WORDS on PLAYS
INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

The Suit

Based on The Suit by Can Themba,
Mothobi Mutloatse, and Barney Simon
Direction, Adaptation, and Music by Peter Brook,
Marie-Hélène Estienne, and Franck Krawczyk

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# Table of Contents

1  Overview of *The Suit*

3  Drowning in the House of Truth  
The Tragedy of Can Themba  
*by Dan Rubin*

12  It’s the Simplest Thing  
Peter Brook and *The Suit*  
*by Dan Rubin*

18  Creating Something Real  
An Interview with *The Suit* Cocrator  
Marie-Hélène Estienne  
*by Michael Paller*

22  Find All the Truth You Can  
An Interview with *The Suit* Actor  
Nonhlanhla Kheswa  
*by Dan Rubin*

26  Remembering Sophiatown  
*by Shannon Stockwell*

33  Apartheid, South Africa  
*by Shannon Stockwell*

39  A *Suit* Glossary

44  Questions to Consider / For Further Information . . .

**COVER**  *The Suit*, by Pascal Victor

**OPPOSITE**  *Sophiatown Destroyed 1958*, by *Drum* photographer  
Jürgen Schadeberg (jurgenschadeberg.com). For a bio of  
Schadeberg, go to page 39.
Overview of *The Suit*

Can Themba’s short story “The Suit” was first published in the inaugural issue of the *Classic*, a South African literary journal, in 1963. Mothobi Mutloatse and Barney Simon adapted the story into a play by the same name, first presenting it in 1994 at Johannesburg’s Market Theatre. Marie-Hélène Estienne and Peter Brook presented their French translation/adaptation of the play, *Le costume*, at Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris in 1999; the production toured the world. They revisited the play, returning it to its original English and incorporating the music direction of Franck Krawczyk, and presented their new version of *The Suit* in Paris in April 2012. It began its international tour in May 2012.

**Characters and Cast of The Suit**

Maphikela .......................................................... Jordan Barbour
Philemon .......................................................... Ivanno Jeremiah
Matilda ............................................................. Nonhlanhla Kheswa

**Setting of The Suit**

Sophiatown, a township of Johannesburg, South Africa. The mid 1950s.

**Synopsis of The Suit**

The narrator, Maphikela, nostalgically recalls Sophiatown, a lost township of Johannesburg, South Africa. Sophiatown was an economically poor suburb, but it was rich in music and stories, often told first over drinks at illegal speakeasies, called *shebeens*. Maphikela remembers when Can Themba first told him the story of Philemon and Matilda, “The Suit”:

Philemon, a doting husband, prepares breakfast in bed for his beautiful wife, Matilda, before leaving for his job as a secretary. He does this every day, taking deep pleasure in serving his wife rather than the whites he is obliged to serve under apartheid. Every morning is much the same: he readies himself, cooks, and wakes Matilda, who refuses to let him wait around to clean up after her. She sings “I Feel Good,” and Philemon leaves to catch his bus.

*OPPOSITE* Nonhlanhla Kheswa in *The Suit*, by Johan Persson
This morning, Philemon meets up with his friend Maphikela (the same man who narrates the opening of the story) in town. Maphikela reluctantly informs Philemon that, for the last three months, Matilda has been visited by a man every morning after Philemon leaves for work. Devastated, Philemon takes the bus back to Sophiatown and finds Matilda in bed with her lover, who leaps out the window and runs down the street in his underwear—leaving his suit draped over a chair.

Philemon pushes the suit toward his wife and tells her that she must treat it with the same hospitality she would show a guest: it will share meals with them, it will share their bedroom, etc. If she refuses, he says that he will kill her. For the first time in his life, Philemon goes to a shebeen, where he stays all day, leaving Matilda alone with her thoughts and fears. She sings “Forbidden Games.”

When Philemon returns, he finds that Matilda has cleaned and spruced up their dingy home. She even wears a beautiful new dress and has prepared dinner. Unmoved, Philemon scolds his wife: where is their visitor? Matilda retrieves the suit and prepares a plate of food for it. This is how it should be from now on, Philemon tells her.

Time passes, and Matilda’s continued punishment wears on her. Desperate for an escape, she joins a cultural club organized by the local Anglican Mission. She finds catharsis among the other married women in the club and sings “Ntylio Ntylio” to them. She invites her new friends to come to her home the following Sunday. She spends the entire week preparing for the party. When her guests arrive, Matilda sings “Malaika” for them. During their applause, Philemon brings out the party’s guest of honor: the suit.

As her guests chitter about this odd behavior, Matilda begs her husband to put her punishment on hold, but he refuses. After she is properly embarrassed, Philemon goes with Maphikela to a shebeen. When he returns home, he is devastated to find Matilda curled up with the suit, dead.
Drowning in the House of Truth
The Tragedy of Can Themba

By Dan Rubin

“I’d like to get people to get at each other, to talk to each other.” Canodoise Daniel Themba’s eyes dance as he speaks, taking delight in throwing ideas up into the air. For him, intellectual discourse is a form of entertainment. “If I could get my worst enemy over a bottle of beer, maybe we could get at each other. It’s not a question of just talking to each other, it is a question of understanding each other, living in the same worlds.”

It is a typical 1950s night in the House of Truth, Themba’s room at 111 Ray Street, Sophiatown, Johannesburg, South Africa. At various states of inebriation, the host, his colleagues from Drum magazine, and other township friends sit joking, philosophizing, conversing, singing around a table of bottles at various levels of emptiness. Alcohol consumption is illegal for black South Africans under apartheid, and everyone in the small room is doing his part to combat the injustice.

Under the heavy cloud of smoke and rebellious jollity, Themba grows reticent. His tall, slender body slouches into his seat as he clings to the half-empty bottle in his hand. He smirks and he nods as conversations about art and religion and women continue to swim around him, but his eyes say he is far away. Like every other night (and day), he has attempted to drown his sharp, restless mind, but it surfaces mid scream: “. . . comes a time when a man feels that everything in his personal organization cannot go on as before for much longer.”

He takes another swig of beer. He smirks and nods and says something with a practiced and perfected irony, and as his retinue laughs at his witticism, he tries to maintain his mask, his attitude of shrugging indifference in the face of anything of weight. He has a reputation to uphold: the intelligent, cynical clown. But this is one of those cruel times when drink doesn’t blind him to the despair that comes with knowing that all of this, everything, is nonsense. No one and nothing black can be real under apartheid. Even in his Sophiatown . . .

Sophiatown. Sof’town. Kofifi. A functioning contradiction. Themba’s adopted township is a showcase of creativity’s triumph over oppression. Where else could an educated black existentialist feel at home?

Sophiatown is South Africa’s Harlem 30 years later: the center of a multicultural renaissance. Here, 200,000 black and coloured (mixed-race) Africans mingle with
immigrant populations from India and China. Europeans and white Afrikaners visit their non-European/non-Afrikaner friends without worry or even much fanfare; a few even live here. Doctors and librarians own property alongside street sweepers and tsotsi gangsters and shebeen queens, madam bootleggers who run the popular illicit speakeasies hidden around town. There is a classlessness, a social fluidity here that exists nowhere else in South Africa. So many different views, traditions, personalities coexisting and cross-pollinating in one place: the bohemia is a celebration of life, a symbol, a glorious, living defiance of a restrictive government that wants nothing short of total racial segregation.

On the other hand, Sophiatown is Shakespearean in its violence and Dickensian in its poverty. It is an overpopulated slum with substandard housing, few facilities for education and recreation, and little opportunity for advancement. Disillusioned residents turn to lives of crime. “Boys grow into young men and young men into grown men without much visible hope in the future for self and for race,” Themba worries. “There must be a better way for humans to live than this.”

But, then, there is a romance to the struggle, isn’t there? An extreme self-awareness is earned in the face of true danger. “You don’t just find your place here, you make it and you find yourself,” Themba comforts himself as he pops open a new bottle. “There’s a tang about it. You might now and then have to give way to others making their ways of life by methods which aren’t in the book, but you can’t be bored. What people have thought to be the brazenness of Sophiatown has really been its clean-faced frankness.”

Does he believe it? It sounds good—but he can make anything sound good.

Themba’s eyes sweep his room at the other frustrated young men: educated blacks living between the worlds of whites who don’t respect them and uneducated blacks who think they’re snobs. They aren’t dignified, but neither are they outlaws; they are smart, and yet not sophisticated; they are too politically inert to be considered liberal. “We’ve been detribalized and caught in the characterless world of belonging nowhere,” Themba ponders. He has no desire to return to the crumbled past, but those lost traditions of the tribe were something to which the mind could attach itself. Without them, he is living a crepuscular shadow-life, in search of an identity that isn’t defined by the black chief or the white government. It is exhausting. He just needs a little respite from the crushing responsibility of being what they think he should be.

Observing his friends, his followers, men who idolize him and try to emulate the devil-may-care attitude he wraps himself in, Themba mourns silently: “They all at one time or another had visions: to escape their environment; to oppose and overcome their context; to evade and outdistance their destiny by hard work and sacrifice, by education and native ability, by snatching from the table of occupation some of the chance crumbs of the high-chaired culture. What a treasury of talent. . . . Must they bury their lives with mine like this under a load of Sophiatown bottles?” Themba wants to warn them, just as in one of his short stories the nice-time-girl Marta begs the young drummer she adores, “Look here, kid, I want you to promise me one thing. Promise me that you will never drink.”
Themba knows he is already drowning. There is nothing to be done for him. He might be a master of English, but he isn’t the master of his own life.

When he joined Drum in 1953, Themba didn’t drink—or at least that is what he told Mr. Drum himself, the investigative journalist and assistant editor Henry Nxumalo. “The great, gallant, Henry Nxumalo,” Themba remembers fondly, content to let the party carry on around him as he slips into memory. “Henry Nxumalo, who fought bravely to bare cruelty, injustice, and narrow-mindedness. Who accepted the challenge of life and dedicated himself to fight against the wrongs of mankind.”

Nxumalo was delivering Themba a prize of £50 when they first met. In 1952, Themba entered Drum’s first short-story contest with “Mob Passion,” his interpretation of Romeo and Juliet in which the star-crossed lovers are from warring gangs in townships around Johannesburg. “They do not see! They do not see!” Themba’s Romeo, a man named Linga, tells his love, Mapula. “They butcher one another, and they seem to like it. Where there should be brotherhood and love, there are bitter animosities. Where there should be cooperation in common adversity, there are barriers of hostility, steeling a brother’s
heart against a brother’s misery. . . . Our true history is before us, for we yet have to build, to create, to achieve. Our very oppression is the flower of opportunity.” Hours later, Linga is murdered by a mob incited by Mapula’s uncles.

With “unusual literary promise,” according to Drum’s judges, the tale by the 28-year-old man calling himself D. Can Themba beat out 1,000 other submissions. It was his first professional success, but not his first work. When he was attending Fort Hare University College in the Eastern Cape on a Mendi Memorial Scholarship, his first short story had appeared in the Fort Harian. He graduated in 1947 with a bachelor’s degree in English with distinction—a legendary feat at that time—and then earned his teaching diploma at nearby Rhodes University. When Themba won the Drum competition, he was teaching English at Johannesburg’s Bantu High School in Western Native Township, just south of Sophiatown. He had decided not to return to his family home in Marabastad, Pretoria, about an hour’s drive north of Johannesburg.

The first impression he made on his students was not an imposing one. He stood at the front of his classroom, at once scrawny and puffy, dressed in baggy gray workman’s trousers, a khaki shirt without a tie, and shoes that needed repair. He could tell they were disappointed. Their principal had made him out to be some intellectual wonderboy. Then Themba opened his mouth, and they understood. He spoke English in a way they had never heard before—at once inviting and eloquent, articulate without being pompous—and his knowledge and love of literature was intimate and extensive. He gave them such writing prompts as “The poetry of the Earth is never silent.”

Prize money in hand, Nxumalo found the teacher/author reading on the stoop of his flat at the top of a noisy street in Sophiatown. Themba invited his guest into his tiny bedroom/sitting room, which he shared with a friend and countless books: collections of poetry and short stories and reference books. Nxumalo would soon learn that Themba’s jackets were always lopsided because of the books he carried in his pockets.

Themba told Nxumalo that when he wasn’t teaching, he spent his time reading and working on a degree in political philosophy. For relaxation, he wandered around Kofifi: “I walk up and down the streets of Sophiatown for hours, forming stories in the back of my mind. Then when I come to plan them—to write them down—they are in one piece ready to be written. But don’t think that I’m a believer in writing by inspiration only—no, it’s just plain hard work all the way.”

Writing was made harder work by the distractions of living in cramped quarters; half-typed sheets of paper were piled high at the foot of his bed. Peace rarely settled over his neighborhood until after midnight. “I must wait until they’re all asleep,” he explained to Nxumalo. “I don’t start writing until after twelve sometimes, and then my roommate snores. If I’m to get anything done, I must work on until three and often four in the morning. It’s the best time to work here. But it’s tiring on the eyes working by lamplight.”

This romantic image of the industrious writer toiling late into the night at a desk piled high with open books and a cigarette balanced on his ashtray was captured by Drum’s photographer. The photograph ran alongside the article about the winner of the
short-story competition. It is one of the few serious photos of Themba; from then on, most capture him playing the fool.

Upon winning *Drum’s* contest, Themba told the magazine, “I feel inspired to go on writing and writing until one day, perhaps I’ll be a really famous author.” *Drum’s* owner, Jim Bailey, hired him on the spot, because “he seemed such a likely chap.” Editor Anthony Sampson was intrigued by his new employee: “He combined a taste for Euripides and Blake with a restless life of intrigue and action in the streets and backyards of Sophiatown.”

Founded by the white liberal Robert Crisp as the *African Drum* in March 1951, the Cape Town–based monthly promoted itself as “A Magazine of Africa for Africa” that “recognizes the existence of more than 150,000,000 Bantu and Negro inhabitants of this continent whom we will attempt to reach for the first time in history with words that will express their thoughts, their impulses, their endeavors, and ultimately, their souls.”
Taken with the idea of the noble savage, Crisp focused on tribal history, tribal music, and farming. The *African Drum* did not sell well.

Although the magazine was Crisp’s brainchild, Bailey was the money behind the operation. When it became clear that Crisp’s ideas about what blacks wanted to read did not align with what blacks, specifically urban blacks, actually wanted to read, Bailey fired him. He also moved the publication to Johannesburg, renamed it *Drum*, introduced a black advisory board, and, most importantly, hired black writers.

In 1950s South Africa, black journalists were in short supply, so Bailey settled for employees who could write well—like Themba. They were young, most of them under 30, and inexperienced. They weren’t political analysts, but they were keen observers of life in the townships, and they became the first to show in print the black side of South Africa—specifically the hardships and indecencies blacks routinely suffered under apartheid. The magazine became popular; its writers became local heroes.

The *Drum* office was a madhouse. The reporters rarely found it necessary to go out in search of news: it came to them. When a bit of legwork was required, they traveled only as far as the nearest *shebeen*. The *Drum* boys, as they were known, lived by the credo from Willard Motley’s *Knock on Any Door*: “Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse.” Theirs was a drinking culture. It wasn’t uncommon for them to come to work intoxicated—if they showed up at all. This was part of the image they promoted in part to endear themselves to their target audience, working-class blacks, who suspected all educated blacks of elitism. Frequenting *shebeens* brought the journalists closer to the people. How could they write about the depths of urban African life if they had not descended there themselves? Themba was obliged to participate and indoctrinate new hires as they joined the magazine.

A knock at the door jostles Themba from his reverie. The room goes quiet as his guests quickly hide their bottles under the table and behind pillows. He lurches over to the door, peeks out, and admits two well-known politicians, one a shadow and the other a giant, from the African National Congress. The drinks return and the conversations resume.

“Can Themba, we’d like to talk to you,” the large one croaks.

The host motions them into seats in a quieter corner; they take them like senators and waste no time: “Look, the fight is on. We know you’re not a member, but this fight is for Africa. We want you all, nice-time boys,” looking at Themba accusingly, “*tsotsis*, teachers, businessmen, lawyers, doctors, all! The African National Congress is not a political party, it is the organization of every African, every African.”

“How do you know what I think?” Themba parries.

“Man, you’re black, are you not? You’re an African, are you not?” asks the shadow. “So long as you’re black we know what you suffer and what you think.”

“I see,” Themba evades. “What is it you want me to do?”
“We want your support, man,” scoffs the big one. “You’ve got some young men about you, and you can make them do things, do things that we don’t think are in the national interest. Will you be with us?”

“Sure,” Themba nods. “Sure.” He gives them the thumbs-up.

As the men leave, he hears the large one mutter, “He’s drunk, that’s all.”

It is true. He is drunk, but that’s not all. He isn’t the political dunce he pretends to be. They just don’t understand what he’s doing. It isn’t necessary to write politically confrontational copy to protest apartheid. Dramatizing the struggle of the day-to-day lives of the township dwellers as they cope with a restrictive society—written in language the masses understand about situations they recognize—is part of the fight.

That was Themba’s way. That was Drum’s way. Its editors never pretended the magazine to be anything other than a popular magazine for the black reader. They ran articles on jazz, film, crime, sports, and beauty contests and short fictional stories about love, passion, sex, and gangsters. But while glamour girls graced the covers, inside one could find hard-hitting investigations into abuses perpetrated by local farms and the police and articles covering the growing political unrest with a sympathy not found in the white press. Furthermore, Themba’s short stories exposed the symptoms of a broken system—disillusionment, poverty, desperation, crime, immorality, fear—and if they were critical of blacks it was only to ask what he had been asking since “Mob Story”: “Where is the cooperation in common adversity?”

Moreover, just going to work every day was part of the fight. How many of his white counterparts believed there was no such thing as a black journalist? Some white reporters from the liberal Rand Daily Mail, which shared a corridor with Drum, were excited to meet “intelligent natives,” but they had their own ideas about what that should mean. Members of the Afrikaans press came by simply to gawk at the anomaly. Once, one man just stood there, aghast, repeating over and over: “Truly, truly, those baboons are typing, to think of those baboons sitting there and typing.”

Maybe the Drum boys weren’t politicians, but they were doing their part. Politicians have too much certainty about their solutions. It was one thing to observe a problem and write about it; it was another to know how to solve it.

Themba stares at the closed door. Given the objective complexities of the situation, he could never be a politico. Jean understands this. Jean understands him. Jean Hart, the married white woman from working-class Whitechapel, London, who can sing “Ngibamba Ngedwa Laph Egoli” like she’d been born in Sof’town. Jean Hart, with whom Themba is in love. She isn’t a tourist, interested in the anthropological knowledge of how the other South Africans live. She just wants to be with him.

Jean Hart, the beautiful wife of Malcolm Hart, arrived in 1957 and met Themba at the party organized to welcome her to Sophiatown. His first words to her had been a bit heavy: “Before we begin, just remember there are twelve million of us and three million of you, and if we kill one of you and die ourselves there are still enough of us to carry on. That’s how you must remember your position in South Africa.” But she wasn’t scared off;
on the contrary, she fell in love with him. She thought he was the most open, loving, and amiable man, the most tolerant, gentle, and human person. They soon struck up an affair.

Yet, he could never stop reminding her—just as he could never stop reminding himself—that as much fun as they were having, they must never forget that the racial politics of South Africa tortured mixed-race relationships. The environment of apartheid would distort love and friendship, as neither could exist on a foundation of inequity. Theirs was a world in which blacks and whites could party together, but, before leaving for home, the blacks must ask the whites to write them notes saying they had stayed late at work. Theirs was a world in which Henry Nxumalo’s wife and colleagues weren’t allowed to identify his slain body, stabbed 22 times in the street, because they were black; the police called Drum’s white editor to come down. This understanding was a constant pain for Themba, a wound he could not stop picking at.

“You and I can never be real lovers,” he told her as they lay together. “You and I can never be real friends, because our power base is unequal.” She watched him drown this clarity of vision time and time again. He drank to stop hurting. And he drank most of the time. Jean understands him. He wants to talk to Jean. Where is she?

Themba looks up from his crowded table around the empty, dirty room.

With dread he realizes this isn’t the House of Truth. This isn’t even Sophiatown. It’s 1967: Sophiatown was bulldozed a decade ago. The government razed it, rebuilt it, resettled it with people they preferred, and appropriately renamed it Triomf. The shebeens were torn down: Little Heaven, The Sanctuary, The Thirty-Nine Steps, and his favorite haunt, Back o’ the Moon, were gone. The old occupants, his neighbors, his friends, were scattered to camp-like ghettos farther out of town. The music had been silenced.

It is 1967 and Themba is 250 miles from home in Mzimpofu, just outside Manzini, Swaziland. Nxumalo died in December 1956. “He must have fought madly with his heart when he thought of his unfinished work,” Themba had imagined at the time, and he promised his friend’s ghost, “We shall take over where you left off.” And he had tried, hadn’t he? He became Mr. Drum. He became assistant editor. He tried to keep Drum relevant even as it began repeating the same stories, even as the black-run tabloid Golden City Post siphoned readers and writers, even as Bailey abolished the fiction section.

Then they took Jean away. The government’s Special Branch went after her for loving him, and she and her husband snuck out of the country and hitchhiked back to England. It was too much. Themba snapped. His drinking became phenomenal and he became impossible to work with. In 1959, he was fired. In 1963, he went into exile. Staying and fighting was for politicians. He left his wife, Anne (yes, he had married), and his daughters, Yvonne and Morongwa. Themba began teaching again. Father Angelo Ciccone, a Catholic priest from Naples, Italy, gave him a post teaching English at St. Joseph’s Missionary School in Mzimpofu. Often Ciccone had to hide his friend from the South African police who pursued him.
Since then, Themba has spent his life in his classroom, the library, church, and his room. Alone. Around the time of Themba’s departure, Drum writer Nat Nakasa published his short story “The Suit” as the headliner of the inaugural issue of the literary journal the Classic. It was one of the last things Themba wrote. In 1966 he was declared a statutory communist under South Africa’s 1965 Suppression of Communism Amendment Act. His writing was banned in his homeland; the only people who could really understand it weren’t allowed to read it.

“Death is lonely even if your dear ones are there to hold a tender hand on your forehead,” he had written in his remembrance of Henry. “Death is desolate if you meet it far away from home on the roadside.”

What would Sophiatown’s cult hero leave the world? A few short stories of real quality—sensationalist and melodramatic at times, but honest, too. A handful of articles about the realities of survival in a marginalized society. A few poems and lost love letters that he wrote on behalf of isotisis for their girls. No novels. No histories of his beloved home. No autobiographies. He was never able to manage more than a few pages at a time. He lacked the stamina.

Henry is gone. Jean is gone. Sophiatown is gone. Apartheid remains. The truth remains. Maybe one more drink is all it will take. One more to forever blind him to everything. One more for his heart to simply stop toiling. “What can I do?” he asks no one. “I’m almost to the bottom of the bottle . . . ”

Can Themba died in 1967 of alcohol-induced thrombosis. He was the first non-priest buried in the cemetery at St. Joseph’s in Swaziland. His work was published posthumously in the collections The Will to Die (1972) and The World of Can Themba (1985). The ban on his work was not lifted until 1982. In 1994, Mothobi Mutloatse and Barney Simon adapted “The Suit” into a play, which premiered at Johannesburg’s Market Theatre. This marked the beginning of the revival of the cult of Can Themba. In 2006, the author was awarded the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver for “excellent achievement in literature, contributing to the field of journalism and striving for a just and democratic society in South Africa.” In June 2013, the first Can Themba Memorial Lecture was held at the State Theatre in Gauteng Province, South Africa.

Sources
It’s the Simplest Thing
Peter Brook and The Suit

By Dan Rubin

Over the years, working with people from every part of the world, we saw that in the limited scope of a theater event, one can go past the barriers of color, creed, religion, culture, background—one can go beyond that and an audience can share that. We have never been involved in theories about what politically should be changed in the world because that isn’t our business. What is our business is the life concerned directly with it.

—Peter Brook, 2013

Peter Brook did not love theater in the beginning. In fact, when he was still a student at Magdalen College, Oxford University, and directed Doctor Faustus in 1942 at the Torch Theatre (a tiny fringe stage near Hyde Park Corner in London), the field seemed to him to be a “dreary and dying predecessor” of film. That was the genre he had really set his sights on. Rather than join the University Dramatic Society, Brook revived the film society, and in 1943 he directed the amateur film A Sentimental Journey on a shoestring budget. Upon graduating, the brash 20-year-old assumed he was ready to begin making professional movies, so he went to see “a big producer man” and told him, “I want to direct films.” He was told, “You can come and work here if you like. I’ll give you a job as an assistant. If you take it you can learn the trade, and at the end of seven years I promise to give you your own film to direct.”

Seven years was too long to wait, so Brook settled for directing a production of Jean Cocteau’s The Infernal Machine in a tiny London venue called Chanticleer Theatre. He prepared for the first day of rehearsal as if it were the first day of a film shoot, coming in with a precise outline of how everything should go. It became clear very quickly that film and theater were two entirely different animals. After a morning of butting heads with his cast members, who were resisting his heavy-handed direction, Brook was pulled aside during the lunch break by the woman who ran the Chanticleer. She explained to him, “That’s not the way to work with the actors.” It was a revelation.

Even so, for the next decade and a half, Brook approached theater primarily from an external, sensory perspective. “I wanted to create a world of sounds and images,” he
remembers. Getting consistent work in London, Birmingham, and Stratford, alternating between high-brow classics and opera and low comedy and musicals, he was not overly concerned with his actors; he was fascinated by the design process, and he liked to play with set models. In 1945, he joined the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. In 1961, he became one of a triumvirate of directors (alongside Peter Hall and John Barton) at Stratford’s Royal Shakespeare Company, where he began working on *King Lear* the following season.

During *King Lear*, he had an epiphany. Just before rehearsals began, he threw out his set—an interesting and complicated design with moving bridges he was quite fond of. He tossed it because he realized that the “wonderful toy was absolutely useless.” He remembers, “This was a very important moment for me. . . Suddenly, something clicked. I began to see why theater is an event. Why it did not depend on an image or a particular context—the event, for instance, was the fact of an actor simply crossing the stage.”

Following this discovery, Brook set out to understand what the theater event was really about. He spearheaded a season of experimentation at the theater at London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art in 1965. “Perhaps the most significant exercise we performed in public was having someone just do nothing, nothing at all,” Brook recalled in 1987. “From that moment on . . . I became increasingly interested in whatever is a direct element in performance. When you set off on that path, everything else falls away. I now realize I haven’t touched a spotlight for at least ten years, whereas before I was forever climbing up and down ladders to adjust them, etc. These days I simply say to the
lighting technician: ‘Very bright!’ I want everything to be seen, everything to stand out clearly, without the slightest shadow.”

Brook gradually became aware that the richest of all the tools at the disposal of a theater director is the human being. From there, it was a short jump to the understanding that has since become the core of his artistry: “Theater must be simple.” He emphasizes that this is not a stylistic rule, but a pragmatic one. In early rehearsals, he believes in throwing “all the junk possible into the pot,” and then filtering it out: “In getting rid of something, you’re not looking for simplicity. You’re not looking for the essentials; they don’t let you go. They just come up by themselves because you’ve left space, and that’s how The Empty Space arose. You don’t start by saying, ‘I want an empty space.’ Then you’d be puritanical, and that sort of simplicity is austere and frightening. No, you just see: ‘Oh yes, it’s better without that. Better without that.’ And you see that something better takes its place. That’s the only reason for making space, because in it what remains is better. It’s the simplest thing.”

In 1968, Brook published his theories about theater in The Empty Space, which became a handbook for practitioners worldwide. Even he has been surprised by the book’s reach. He recalls an episode with a South African director who was a key player in creating the black theater movement in the townships:

[He] said to me, “We have all read The Empty Space, it has helped us a lot.” I was pleased but very surprised, as most of the book was written before our experiences in Africa and had constant reference to the theaters of London, of Paris, New York . . . What could they have found of use in its text? How could they feel that the book was also for them? How could it link with the task of bringing theater into the conditions of life in Soweto? I asked this question and he answered, “The first sentence!”

The South African director is referencing, “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all I need for an act of theater to be engaged.” Brook continues his story:

They had been convinced that doing theater under their conditions was an unavoidable disaster because in the townships of South Africa there isn’t a single “theater building.” They had the feeling they could not get very far if they didn’t possess thousand-seat theaters, with curtains and flies, lights and colored projectors, like in Paris, London, and New York. Then suddenly along came a book the first sentence of which affirmed that they had all they needed for doing theater.

To continue investigating the potential of theater, in 1971 Brook founded the International Centre for Theatre Research (ICTR) with Micheline Rozan in Paris and began working with a cadre of multinational artists there and abroad. “Through the Centre we had the experience of playing very naïve little improvisations in the heart of Africa: that was an experience of life that marked all of us, myself and everyone else, as strongly as when we did The Mahabharata [Brook’s epic adaptation of a Vedic text that
took ten years to rehearse and nine hours to perform. To play that meant working on an extraordinarily rich, meaningful text, which touches on all sorts of aspects of social, political, and inner life, and at the same time meant going out of theaters into life, and going to India. A good work brings you new meetings with new people.”

After three years of traveling the world, Rozan announced to Brook, “There is a theater behind the Gare du Nord that everyone’s forgotten about. I’ve heard that it’s still there. Let’s go and look!” They went there immediately and found a former music hall and variety theater, “wrecked, charred, streaked by rain, pock-marked, yet noble, human, glowing-red, and breathtaking—Les Bouffes du Nord.” It had the proportions and high curves of a mosque—enviable acoustics and flawless sightlines—and they decided to move in. They made two decisions on the spot: “One was to keep the theater exactly as it was, not to erase a single trace of the hundred years of life that had passed through it; and the other was to bring new life back into it as quickly as possible. We were advised that it would be impossible. . . . Six months later, we opened with *Timon of Athens*.”

For the last 40 years, Les Bouffes du Nord has been a center of multicultural collaboration. In 1995, Brook celebrated the turn of the twenty-first century as a moment when new points of cross-border contact allowed for a greater understanding of the human condition: “Today, the world offers us new possibilities. This great human vocabulary can be fed by elements that in the past have never come together. Each race, each culture can bring its own word to a phrase which unites mankind. Nothing is more vital to the theater culture of the world than the working together of artists from different races and backgrounds.” Since the 1960s, Brook has secured his reputation as one of the world’s leading theater innovators, and he has continued to inspire new generations of artists with his productions and publications.
The Suit

Brook first learned about Can Themba’s “The Suit” when he read a newspaper article about Mothobi Mutloatse and Barney Simon’s adaptation of it at Johannesburg’s Market Theatre, which Simon founded in 1976. When Brook first visited South Africa years earlier, he made a strong connection with Simon, whom he calls “courageous and imaginative.” “His theater in Johannesburg, for complicated and idiotic reasons, had to be in a market because it was one of the few places the races could mix under apartheid,” explains Brook. “He brilliantly thought, if I start a theater in the middle of a market, they can’t stop us from using black and white actors, in front of (mixed) audiences.” He asked Simon to send him the script for The Suit, which he shared with longtime collaborator Marie-Hélène Estienne. “Ah! Yes, this is remarkable,” he remembers her saying. “But it’s only like a first draft. We could do it in our theater in Paris, so we’ll do it in French.”

Brook agreed: “[‘The Suit’] was an essential human story that needed to be told and we knew at once we had to do our own adaptation and staging.” In the French translation, some scenes developed and some were eliminated. Brook and Estienne put Le costume, as they called the piece, in front of a Parisian audience in December 1999 as part of Les Bouffes du Nord’s season of South African plays, after which it quickly started touring the world.

Using minimalist and sophisticated staging, mime, and music, Le costume was “tres Brook,” according to local papers, and with its “radiant charm, exquisite humor, and gently tragic undertow,” the play was a hit. The creators of the show, however, were not satisfied; they realized the piece wanted to be done in its original English. “[The French version] wasn’t mature,” remembers Brook. “It wasn’t ready. Like with many projects, we waited for the right moment to return to it.” In 2012, they remounted Le costume as The Suit.

When revisiting the tale a decade after first exploring it, the creators realized that their audience was 20-years removed from the realities and knowledge of South African apartheid. “One of the biggest developments since Le costume,” explains Brook, “was that in those days, all theaters were riddled with angry, agitprop, politically aware plays. The background of apartheid didn’t need underlining. It was in the air. So we concentrated on the essential human story. In doing it again, now we found we can develop the presence, not only of apartheid, but because of all that is going on at this very moment all over the world, the presence of all the ruthless, cruel dictatorships and regimes all over the world.”

While it still does not need emphasizing, the original context of 1950s South Africa is essential to understanding the weight of Themba’s tale; without it, Brook explains, “we couldn’t tell this story and make it even remotely real.” While the tropes of betrayal and revenge are as old as the art of storytelling, he thinks Themba added a new twist: “showing how political oppression can impact one’s personal relationships.” He continues,

The situation in The Suit couldn’t have arisen without that endless pressure, hour after hour, minute after minute, of people living in those brutal situations. . . . We don’t have to underline this by making an overtly political play, because
it’s there. I think that one can feel from the start that this is not taking place in Never Never Land; it is taking place in a township under apartheid regime.

Brook wants the racially defined environment to permeate the painful story of a loving couple destroyed by an adulterous affair, but he doesn’t want it to take over. “The easy thing is to get stuck in anger, outrage, protest, and despair. Now, to show a human situation in which all of that is there, and yet all of you together feel that in human life there is something more: that’s the aim.”

At age 89, Peter Brook is still hard at work. He is currently staging The Valley of Astonishment, which will premiere this spring at Les Bouffes du Nord. It is the first of a trilogy of plays about “the neurology of the brain, and how it affects human behavior.” He says of his enduring vitality, “What invigorates us all is the same thing. It is life, the flow of life. We are all instruments of it. I have only one theme in relation to life, and it is gratitude. I can take no credit, but can only be grateful for what’s come my way.”

Creating Something Real
An Interview with The Suit Cocreator Marie-Hélène Estienne

By Michael Paller

Marie-Hélène Estienne began her career as an art critic for the Paris weekly Le nouvel observateur in the early ’70s. “Somehow I met Peter,” she says, “and became interested in theater and began writing about it. After two years, I got bored. I wrote Peter at his theater, the Bouffes du Nord, and said, ‘I can’t go on without understanding how theater’s made. I want to understand the process. I’d like to come and work with you.’ So he said yes. My first job was a press agent, which was funny because I knew the press very well. I was good at it, but became bored with that, too.”

As a young woman, Estienne wanted to be an actress before becoming a writer, and she found that now she somehow wanted to combine the two. “I was lucky because around that time Peter’s assistant left.” In 1976 she took over the job. “I was 26 or 27. Since then it’s been really a joy.”

The first piece she collaborated with him on was The Conference of the Birds in 1979. In 1982, she went to India, where she researched The Mahabharata. She saw it performed in many ways and many versions, from a single man performing by himself for several hours, to more elaborate versions featuring dancers and masked performers. She arranged for Brook and the playwright Jean-Claude Carrière, who wrote an adaptation of the Indian epic, to see them, as well. She’s also traveled with Brook to Africa and Japan. She began writing and adapting texts for him beginning with The Man Who in 1993, and since then she has adapted, written, cowritten, or codirected several pieces with Brook, including The Tragedy of Hamlet, Tierno Bokar, Fragments, Eleven and Twelve, Warum Warum, and The Valley of Astonishment, which opened at the Bouffes du Nord in April 2014. Brook credits her with having done 90 percent of the work on the script of The Suit.

Peter Brook has taken many trips to Africa; the first was in 1972. What he and his actors learned there has had reverberations beyond the work they did subsequently that had specifically African subjects, such as The Ik. The Cherry Orchard, for example, was staged largely on a carpet, similar to the one the company had performed on in African villages. Did those trips around northern and western Africa have any effect on the way you tell the story of The Suit?

No, The Suit is something totally different.
How did it come about?

I will start from the beginning. One day, it must have been the mid ’70s, Peter came back from London and said that he saw the most beautiful play in his life. It was The Island [Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona’s piece about two black South African political prisoners]. He said, “These actors, the way they do theater, I’ve never seen anything like it in my life.” I was very impressed! A few years later, we heard about Woza Albert! [by Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema, and Barney Simon, in which Christ comes to South Africa during apartheid], and he saw that in London, too. A few years after that, we were in New York and someone told us there was a play in Harlem called Asinamali [also about black South African prisoners and written by Ngema].

After this, Peter decided to do a South African festival at Bouffes du Nord, so we went to South Africa. This is a theater that belongs to the townships. It’s not from the African tradition [of the sort that Brook and his partners experienced in such countries as Benin, Nigeria, and Mali]; it’s an urban theater. We went to South Africa and we met Mbongeni, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona, and that began a very strong relationship.

John was one of the leading actors at the Market Theatre [in Johannesburg], and he was the one who thought of doing The Suit (which, as a story, had been banned for years) as a piece of theater. He asked Mothobi Mutloatse and Barney Simon [cohead of the Market Theatre] to write it in the early ’90s. Peter read about it in the newspaper and said we must do it. So we got the rights and did it in French first, in 1999.
And you wrote that translation?
Yes, I had to do an adaptation, really, because the English version they did in South Africa was difficult to translate, with a lot of references to South Africa that would confuse a French audience. So I made a simpler version [called Le costume], which we played with a lot of success and very good reviews for three or four years. Then we wanted to do it in English in Chicago but it didn’t happen—luckily, actually, because while we didn’t understand why exactly, it was too soon after doing the French version.

[In 2010] we made a short piano version of The Magic Flute, with a musician named Franck Krawczyk. We had a wonderful time with him; it was really a wonderful collaboration. And we decided then that we should do The Suit again [with Krawczyk as music director] with music from South Africa and classical music. That’s where this version started.

Why did you add music?
In the first version we used taped [South African] music. It was an interesting emotional experiment. Then we saw that you could put this story with Schubert. His “Ständchen” fits it so well. Also, I’d been to Chile with Franck Krawczyk, where we listened to the music of Violeta Parra and Víctor Jara, famous singers before Pinochet. Their music is so concerned with poverty and the struggle of people to survive, and we wanted to take The Suit to many poor countries, so we thought it could be really interesting to mix that with Schubert. So that’s what we did. It’s Schubert and South African and Chilean music. When you suddenly open the story to Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden,” you say something that you can’t say with words. The music is carrying it in a language that we hear with our hearts.

Beyond words.
And that’s, I think, important.

When you decided to do The Suit in English, did you go back to the original English or did you adapt it from the French?
I went back to Can Themba, of course, but it’s partly a new text. To be clear, again, we wanted The Suit to be adaptable to any country we took it to.

Could you describe what you do as Brook’s codirector, at least on The Suit?
I can just say that when Peter is not there, I do it. [Laughter] You can write that; it’s true.
What was the process of creating the piece? Here in the United States, for the most part, you begin with a script and you go into the rehearsal room and the actors have learned their lines or are about to.

We never work like that. I can never explain the process. I just can say that we need a group of people who trust each other, who can work every day. We are not scared to change the text; we change the text all the time for the first two or three weeks, and I think we go on a journey together.

**Does the process include a lot of improvisation?**

Sometimes, yes, that’s often a need, but it’s not only improvisations, of course. I think it’s more a matter of trusting each other to a point where simplicity, real simplicity, the opening up of the person, of the actor and the musician, can appear. It’s an ensemble. It’s like an orchestra. The best example would be a quartet: it’s exactly like that. If they don’t play together, they can’t be a quartet.

**And in a quartet there is a constant process of listening and reacting.**

Yes, but it’s also about being free, not forced. I mean it’s opening, opening, opening, so that little by little, something comes out.

You certainly need a great deal of trust among actors and a director for anything that’s real and simple and honest to appear. That’s how I felt about *The Mahabharata* and also *The Cherry Orchard*, which I saw in 1988, and then a little later *The Man Who* in 1993.

That was the first time I wrote with Peter.

I’ve never seen actors so relaxed and with such powers of concentration as I saw in those three productions.

And freedom. Actors can open themselves and relax. For a moment they are totally free because they have worked so much and with such understanding and feeling. There is a moment when we look at a play and we forget about ourselves, because the actor brings us and everything up to a point where we forget ourselves.

And then we’re in the presence of something real. It’s hard to define what “the truth” is, and what “real” is, but you recognize them when you see them.

Exactly. And they put you into a silence: the good silence that is life. [These are] the great moments in the theater—you cannot always reach them, but if you can reach them for even ten minutes, that’s not bad.
Find All the Truth You Can
An Interview with The Suit Actor Nonhlanhla Kheswa

By Dan Rubin

South African actor/singer Nonhlanhla Kheswa never trained formally as an actor. In 1998, she was recruited before finishing high school in the Johannesburg township of Soweto—at Morris Isaacson High School, where, two decades earlier, Teboho Mashinini sparked the Soweto Uprising—for a role in Darrell Roodt’s film Soul City. On the heels of that, she joined the cast of Disney’s The Lion King on Broadway; she stayed with the show for five years. New York was a playground for Kheswa’s explorations of vocal performance. She became a regular member of hip-hop artist Wyclef Jean’s ensembles, while entrenching herself in the city’s jazz scene and Brooklyn’s eclectic youth-music culture. She started her own group, Kheswa & Her Martians, which is “steeped in the hard-bop accents of Jackie McLean and Gary Bartz, the spirituality of John Coltrane and McCoy Tyner, and, naturally, the diverse strands of the South African jazz subculture.” They released their debut album, Meadowlands, Stolen Jazz, in 2013.

In 2011, Kheswa auditioned for The Suit and was cast in the role of Matilda—a woman who dreams of becoming a professional singer, if she could only get out from under the oppression of apartheid. Since then, Kheswa has traveled the world with the show: to Paris, London, Madrid, Milan, Naples, Shanghai, Beijing, and New York, just to name a few places. We spoke with her just before she finished her three-week run at Seattle Repertory Theatre in April 2014.

You’ve been all over the world with The Suit, and it looks like you usually only stay in one place for a few days. Already this year, you’ve spent three days in Michigan, a week in Philadelphia, three days in Washington, D.C., and a few weeks in Seattle.

The longest we’ve stayed in one place was in Paris, due to the rehearsals in the beginning of The Suit. We were in Paris for three months. Then we stayed in London for one month. Some places in Italy, like Napoli, we stayed for three weeks or so.

Is it different staying in one place for a while? Do you get into a different groove?
Yeah, I look forward to it. I don’t look for what the view of the city is or anything like that. I look for the groove in the people. I like meeting new people. I like getting to know their
lives. I like comparing their heartbeat to those in the city that I just left and making sense of it.

I was once asked in London if I had a room filled with anything, what would it be filled with? And I said, “People.” People are great! Imagine if you were just one human being, wandering the world by yourself. We have people in this world: we have people to be audiences, people to be friends. I’m not trying to sound like such a hippie, but people are great.

It’s interesting to hear you say that, because I saw a video with Can Themba from the 1950s, and he says almost the exact opposite: “Human nature stinks. It’s hopeless. To hell with it all. I want to be left alone.”

It was during apartheid that this happened, though; it was during the struggle. I’m sure he loved people. With a mind like that, he must have loved people. He wrote about them. He needed people to make stories.

You spend every day with this very hard story, so it’s lovely to hear that you come out of it loving people.

My god! Imagine all that’s happening in this world. It’s like one bad thing after the other. But through it all, we don’t have to lose hope. We just have to be grateful and thankful and live on and encourage each other.

Have you had a favorite city that you’ve traveled to with The Suit?

Yes, I loved Tbilisi, Georgia, because again: the heartbeat. The people there have suffered a war recently. I come from South Africa, where there was apartheid. I’ve experienced all that shooting. When I went to Tbilisi, it reminded me so much of Alexandra, the township I grew up in, because it’s a developing country. The people’s spirits are so lively. They are just thankful that they are alive. They are thankful they’re able to breathe. And they have such an immense love for theater and art, so I felt like I was at home.

Have you performed The Suit in South Africa?

No, everybody keeps asking! It’s funny, because South Africans would not understand the way that Peter Brook works, and they would have a problem with The Suit having
an international cast. They would say, “Why don’t you cast South Africans to tell the story of our people?” But, no: This story can be told by anybody from anywhere. It’s an international story, because people, like the people in Georgia, can relate to the struggle.

How has it been for you to spend three years with this show?

It’s been great, because I have had the opportunity to work with one of the great directors out there. I have a very short attention span, but when Peter directs, he’s not like other directors, who tell you, “Okay, go there, do this, do that.” No, he talks to you, he doesn’t talk at you, and he doesn’t want you to go onstage and act or demonstrate everything. He wants you to talk to people. He wants you to forget about acting and tell a story—as best you can, find genuineness in it, find all the truth you can in what you’re saying, and then people will understand. I didn’t study acting, but I’ve been blessed to work professionally as an actor. I consider The Suit to be part of my journey: learning from Peter himself. While young adults read The Empty Space, I get lessons one-on-one from him. I’m really thankful.

What is it like working with Marie-Hélène Estienne?

She’s such a joy, and a wonder to work with. Sometimes in rehearsals, she will stop everything just to move a chair because it’s not right aesthetically, and you will think, “Oh my god, this woman is OCD!” But no, she knows exactly what needs to happen in order for you to tell your story right, according to what the audience sees. She’s amazing like that. And she tells it like it is. She expects that everyone is intelligent, which is a really healthy way to be. If they see the world the way that it is, she believes they’re intelligent. You always want to do right by Marie-Hélène. It’s funny how you work with somebody so closely: I feel like she’s like my second mother.

Has the show changed over the years?

Oh, it’s different every night of the week! We look for newness in it so we don’t get bored. We approach each and every line differently. You cannot just think one thing. Sometimes we discover that we’re overzealous about something and need to tone it down, or maybe we just need a little dollop of something to brighten something up.

The press release for your CD, Kheswa & Her Martians’s Meadowlands, Stolen Jazz, talks about how jazz has been a really important part of South African history, and specifically the area in which you grew up. Did you grow up singing jazz or is that something that you picked up after you moved to New York?

It’s something that people decided I sounded like! [Laughter] I guess I just loved singing ever since I was growing up, and everything I could sing along to, I would sing along to. As I was growing up, my taste changed. I was so into American music that I could belt out any Celine Dion tune; I could belt out Whitney Houston, and I love Aretha
Franklin. I love all these really great divas. I would sing in church, obviously, and school. I was one of those kids who weren’t shy to embarrass themselves. I still am that guy.

It is fascinating how different jazz is from pop, hip-hop, from everything. It’s classic: people dress up when they go to see live jazz. It’s classy. So I love jazz.

Do you have a favorite song in The Suit?

I love all the songs, but I do love “Malaika,” because I’m a softy and a lover. It talks about a man who wanted to marry someone, and he didn’t have enough money, but he still has hope that one day he’ll marry her. She goes on to somebody else, but he became rich and famous because he wrote that song. She didn’t even know the song was about her.

Can you tell me about who Matilda is? In Can Themba’s short story, she doesn’t have much of a presence. It’s much more about Philomen. When The Suit became a play, it was more about her. I’m curious about your understanding of the character.

Matilda is bored. She’s an oppressed woman. Not that it’s mentioned in the story, but she wants to be a singer. She wants to do things, but Philemon wakes up at 5:30 in the morning and prepares breakfast for her so that she can stay in the house. She wants to be a singer, but he says, “No, no, you don’t need to be out there embarrassing yourself!” He wants her to stay home and be beautiful. “I’ll do everything for you.”

She needs, you need, human contact; remember, we spoke about this earlier. Just being alone all day long and seeing the same things, you’re going to get bored at some point. And so, she cheats. I’m not promoting cheating, but she cheats. She thinks nothing’s wrong with cheating, as long as Philemon doesn’t know. What he doesn’t see won’t hurt him, is what she’s thinking. Then she gets caught.

Philemon creates this punishment: it’s just so crazy! She probably would have expected him to hit her, but he doesn’t. He prolongs the punishment forever and ever, gets her to walk the suit, feed the suit, all these embarrassing things, but he doesn’t tell people outside of their home what’s happening. They see this happening, but they don’t know. She knows, and it kills her inside. Kills her deeply.

She’s really a caged bird, this pet that he keeps; he has no idea that she’s her own person. Definitely. She knows that there’s something more inside of her. She loves Philemon as much as Philemon loves her. And I don’t think Philemon thinks there’s something wrong with the way that he’s treating her, because he hasn’t hit her: “Other men would hit you. I didn’t hit you. I’m making you do something simple. It’s a very simple task I’m asking you to do. . . .”

They’re both living during apartheid. The reason Philomen does what he does, the punishment he chooses, is because he doesn’t want to lose her. He loves her, first of all. He never doesn’t love her. But you have to realize that whatever it is that you love, you can also kill by overloving.
Remembering Sophiatown

By Shannon Stockwell

The whole cycle of living made a continuous and simultaneous assault on your senses. . . . Men shouted in the street, a procession of some sort, perhaps a school or funeral parade, children quarreling, a baby crying, a woman singing at a washtub, the rusty bray and slam of the communal lavatory in the yard as people trooped in and out. . . . There were summer nights . . . when no one seemed to go to bed. . . . Urchins gambled under the street-lights. . . . There was singing and strolling; now and then one of the big American cars that the gangsters use would tear scrunching over the stones, down the street, setting long tongues of dust uncurling. . . . There was giggling and flirting. . . . On such a night, suddenly, a procession would burst round the corner, swaying, rocking, moving by a musical peristalsis: men, women, and children, led by a saxophone and tin whistles.

—Johannesburg resident Nadine Gordimer, *A World of Strangers, 1981*

In 1886, gold was discovered in the Witwatersrand, a mountain range in northwestern South Africa. The city of Johannesburg appeared almost overnight in order to accommodate the miners flooding into the area. About ten years later, an Afrikaner (a white South African with Dutch ancestry) named Herman Tobianksy bought 237 acres of land five miles west of Johannesburg and named it Sophiatown after his wife. Initially, Tobianksy intended the land to be a suburb for whites, and the suburb grew as he planned until the city built a sewer in the immediate vicinity. White families had the privilege to live elsewhere and fled; in order to sell their land in the now undesirable Sophiatown, freehold rights were made available to black South Africans, making the small suburb of Johannesburg one of the few places in the country where blacks could legally own property.

Most white residents left the neighborhood by 1920. What developed in their absence was a vibrant community, the majority of which was black and working class. The population increased sharply after the Slum Act of 1934; the ostensible purpose of this act was to “clean up” inner Johannesburg, but in reality it meant that the city was now whites-only. Many of the black former residents of Johannesburg, displaced by the legislation, moved to nearby Sophiatown. By the 1950s, Sophiatown was a hub of black culture.
“We Made the Desert Bloom”

The prospect of living in Sophiatown was enticing for many blacks because it was one of the few places in the greater Johannesburg area that wasn’t entirely under government control, which imposed oppressive regulations on people of color. Historian Paul Gready explains that here “it was possible to believe that the state owned a little less of your soul.” As a result, Sophiatown suffered extreme overpopulation. Property owners crowded tenants and subtenants into houses and makeshift shacks in yards in order to accommodate as many people as they could. By 1950, there was an average of more than eight families per lot of property, there were more than 150 people per acre, and one-half of all families lived in just one room.

Anglican priest Trevor Huddleston moved to Sophiatown on a church mission in 1943, and, one of the few white people living there, he became heavily involved in the anti-apartheid movement. Though he loved his community, he cataloged the poor conditions that stemmed from overpopulation: “sordid and over-crowded backyards . . . dusty, dirty streets . . . slovenly shops . . . sprawling and unplanned stretches of corrugated-iron roofs . . . foetid insanitary yards.” But overpopulation had an upside. Gready explains that Sophiatown lacked a “geography of class,” quoting Sophiatown-born writer Don Mattera:

Their [middle-class professionals’] beautiful houses, sometimes “double-storied mansions,” stood side by side with quaint cottages and rusty tin shacks, with which they were “locked in a fraternal embrace of filth and felony.”

The diversity of class extended into cultural realms, as well. Huddleston remembers:

An “American” barber’s shop stands next to an African herbalist’s store, with its dried roots and dust-laden animal hides hanging in the window. You can go into a store to buy a packet of cigarettes and be served by a Chinaman, Indian, or a Pakistani.

While overpopulation led to a unique diversity in Sophiatown, poverty led the young men living there into gangs with such names as the Cowboys, the Black Cops, the Orange and Blacks, the Berliners, the Gestapo, and the Americans. As some of the names suggest, gangs were heavily influenced by American culture: they drove American cars, dressed in American clothes, watched American movies, and spoke in American slang. Some gangs simply stole food from shops and delivery trains and then sold it cheaply. Others, however, were more violent. African-against-African crime was rampant, and there were two murders a week. Mattera remembers the anxiety so commonly felt by the residents:

There were times of searching for a loved one in some alley, finding him or her wounded in a hospital or jail, or dead in a morgue. Or checking for husband or father, a brother or a son who had never returned home from work. Or waiting for a mother, an aunt or sister who did not get off the bus or tram where you usually waited for them.
Law enforcement was largely white and unconcerned with black-on-black crime, so there was no protection or relief. *Drum* writer Bloke Modisane recalls in his autobiography, *Blame Me On History*, “I learned there in Sophiatown, that one looked at the killing and never at the faces of the killers; one also knew that the law is white and justice casual, that it could not protect us against the knives of Sophiatown, so we tolerated the murders whilst the law encouraged them with its indifference.”

Sophiatown gangsters, called *tsotsis*, were a ubiquitous part of township life and a frequent topic of *Drum* magazine’s articles and short stories. The 1951 article “The Birth of a *Tsotsi*” explores why a young boy would enter into that dangerous lifestyle: “With grinding poverty and the sea of squalor that surrounds the ‘Gold City,’ it is not difficult to understand the rest. There is a struggle for existence, and the individual tends to survive.” In “The Urchin,” one of his last short stories, Can Themba shows that he remained intrigued by Sophiatown gang life even after he went into exile in 1963. In the tale, four young boys idolize their neighborhood gangs, and as they walk down the street, they receive encouragement from the older *tsotsis*, who shout at the juveniles: “Da men who rule da town!” and “Tomorrow’s outees!”

The struggle to survive and prosper was a reality not just for the men of the town, but for the women, as well. Before legislation passed in 1952, only black men were required to carry “passes,” which stated where they were allowed to be (in the case of Sophiatowner men, this was usually Johannesburg). Because black women were not required to carry such documentation, authorities could not monitor them as closely as they could men, and, therefore, employers were reluctant to hire black women. The women of Sophiatown made money in other ways: some washed laundry, some became prostitutes, and some became what Sophiatown residents called “*shebeen* queens.” *Shebeens* were the response to legislation that made it illegal for blacks to drink alcohol. People ran the small speakeasies out of their own houses, where they sold stolen and illegally brewed booze. The women who ran these *shebeens* often made more than men who were employed legally in Johannesburg.

Going to a *shebeen* was often an all-night affair, because after 10 p.m., the government-imposed curfew, patrons had no way to return home without running the risk of being arrested. *Shebeens* became places for people to meet, exchange ideas, and unwind. There was a feeling that one had escaped the oppression of everyday life—they were places “outside of apartheid.” Anthony Sampson, the editor of *Drum* from 1951 to 1955, remembers, “[Sophiatown] was such a fascinating place with a mixture of personalities in the *shebeens*, from well-educated people like Can Themba to the gangsters, businessmen, or politicians just dropping in for a drink. It was wildly romantic and tremendously entertaining compared with the formality of the white world.” Indeed, Sophiatown’s vibrant life attracted many white visitors. Themba’s white lover, Jean Hart, remembers:

> A lot of whites did go slumming in Sophiatown and other townships and did have black friends and used to vie with one another. You really couldn’t
go anywhere in good left-wing society without a black on each arm. . . . You could go to Sophiatown and let your rocks off. It was a bit like sin city in a way, or how uptown New Yorkers used Harlem in the ’20s and ’30s. . . . Life was warmer and more bubbling and funnier.

*Shebeens* were also crucial in fostering the music culture of Sophiatown, because *shebeen* queens would hire musicians to attract customers. Due to the new technology of the 1930s, black musicians in South Africa were introduced to American jazz on gramophones and radios; they were inspired by the music of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Count Basie. In the 1950s, bands began to play American swing music, and eventually the musicians invented their own hybrid genre called *tsaba-tsaba*, which combined African melodies with swing and jazz. *Tsaba-tsaba* eventually morphed into *kwela*, a form of street music played on penny whistles.

The *shebeens* offered Sophiatowners a sense of community and music, but the combination of overworked, underpaid, and systematically oppressed men and women with strong drink led frequently to violent altercations and alcoholism. Modisane observes, “Getting drunk was a purposeful destruction of the pain of their lives, a drowning of themselves in this orgiastic expenditure. They were breaking out, escaping from themselves.” Themba, notorious among the *Drum* writers for his alcoholism, writes:

I was really fighting something inside that nibbled at my soaked soul. Yet, what the hell! We were cavaliers of the evanescent, romantics who turned the revolt inwards upon our own bruised spirits. It was flight now, no more just self-erasure.

Considering Sophiatown’s high crime rate, gang violence, overpopulation, and rampant alcoholism, there is no denying that life in the township was hard. However, as Themba points out in his remembrance “Requiem for Sophiatown,” “It was not all just shebeeny, smutty, illegal stuff. Some places it was the stuff that dreams are made on.” He describes his home in the essay “Crepuscule”:

We drank, joked, conversed, sang, and horse-played. It was a night of the Sophiatown of my time, before the government destroyed it. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on it being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. Sometimes I think, for his sense of contrast and his sharp awareness of the pungent flavours of life, only Charles Dickens—or perhaps Victor Hugo—could have understood Sophiatown.
Sophiatown is remembered fondly, indeed romanticized, in spite of its flaws. The increasingly oppressive laws of the apartheid government told blacks that they were less than human, but Sophiatown presented a unique opportunity to be free from at least some government restrictions. Esme Matshikiza, wife of a Drum reporter, explains:

Of course there was resentment and bitterness and hatred at the circumstances under which we had to live, but at the same time we had our lives to lead, which were very interesting lives, and life was fun. Even within the confines of the system we could still live extremely happy lives. There was a society within a society that actually functioned.

The most significant freedom Sophiatown offered was ownership. No matter how terrible the conditions, the ability to own land was symbolic of a more profound personal freedom that the government was determined to destroy. The theme of ownership comes up frequently in writings about Sophiatown, such as in Modisane's autobiography:

Sophiatown belonged to me. . . . The land was bought with the sweat, the scrounging, the doing without, and it not only was mine, but a piece of me; the house was mine even if the rain leaked through the roof and the cold seemed to creep through the cracks in the ceiling, and crawled through the rattling window-frame and under the door. . . . Whatever else Sophiatown was, it was home; we made the desert bloom; made alterations, converted half-verandas into kitchens, decorated the houses and filled them with music. We were house-proud. We took the ugliness of life in a slum and wove a kind of beauty; we established bonds of human relationships which set a pattern of communal living, far richer and more satisfying—materially and spiritually—than any model housing could substitute.

“Rumbling Trucks and Sledgehammers”

According to the Afrikaner National Party, however, Sophiatown was, as Modisane put it, a “political corn inside the apartheid boot.” The expansion of Johannesburg’s population meant that white families were living closer and closer to the edges of Sophiatown. White residents of Johannesburg began calling for the removal of this racially integrated suburb in the late ’30s; at that time, the Johannesburg City Council and the United Party planned to remove the non-white citizens of Sophiatown, but they never managed to get the budget in order. In 1948, however, white South Africans voted the National Party into power. The new government approached segregation of the races with systematic vigor. In 1953, it created the Native Resettlement Board (NRB), headed by Dr. Henrik Verwoerd, which conducted a survey of Sophiatown and declared that the majority were slums “in need of reconstruction or demolition.” In 1954, the NRB sent residents notices informing them of their impending removal, scheduled to begin on February 12, 1955.
Resistance efforts arose among the Sophiatown community, but it was difficult to form a cohesive force with so little time to prepare and so many contrasting opinions within the diverse community. The liberal African National Congress party line was that of passive resistance—including refusal to fill out necessary resettlement forms and refusal to use government-supplied moving trucks—but others felt that injustice of this magnitude called for violent resistance. In addition to these disagreements within the resistance effort, some tenants and subtenants welcomed the chance to escape the harsh conditions of Sophiatown. Therefore, the citizens of the township did not band together in time to stop the impending evictions.

The NRB, unaware that Sophiatowners were floundering for ways to resist the forced removals, anticipated the worst. On February 8, 1955, they banned any and all meetings in Sophiatown. The following day, they sent in 2,000 police—three days before the date they had given the residents in the official notice of eviction. There was neither violent nor passive resistance. Faced with weapons and the prospect of arrest, most residents quietly packed up their things and got into the trucks. Nelson Mandela recalled in his autobiography, “In the end, Sophiatown died not to the sound of gunfire but to the sound of rumbling trucks and sledgehammers.”

The removal and resettlement process lasted until 1959; about 65,000 people were moved to various townships in and around Soweto, mainly to a township called Meadowlands, on the other side of Johannesburg. In their coverage of the removals, LIFE magazine said Meadowlands “offers most of the Sophiatowners better quarters in brick and asbestos sheeting houses, but title remains with government.” Modisane, however, found the new housing sinister:

Physically Meadowlands is soul-destroying, a depressing monotony, the houses look like thousands of mushrooms on a hillside, small unit detached houses dispatched without love or propriety, monolithic monsters from the architect’s
As the residents left, their houses were destroyed. In “Requiem,” Themba recounts, “The government has razed Sophiatown to the ground, rebuilt it, and resettled it with whites. And with appropriate cheek, they have called it ‘Triomf.’”

For the artists who were once inspired by what Themba describes as the “swarming, cacophonous, strutting, brawling, vibrating life” of Sophiatown, its destruction was symbolic of white Afrikaner triumph over black South African art, freedom, and equality. Modisane writes:

The people I had known, and loved, were gone; the relative, the friend, the childhood sweetheart, last year’s beauty queen, the nice-time girls, the shebeen queens, the beggars, the thieves, the frauds, the gangsters, the killers; they were all gone, and with them had gone the only world I knew. The music had gone, the colour, the violence, only the desolation remained.

Themba writes of returning to Sophiatown after its destruction: “And I still wander among the ruins trying to find out one or two of the shebeens that Dr. Verwoerd has overlooked. But I do not like the dead-eyes with which some of these ghost houses stare back at me.”

Triomf became a working-class white neighborhood and remained that way until apartheid rule was overthrown in 1994. In 2006, Johannesburg Mayor Amos Masondo officially restored the name Sophiatown. Upon hearing the news of the name change, residents claimed it didn’t matter: “A name is a name.” But Mayor Masondo felt differently:

A name is a name—why should we care? [Because] a name is something that gives identity to people. It locates a person in the broader scheme of things. A name makes you different. In the minds of those who had lived here, it was “Triomf.” . . . Sophiatown is the past we dare not forget.

**SOURCES**

Apartheid, South Africa

By Shannon Stockwell

Diamonds and Destruction: 1652 to 1948

In 1652, Dutch settlers landed on the southwestern coast of what is now South Africa. They set up a trading post, where merchant sailors could restock their ships on their way to and from the West Indies, and a small settlement, which became Cape Town. Throughout the eighteenth century, the Dutch colony grew, taking over land from the indigenous African tribes. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, Britain was intent on spreading its empire and establishing itself as a great world power. They landed in Cape Town in 1795. The Dutch and the British fought for control of the colony, and, upon losing, the Dutch (also called Afrikaners, meaning “African” in Dutch) embarked on what became known as the Great Trek in the 1830s. They migrated farther inland to establish territories away from British rule.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, gold and diamonds were discovered in northwest South Africa. The mining industry drew hordes of people to the area, and the city of Johannesburg was established in order to accommodate the miners; within ten years of its founding, the population was already larger than that of 250-year-old Cape Town. The British wanted power over the Afrikaner-controlled mines. The Afrikaners refused to give it up, and thus began the Anglo-Boer War, which lasted more than three years. The war instilled in the Afrikaners a nationalism that grew over the next half-century and eventually led to apartheid.

The British ostensibly won the war, but they soon found that they were unable to sustain the economy without the assistance of the Afrikaner colonies. In 1910, the British and the Afrikaners came together under a constitution that promoted racial segregation and the supremacy of “whites”—to the dismay of indigenous Africans (“blacks”), who had suffered abuse since the Dutch first arrived. Almost immediately after South Africa united, two laws were passed that undermined the rights of African citizens. First, the Mines and Works Act ensured that a black worker could never be promoted to the level a white worker could; second, the Land Act decreed that land owned by whites could never be bought by blacks. The government created “land reserves” where blacks could own land, which accounted for less than 14 percent of the area of South Africa. Inevitably, the reserves became overcrowded, and it was impossible to sustain an
independent economy on them. Instead, these reserves ended up serving as labor pools for mining and other industries controlled by white businessmen.

In the aftermath of the Great Depression, the government decided that economic decisions should come from a single-party, non-partisan government. The Afrikaner National Party and the British South African Party joined together, forming the United Party. Despite the union, the '30s and '40s saw increasing Afrikaner nationalism. Celebrations of the centennial of the Great Trek stirred feelings of Afrikaner pride and brought up past tensions, which intensified when, despite the objections of the Afrikaners, the British bloc of the United Party led South Africa into World War II. The Afrikaner National Party, under the banner of “apartheid” (literally “apartness” in Afrikaans), was gaining strength.

**The National Party’s South Africa: 1948 to 1960**

May 26, 1948, was election day for white South Africans. It was a close race, but the Afrikaner National Party came out victorious. Its main philosophy stressed the importance of God-given heritage and ethnicity. In order to preserve the purity of different ethnic groups, laws passed immediately after the election focused on keeping the races separate. The Mixed Marriages Act and the Immorality Act made sexual relationships and marriage between races illegal, and the Population Registration Act made it easier to track violations by classifying all citizens in one of four racial categories: white, “coloured” (of mixed ethnicities), “Asiatic” (Indian, Chinese, etc.), and “native” (later Bantu or African).

Throughout the 1950s, the government passed laws that extended into every aspect of life for Africans. The Group Areas Act enforced racial separation of residential areas, which provided the basis for evictions in townships with a black majority (such as District Six and Sophiatown) and gave the government justification to move the residents into government-controlled townships. The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act enforced segregation of such public amenities as post offices, stores, transportation, and restaurants. The Suppression of Communism Act allowed the government to ban organizations and people they identified as “communist” (which the National Party defined quite broadly) in order to ensure that there would be no pushback or protests against these oppressive laws.

Another policy that ensured the subjugation of black South Africans was the Bantu Education Act, which stemmed from the belief that Africans should only be taught skills necessary to maintain a white-run economy. Prior to the Bantu Education Act, schools for Africans had primarily been run by Christian missions. Once the legislation was passed, however, these were forced to close; Henrick Verwoerd, the minister of native affairs, explained that these mission schools “misled [Africans] by showing them the green pastures of European society in which they are not allowed to graze.” The government took control and imposed curricula that taught the philosophy of apartheid.
In addition to these acts, there were several laws passed that restricted the rights of black workers. In 1951, strikes by Africans were made illegal. Black workers were still allowed to unionize, but union leaders were banned by the Suppression of Communism Act, and their employers were not required to negotiate with the workers, rendering strikes largely ineffective. In 1952, the Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act required all Africans—men and women—to carry a book of “references” that stated explicitly where they were allowed to be and when. Although total separation was the original goal of apartheid law, politicians did recognize that some white employers in urban areas relied heavily on a previously established black labor force. Therefore, in 1955, the Natives (Urban Areas) Amendment Act decreed that some Africans could live in urban areas, but only if they had been born there, had worked there for a minimum of fifteen years, or had worked there for a minimum of ten years with the same employer. Everyone else needed a government permit if they wanted to stay in a white urban area for longer than three days.

In 1959, the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act created eight (later ten) official reserves, called “Bantustans,” which the government hoped would quiet the growing protests from black South Africans by instilling in them “ethnic homeland loyalty.” The government professed a hope that each of the African tribal ethnicities would control their own government, but the actual intended effect was clearly total segregation. The Bantustans were small and overcrowded, and the government only
permitted large industries to be built on the borders, instead of closer to the city centers where citizens actually lived.

As the National Party gained strength, so did protests among the African population. In 1952, the African National Congress (ANC) began the Defiance Campaign with a young man named Nelson Mandela as its leader and spokesperson. The campaign lasted until 1953, when the government enacted the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which illegalized civil disobedience. More than 8,000 people were arrested, including Mandela, but ANC membership increased to 100,000 people. The campaign set a precedent for resistance and a model for protest.

In March 1960, protesters planned to march to their local police stations and turn in their passbooks. In the town of Sharpeville, police opened fire on some 5,000 protesters, killing 69 and wounding 180. The news of the massacre spread across the country, leading to more protests and marches. The government declared a state of emergency and banned the ANC along with several activist organizations and key leaders involved in the movement, like Mandela. The Sharpeville massacre also thrust South Africa into the international spotlight. There were appeals at the United Nations for economic sanctions against the country, but they were repeatedly vetoed by the United States and Britain, which still had an investment in the country, claiming they were afraid that economic action would “hurt the people they were most trying to help.”

After the banning of the ANC and other activist organizations, many people involved in the resistance movement were imprisoned; Mandela was sentenced to life in prison in 1964. Some activists managed to go into exile and continued working on the resistance effort from outside the country, but even they were not safe from the reach of apartheid law: the government hunted individuals and hired bombers and assassins to target ANC headquarters in other countries, albeit unsuccessfully.

With most activists either in prison or abroad, South Africa in the ’60s appeared relatively quiet and even peaceful, at least from a foreign perspective. But at university campuses and schools in the Bantustans, students began meeting underground, creating the Black Consciousness Movement. Stephen Biko, a young man studying medicine at Natal University, founded the South African Students Organization in 1969, which spread to other universities around the country. Heavily influenced by the growing Black Pride movement in the United States, Black Consciousness was, at this point, more a state of mind than a political plan of action. As Biko said, in order to make progress, Africans must first be “liberated from fear” of white control. “What Black Consciousness seeks to do,” he wrote, “is to produce . . . real black people who do not regard themselves as appendages to white society.” Biko did not limit membership in Black Consciousness to blacks; all those oppressed by apartheid law were welcome.

In the 1970s, more African students than ever were attending high school and college, but the schools were underfunded and overcrowded, and unemployment among graduates was high due to an economic recession between 1973 and 1976. When the government decreed that certain crucial subjects like math be taught solely in Afrikaans
instead of English (the common language of Africans), students reached their breaking point.

On June 16, 1976, 15,000 students living in Soweto gathered to protest the unfair conditions in schools. Police opened fire and killed two students. The Soweto uprising spread across the country, and the violence lasted for several weeks. Biko was arrested and died while in custody. Authorities claimed he had refused to eat and died from starvation, but an autopsy revealed that he died from complications resulting from a brain injury obtained from a blow to the head.

The Fall of Apartheid: 1977 to 1994

After almost two decades of relative quiet following the Sharpeville massacre, the Soweto uprising and Biko’s death reminded the international community of the injustices occurring in South Africa. For many foreigners, it was the first time they saw footage of the conditions of apartheid, and several major world powers threatened sanctions and boycotts. Apartheid had never hurt the country’s economy—in the beginning, it had even helped it—but now the economy was suffering, and apartheid was to blame. This realization led the government to a series of small reforms designed to alleviate the pressures apartheid placed on the economy, but these measures were far from palliative for Africans, who still lacked political representation. In 1984, the government issued a new constitution that gave parliamentary power to “coloureds” and Indians for the first time, but it still excluded black South Africans.

Because of these reforms, Conservatives felt that the National Party was abandoning both them and the ideology of apartheid, and Africans felt patronized and insulted by the piecemeal measures. The reforms also failed to revive the suffering South African economy, and the country became dependent on international foreign loans. Pass laws were abolished in an attempt to assist floundering manufacturing businesses, and Africans flooded into previously segregated cities looking for jobs, of which there were very few. Out of this milieu of unrest came protests—more violent, enduring, and widespread than any before. The government declared a state of emergency in 1985. Foreign lenders called in their loans, and the economy collapsed.

Amid the chaos, one thing was clear: something had to change. The Afrikaner nationalism that had been the cornerstone of the National Party in 1948 had long since lost its relevancy: the British Empire was no longer a threat, and veterans of the Anglo-Boer War were long dead. The international community was disengaging itself from the South African economy. Labor unrest was widespread. The violence of the 1980s was not only taxing on security budgets, it cost lives. In short, South Africa could no longer afford apartheid.

In 1989, a new leader was elected. Although F. W. de Klerk was a member of the National Party, his first actions in office were surprisingly liberal: he freed several political prisoners and lifted bans on the ANC and other activist organizations. He also repealed key apartheid laws that had been in place for years. On February 11, 1990,
Nelson Mandela was released from prison: a powerful symbol that, finally, South Africa was changing for the better.

Despite these reforms, South Africa remained chaotic between 1990 and 1994 as political parties vied for control of the new government while the international community kept a judgmental eye on the changes taking place. Finally, the government adopted a new liberal constitution that ensured equal rights for all. Between April 26 and 29, 1996, almost 20 million South Africans of all races voted and elected their first president, Nelson Mandela.

Truth, Reconciliation, and Moving Forward: 1994 to the Present

The victory called for a massive, worldwide celebration, but there was work to be done. South Africa had suffered for half a century and survived a difficult, long surgery. Now began the arduous and painful process of rehabilitation. Created by Mandela and chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) offered amnesty to anyone who gave full and public testimony of human rights violations in which they were complicit between 1960 and 1994. Tutu believed that the only way that South Africa could begin to heal as a country was for citizens of all races to acknowledge the past and forgive each other. Some, however, did not see the TRC as an appropriate solution. Not all victims felt that the hearings made up for what they had suffered, and they were angry that the perpetrators would not be punished for the crimes they had committed. Still, many found comfort in the honesty and forgiveness that the hearings promoted. A teenage girl whose father had been killed by a car bomb in 1984 was asked, “Would you be able to forgive the people who did this to you and your family?” She replied, “We would like to forgive, but we would just like to know who to forgive.”

On December 5, 2013, Mandela died of a respiratory infection, which sparked worldwide reminiscence and reflection on how far South Africa has come since 1994—and concern about how far it still has to go. While legislation is no longer based on ethnicity and white supremacy, systemic racism, left over from South Africa’s long history of segregation, still exists on a very visible level. But many believe there is hope for the future; reflecting on Mandela’s death, Tutu said:

Because of him we amazed the world, a world that thought we would live in eternal devastation caused by apartheid. . . . God is asking South Africans, please become what you are, show the world we are members of one family. We belong together.

A *Suit* Glossary

**Allusions to Other Can Themba Stories**

When Peter Brook and Marie-Hélène Estienne adapted Can Themba’s “The Suit,” they wanted to flesh out the world of South African apartheid for an audience that would not be as familiar with it as Themba’s original readers. To accomplish this, they incorporated elements from articles Themba wrote for *Drum* magazine.

In the play, Maphikela’s story about being denied entry at white churches was inspired by “Brothers in Christ,” a 1956 investigative report Themba wrote after trying to worship at a number of white churches. He was tolerated or simply ignored at many (namely, Anglican and Catholic churches) and welcomed at the Baptist Church in Kensington and the Methodist Church in Orange Grove, but he was denied access (sometimes violently) to the Presbyterian Church in Orange Grove, a couple of Seventh Day Adventist churches, and many Dutch Reformed churches.

Maphikela’s story about crime-ridden trains was inspired by Themba’s “Terror on the Trains,” also published in 1956. During peak commuting hours, the third-class cars of Johannesburg’s commuter trains were “jam-packed with gasping, frightened humanity.” Pickpockets were brazen, and passengers were regularly held up at knife- and gunpoint. Various gangs operated aboard trains and near railway stations. Paydays were especially dangerous. The train was a frequent topic and setting of Themba’s writing, including the short story that introduced him to *Drum*, “Mob Story.” In 1955, he recounted/imagined a particularly violent onboard incident in his short story “The Dube Train.”

**Songs in *The Suit***

“Forbidden Games” “Forbidden Games” was first performed by Johannesburg singer Miriam Makeba, also known as “Mama Africa” and the “Empress of African Song.” It was first released on the 1963 album *World of Miriam Makeba*. Graeme Ewens writes in London’s *Guardian* in her 2008 obituary of Makeba: “She was one of the most visible and outspoken opponents of South Africa’s apartheid regime from the 1960s till its dismantling in the early 1990s. She was
also the anti-apartheid movement’s most audible spokesperson, having entered the top flight of international performers and able to sell out prestigious concert halls with a repertoire that changed little over three decades of musical evolution.”

Though it’s forbidden for my arms to hold you
And though it’s forbidden, my tears must have told you
That I hold you secretly each time we meet
In these forbidden games that I play

Though it’s forbidden in dim, quiet places
To capture the rainbows my aching heart chases
My bittersweet ecstasies come to me here
In these forbidden games that I play

Everyone knows you belong to another
Spinning your magic for her and no other
Still, I’ve been content to be part of this fantasy
Part of this game that I play

Though it’s forbidden and you’ll love me never
I’ll keep my love hidden and love you forever
Through countless eternities you will be mine
In these forbidden games that I play

“In Malaika” Written by Kenyan singer Fadhili Williams Mdawida in 1959, “Malaika” was made famous by better-known singers like Miriam Makeba, Harry Belafonte, and Boney M. Malaika means “angel” in Kiswahili, and the love song tells the story of the songwriter’s first love, a girl he could not marry because he could not come up with the required bride price.

**Malaika, nakupenda malaika**
[Angel, I love you, angel]

**Malaika, nakupenda malaika**
Nami nifanyeje, kijana Mwenzio
[And I your young lover, what can I do]

**Nashindwa na mali sina we, ningekuoa malaika**
[Was I not defeated by the lack of fortune, I would marry you, angel]

**Nashindwa na mali sina we, ningekuoa malaika**
Kidege, hukuwaza kidege
[Little bird, I always dream of you, little bird]

**Nashindwa na mali sina we, ningekuoa malaika**
**Nashindwa na mali sina we, ningekuoa malaika**

Nashindwa na mali sina we, ningekuoa malaika

**Pesa za sumbua roho yangu**
[Money is troubling my soul]

**Pesa za sumbua roho yangu**
Nami nifanyeje, kijana mwenzio

**Nashindwa na mali sina we, ningekuoa malaika**
**Nashindwa na mali sina we, ningekuoa malaika**
“Ntyilo Ntyilo”  *Ntyilo ntyilo* means “little bird” in Xhosa, an official language of South Africa spoken by about 18 percent of the population. The song is a South African classic, included in the repertoires of most jazz performers. It was written by Alan Silinga for Miriam Makeba, who first recorded it with the Manhattan Brothers in 1954. Her solo rendition, recorded in 1960, put the song on the world stage. Silinga has said that the song is simply about a bird singing sweetly and inviting the listener to “that happier place” called heaven.

I heard a sound from the bush.  
I looked up, I drew near.  
The sound I heard was  
*Ti, li, ti, li, ti, li.*  
*Ntyilo, Ntyilo, Ntyilo.*  
That melody was beautiful.  
I heard the voice from the bush.  
I looked up, I drew near.  
The voice said:  
“There is trouble in the land.”  
*Tra-la-tra-la.*  
That melody was beautiful.  
The owner of the voice  
Was dressed in white robes.  
The owner of the voice  
Was dressed in red robes.  
The words were  
*Tra-la, tra-la, tra-la.*  
The melody was beautiful.

“Strange Fruit” “Strange Fruit” was written by American schoolteacher and activist Abel Meeropol in 1937 in response to Lawrence Beitler’s famous photograph of the 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana. The song was made famous by Billie Holiday, who first performed it in 1939. In 1999, *Time* magazine called it the song of the century.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,  
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,  
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

Terms

*AmaPotchefstroom* A kind of scone, also known as *amakhekhe* or “township scones.”

*Anglican Mission of Christ the King* Built in 1935, Sophiatown’s Anglican Christ the King Church is one of the few buildings to survive the governmental bulldozing of the township in the second half of the 1950s. The building was famous in the 1940s and ’50s as the home of Archbishop Trevor Huddleston,
a member of the Community of the Resurrection order who was in charge of the mission. Father Huddleston, one of the few whites who lived in the multicultural Sophiatown, actively protested the forced removals of its residents. He also shut down the affiliated St. Peter’s School rather than hand it over to the apartheid government under the Bantu Education Act. The staunch activist, who was regularly in conflict with authorities, earned the nickname “Makhalipile,” or “dauntless one.” As fears for Father Huddleston’s safety grew, he was recalled to England in December 1955.

**Baas** Afrikaans for “master,” used by nonwhites in South Africa when speaking to whites in positions of authority.

**Bantu Education Act** The 1953 Bantu Education Act gave the Afrikaner National Party control over the education of Africans. Previously, most schools had been run by religious missions and funded by the state. The act required schools to register with the state and teach a racially discriminatory curriculum in order to receive financial aid. As a result, almost all of the mission schools closed. Minister of Native Affairs Dr. Hendrik F. Verwoerd explained the government’s new education policy to the South African Parliament: “There is no space for [the ‘native’] in the European community above certain forms of labor. For this reason it is of no avail for him to receive training which has its aim in the absorption of the European community, where he cannot be absorbed. Until now he has been subjected to a school system which drew him away from his community and misled him by showing him the greener pastures of European Society where he is not allowed to graze.”

**Buses** Those who worked in Johannesburg had to commute there from Sophiatown by bus. Buses were segregated and the subject of frequent protests and boycotts, mainly in reaction to rising costs.

**Cultural Clubs** After the passing of the Bantu Education Act, the school at Anglican Mission of Christ the King was turned into a “cultural club” so that it could remain outside the government’s control. This also meant, however, that the school could no longer use equipment that would reveal that it was, in fact, a school. In his memoir *Naught for Your Comfort*, Father Trevor Huddleston describes the scene in a cultural club: “Then gradually the light fell upon a mass of heads, upon a crowd of children of all sizes, of all ages, gathered round a table. Seated at the table was a young African woman, trying to demonstrate some game, trying to keep fifty, a hundred children interested, or at least quiet. There were two or three other groups playing round the hall, or sitting on the dusty floor arranging letters into an alphabet, or just sitting. . . . There was no blackboard; there were no school books; there were no benches. . . . This was a ‘Cultural Club,’ and such things as would equip a school would immediately make it illegal.”

“**Henry, the singer, the great guitar player, was found dead.**” This is a reference to Víctor Jara, a Chilean singer-songwriter and activist. In the aftermath of the violent coup d’état in which dictator Augusto
Pinochet and his followers overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende in September 1973, Jara was arrested, tortured, and killed. The story of Pinochet’s army breaking his fingers seems to originate in the 1974 song “It Could Have Been Me,” by Holly Near, who sings, “The *junta* broke the fingers on Victor Jara’s hands / They said to the gentle poet, ‘Play your guitar now if you can.’”

**Home of Truth** Can Themba referred to his home in Sophiatown as the “House of Truth.”

**River Tugela** A large river in eastern South Africa.

**Te Deum** A Christian hymn of praise; Latin for “to God.”
Questions to Consider

1. Maphikela claims, “The story I’m going to tell couldn’t have happened anywhere except in countries like South Africa, which lived under the iron fist of oppression.” Do you agree? In what ways are the actions of the characters in The Suit influenced by the environment in which they live?

2. Why does Philemon choose the punishment he does for Matilda?

3. How is Peter Brook’s philosophy of “the empty space” apparent in The Suit?

4. Marie-Hélène Estienne claims that music says “something you can’t say with words.” What does music say in The Suit?

5. How do you think perceptions of Can Themba’s story “The Suit” have changed since it was first published in 1963? How do you think they have changed between the first stage adaptation of the story in 1994 and today?

For Further Information . . .

