity founded on objectification and objective thing-ness is vulnerable to external circumstances. One cannot make an object of one's own being since the self is not an object. Besides, objectivity is transitory. True freedom is found only in subjectivity (1976:52). Accepting one's 'subjecthood' leads to committed choices, involvement, authenticity in relationships, better mobilisation for action and vitality (1976:7).

Since the existential identity is constantly in transit, one should embrace change. Bugental's conviction is that if one tries to freeze one's nature, one will destroy oneself.

Bugental further holds that we are not to deny our choicefulness (1976:98). Having to make choices may be distressing, since choosing calls for the relinquishing of alternatives. If we rely on rules and principles to make the decisions for us or displace responsibility onto others (1976:99-100), we suppress our individuality, and the opportunity to change and experience the full meaning of our being is missed (1976:137).

Irvin Yalom concurs with several of James Bugental's assertions. In fact, he states this explicitly and frequently refers to Bugental in his treatise, *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980).

Yalom states that everything endeavours to persist in its own being (1980:8). But if one acknowledges the impermanence of existence, life is enriched and not impoverished because one gains a new perspective on life (1980:40) and acquires

a greater sense of its specialness (1980:31). One's perspective then also shifts from a 'state of forgetfulness of being' (losing one's self in the everyday, objective world of appearances, diversions and objects) to a 'state of mindfulness of being' (Heidegger in Yalom 1980:30) and the taking on of responsibility (Yalom 1980:31). Hence one ceases to use the world like a tool (1980:360) and attains a purposeful existence.

Yalom lists several strategies that humans employ to conceal the cruelty of the reality of their own mortality. Unfortunately, many of these coping mechanisms restrict growth, limit the ability to live spontaneously and creatively and ultimately result in a constricted and unsatisfying existence (1980:111). (Fugard's Johnnie is evidence of this.)

Such defence measures include the belief in a personal rescuer and dispenser of protection and meaning (Yalom 1980:113, 116) or, at the other extreme, the persuasion that one is special and inviolable (1980:141). Herman Witkin classifies people with rescuers as field-dependent (in Yalom 1980:141). Like *The Road to Mecca's* Helen Martin, these people are likely to have a low self-esteem and feel ineffectual and powerless. They distrust their own judgement, bury their potential and accept "'oughts" or "shoulds" as [their] own wishes' (Yalom 1980:354).

Field-dependent individuals often suffer from isolation *angst* (Yalom 1980:142). Yalom quotes Martin Buber and Erich Fromm on this subject. Buber contends that the human being's basic mode of existence is relational (in Yalom 1980:367) and Fromm takes isolation to be the 'primary source of anxiety' (in Yalom 1980:357). The fear of life (which Johnnie in *Hello and Goodbye*, experiences) is the fear of having to face it as an isolated being (1980:141) (as growth is a process of separation [Rank in Yalom 1980:361]). Thus, it is the apprehension of individuation, individuation entailing an insurmountable and eternal sense of standing out and of unprotectedness (Yalom 1980:361, 378).

Other shields against the dread of desolation and dissolution are merging with others or incorporating them. But real intimacy is not possible without two distinct

individuals. In such a unilateral relationship the other is transformed into an 'it' with the 'I', the subject, living off the 'It', the object. This alliance is functional and exploitative and entirely wanting in mutuality (Yalom 1980:363-4).

Buber's 'I-Thou' interpersonal affiliation, contrarily, is an effective way of allaying the pain of separation (Yalom 1980:370). The basic mode of the 'I-Thou' relationship is dialogue (1980:366). Because one has in mind the entire being of the other, one directs what one says to the other as the person s/he is, or, one engages in genuine conversation. The I-Thou relationship, thus, has an element of inclusion and mutuality to it (1980:366). The 'I' is influenced, shaped and altered in the reciprocal relationship with the 'Thou', and the 'Thou', simultaneously, becomes more alive (1980:365).

Yalom also refers to Abraham Maslow, the pioneer of the modern resurgence of humanistic psychology, who distinguishes - as Fugard also does - between love-need and needless love. The first form of love is infantile, passive and selfish. Characters (such as Blackie in *Nongogo*) who love in a 'deficiency-motivated' manner, attempt to attract attention and affection by pretending to be either good or helpless (Yalom 1980:369, 371). They look for the presence of others who are greater than they to 'swallow' or elevate them (1980:392). Their intention is to become the object of another's consciousness (1980:376). Eventually, this other senses that s/he is not loved but needed and grows weary of affirming the existence of the 'deficiency-motivated individuals' (1980:369).

Growth-motivated persons, conversely, are independent (Yalom 1980:369). Like *Hello and Goodbye's* Hester, they relate in an unneeding and selfless way and care about the total being of others, not only about those aspects that serve a purpose. Their objective is to make the others grow, and to this end they will give of themselves without expecting reward (1980:373).

Erich Fromm differentiates symbiotic union - a form of fallen love - from mature love (in Yalom 1980:370). Symbiotic love, usually consisting of an active (sadistic) and a passive (masochistic) form, is the exclusive attachment to one person (1980:372). In this state of fusion neither party is whole or free (Fromm in

Yalom 1980:370). The two protagonists in *The Blood Knot*, Morris and Zachariah, have a symbiotic relationship. Mature love, in contrast, is a brotherly union with all individuals, even with those who do not serve a purpose. In this relationship the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two (Yalom 1980:370) as the individuality of both is preserved.

On existential isolation, Yalom avers that the only and ultimate solution is to explore it and take it into oneself (1980:363, 398). Loneliness expands one's perceptiveness and sensitivity (Moustakas in Yalom 1980:398). Personal growth, thus, is catalysed by seclusion (Yalom 1980:400). If human beings acknowledge their discarded state in existence, they will be able to turn lovingly toward others; if they flee from it, they will be at cross purposes with others (1980:363).

The third aspect Yalom addresses is responsibility. He defines it as the capability for rational conduct and authorship which opens the door to change (1980:218). To be aware of authorship one has to realise that nothing in the world has significance except by virtue of one's own creation. Even the self originates from the choices we make; we will ourselves into being what we are (1980:230). This is every individual's constitutive function (1980:221).

Responsibility is linked to freedom (Yalom 1980:220). Those who welcome their freedom, for instance Hester Smit, are considered to have an internal locus of control.

Individuals with an external locus of control, for instance another person, cannot cope with situations of freedom and isolation in which decisions are to be made and action is to be taken. These persons often procrastinate (Yalom 1980:321) in an attempt to transfer choice to other individuals or institutions, or abdicate it altogether (1980:230). So Johnnie's father decides for him, and Elsa has to choose for Miss Helen.

According to Yalom (1980:318), a decision is difficult not only because one has to renounce other alternatives, but in that it exposes one to the anxiety of groundlessness and also endangers one's defences against death anxiety. By

confronting one with the limitation of possibilities, a decision challenges the fiction of specialness. And a choice, in so far as it compels one to recognise 'personal responsibility and existential isolation anxiety' - because it is a lonely act - jeopardises one's trust in an ultimate rescuer (1980:319).

Existential guilt may be a 'decision-blocking factor' in that the determination to change makes people realise how much they have wasted and wrecked their lives (Yalom 1980:320). The source of this guilt is often a transgression against one's potential self and destiny (1980:147, 285). It is the omission or failure to tap the possibilities within one and live the life allotted to one. It is self-condemnation for the repressed and unrealised possibility and potential, 'the unused and unlived life' (1980:320).

Rollo May postulates that existential regret is a 'positive constructive emotion' (quoted in Yalom 1980:278-9). Awareness of regret and self-reflection may allay despair, whereas to be ignorant of it is a deeper form of despair yet (Yalom 1980:278).

May also writes that responsible action begins with the wish (in Yalom 1980:302). Some individuals - like Zach in *The Blood Knot* - avoid authorship by not discriminating among wishes, but act impulsively on all wishes. Indiscriminate enactment of all wishes is a symptom of disordered will. Since 'to wish is to lunge into the future', not to do so betrays an inability or reluctance to project oneself and to convert one's life (1980:311-2).

Otto Rank, one of Freud's first students and his close associate until 1929, lists three types of will (in Yalom 1980:293). The first is counter will or the opposition to another's will; the second is positive will or willing what one must; and the third is creative will: willing what one wants (1980:294-5). In order to attain the third stage - willing to be oneself - the first two stages must be supported.

Yalom's fourth and final topic is meaning. He emphasises that humans need meaning, either cosmic or terrestrial (1980:423), because without it life has no values, no overall perceptual framework and no religious or moral foundation on

which to base actions (1980:442). This gives rise to dysphoria (1980:218). On the other hand, the conviction that life has significance and is therefore justified (Seidenspinner 1986:316) relieves the misgivings that come from existing in a contingent world with neither an external pattern nor a pre-ordained grand structure (Yalom 1980:221, 423). For this reason, moribund persons who have a 'purpose, firm ideals, and guidelines by which to steer their lives' can confront death with less despondency and live fuller lives (1980:442).

Viktor Frankl divides life meaning into three categories. The first is creative (what one accomplishes or offers to the world by way of one's creations), the second experiential (what one takes from the world in terms of encounters and experiences) and the third attitudinal (one's stance towards suffering and a fate that one cannot change) (in Yalom 1980:445). Activities that may give meaning to life are altruism, dedication to a cause, the creation of something new or beautiful, a hedonistic solution and, finally, self-actualisation or the realisation of one's existential potential (1980:435-41).

Abraham Maslow agrees that individuals will make an effort at self-actualisation - provided that their physiological requirements and the need for safety and security, belonging and love, identity and self-esteem are satisfied. Actualisation is a natural process and can take place 'without the aid of any social structure'. In fact, society often causes the abandonment of a 'unique personal development' (in Yalom 1980:438), as demonstrated by Fugard in *The Road to Mecca*.

In Frankl's opinion, those who do not realise themselves and are prey to existential meaninglessness, will often engage in compulsive and frenetic activity - which comes to the fore when the false centre of life either collapses or is at risk of collapsing (in Yalom 1980:452). These activities include crusadism (adventurousness, dedication to dramatic causes regardless of their content) and nihilism (the disparagement of endeavours which have value for others). Another sign of existential 'sickness' is vegetativeness, when one is incapable of perceiving the point of anything (1980:450-1). *Playland's* Gideon could serve as an example here.

Frankl also defines two stages of what he calls meaninglessness syndrome (in Yalom 1980:449). Existential frustration is typified by boredom and listlessness, lack of direction, apathy, emptiness, cynicism and questioning the point of one's activities. The characteristics of existential neurosis, again, are daredevilry, alcoholism, hyperinflation of sex, depression, obsessionalism and delinquency (1980:449-50). Queeny in *Nongogo* displays many of these symptoms.

When all meaning seems obscured by a given situation, Camus and Sartre believe that it is still possible to invent meaning, and then commit oneself to the fulfilment of that meaning (in Yalom 1980:431). Frankl proclaims that a life purpose can even be constructed by cherishing the vortex of despair and arriving, as Camus phrases it, 'at a posture of heroic nihilism' in facing one's lot (1980:427).

Whereas death, freedom and isolation must be grappled with directly, Yalom's view is that the more humans seek meaning, the more it will elude them (1980:482-3). Engagement, a 'leap into action and commitment' (1980:431), is his therapeutic antidote to purposelessness and also that of Hume, Camus, Tolstoy, Sartre (1980:481) - and Fugard. Meaningfulness is a 'by-product of engagement' and one should not meditate upon this matter (1980:482-3). The dissertation will investigate which of Fugard's characters seize the option to make that leap into action and commitment, and shape their future destinies, and which do not.