

ATHOL FUGARD INTERVIEWED BY PETER DAVIS. 1 July 1981

PD: Can you talk about *Sizwe Bansi* and John Kani and Winston Ntshona?

AF: Well I suppose you can't really talk about *Sizwe Bansi*, *The Island*, John Kani and Winston Ntshona and my relationship without going back before that to the genesis of the group which provided us with a context for our work which is Serpent Players and the simple facts there are, 19.. must have been about 1963, I was back in Port Elizabeth after having done a tour of the country with the first play really to achieve some recognition which was *The Blood Knot*. It attracted a lot of publicity, it was very well received. I was back in Port Elizabeth and one night there was a knock on the door and into my life walked four men who asked me if I'd help them start a drama group. At the time I felt bloody tired and I really didn't want the involvement like that. I said come back later, and they came back about a week later and I had thought about it and in true guilt-stricken liberal fashion I said yes and the first problem was to look around for a script or an idea for a play to provide us with our first production, and what I did was adapt to a township setting Machiavelli's *The Mandrake* - do you know it?

PD: I haven't read it for years.

AF: It's a glorious bit of fun. That was the start of Serpent Players. The name incidentally is interesting, the only venue we could find for a performance in Port Elizabeth, being a black group, was, there was a museum not far off from where I was staying, and part of the museum had been a snake park and there was an abandoned snake pit that gave our first performance in this abandoned snake pit, and that's where the name Serpent Players comes from.

We followed *The Mandrake* up with other productions ranging from Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, to *Antigone*, and then as my involvement grew they became a little impatient. Obviously a play like *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* or *Antigone* deals with issues which had, you know, reference to the problems in their lives, but they were impatient to deal with their own experiences more immediately. So, parallel with our sort of orthodox work it was getting hold of a script and maybe adapting it slightly, but basically getting another writer's script. We started experiments in playmaking, the first one of those was called *The Coat*, and it's a published text, not published outside South Africa but it was published inside South Africa. *Friday's Bread on Monday*, which literally was me setting up situations where an actor improvised on a theme, and then acting as scribe, sort of shaping the material that came out of these improvisations, until finally I was able to structure the experience into something that was a viable little piece of theatre.

So this idea of playmaking was well established in the group by the time John and Winston came. John and Winston came and joined the group, John came first,

Winston second, and I think about four or five years after it had been in existence. And at a certain point they participated in some of these playmaking experiments. And then at a certain point John and Winston turned to me and said something which I took as the height of idiocy, not idiocy, just totally impossible. John was working at Ford, and Winston had a clerical job in a timber factory, lumber yard, and they said, "Listen, what chance is there of us earning our living solely from theatre?" In other words, What chance is there of us being professional? and, god, in those days, well, I mean that was to ask for the impossible.

PD: Was there any tradition of black theatre at all?

AF: Things that happened. I mean in a situation in Johannesburg for example, seven, eight years earlier, I had started a group there and done work that I'm very proud of, but really, and I'm not flattering myself, I suppose I would describe my work in Johannesburg as the first real attempt to train and establish something which for want of a better adjective I could call black theatre. So the tradition which was virtually non-existent, certainly in Port Elizabeth but even in a place like Johannesburg, I mean those were still very difficult, hard times. Anyway, John and Winston said to me "What chance is there of us earning a living as actors?". I said, None, but they said, "Can't we at least try?" And the first thing I had to do, obviously, was look around for a two-hander suitable for them, which I would then direct. And we looked at a lot of plays, and none of the ideas really grabbed us, and then John and Winston followed it up with the obvious thought which was, What about making something in the style that we have been doing in the Serpent Players with just the two of us? I said, OK, we'll try. The immediate problem was, what idea?

We got a little space and we actually started working in my garage and we tried one idea, another idea, and we talked about this and we talked about that and nothing really grabbed us, until one day I said to the chaps, "I tell you what, where our play is or what's at the core of our play", and I described to them a photograph I had seen in a black photographer's studio of a man smiling radiantly in a suit that he had obviously just bought, a hat upon his head and a pipe in one hand and a cigarette in the other, and I said, "That's our play". At first they were sceptical about that particular idea, it seemed very thin, but I persisted and we started to explore it and the obvious question came up, Why is he smiling, why is he smiling? What reason could there be for a New Brighton man to have such a bloody big smile on his face? And in terms of the South African situation, the biggest reason a black person can have for smiling is if something good has happened in terms of his pass book, of his reference book. So that was in our starting point. So we had a man smiling, we knew that our situation related to a reference book, and the man had had a photograph taken. So we had a photographer, that man, and some situation involving the reference book.

Years, years, years earlier I had been for a short period a clerk of the Native Commissioner's Court. I had taken that very ugly job in order to get a bit of experience. I needed some facts and understand certain things which I wanted to use in my writing and one of the things I just encountered for virtually every day was this question of false or forged reference books. I knew a lot about that and my suggestion was, "Listen, let's explore some of the possibilities in terms of that". One accident led to another, Peter, the end result was a mountain of material that had come both by way of improvisations and by way of me actually writing, of me structuring moments that John and Winston had sort of worked on.

Our first performance of *Sizwe Bansi* lasted three and a half hours without any interval. There was no real text as such, it was just a sort of structure. The chaps were totally free on stage and obviously three and a half hours, we had a very good response to that three and a half hours, but it was a killer for the two actors and finally too much to ask of an audience so we had to go about the process, or I went about the process of, what would be the word, better to describe it, tightening that experience. As one performance followed another, having seen what we could do without, and beginning to discipline John and Winston so that some element of consistency began to inform the performance. After about a month, in the course of which I suppose we must have given about 14 performances, I was in a position, I also made a recording of performances, I was in a position to sit down at a typewriter and type out the first rough draft of *Sizwe Bansi*.

PD: Maybe you could describe as you did for me the other day, the meanings of the words, Sizwe Bansi, the meanings in terms of the context of the play.

AF: Sizwe Bansi, which is of course a phrase, means "the people are strong", the people are powerful and - I can't remember what I said the other day, what did I say the other day about it?

PD: You said exactly that when I asked you about the meaning of Ubuntu and of this was the same as Bantu.

AF: Oh, sorry, no, Sizwe Bansi, I said, the nation, the nation is powerful. Sizwe means the nation. Ubuntu means the people, and the point being is that our first sense of ourselves in relation to this piece of work was that it only had a life or a significance really in terms of black audiences, and that's, you know, in terms of playing to black audiences, using, or having a title like Sizwe Bansi, immediately the audience already knows what you talking about, what area you're going to be talking, a man walks on to the stage and his name is Buntu, the audience immediately pick up that reference as well.

PD: What kind of reaction did you have from the authorities, not necessarily just Sizwe, begin with Sizwe and then talk about the others.

AF: Just in terms of Sizwe or what?

PD: Begin with Sizwe if there was any reaction at all.

AF: Oh ja, ja, there was a lot of reaction. I mean we had a constant measure of police harassment, culminating one night when we were giving a performance at the Space Theatre in Cape Town, with the police arriving, calling John, Winston and myself and a very, very courageous man who started the Space Theatre and in a sense I think sort of gave protest theatre in South Africa, alternative theatre in South Africa, the first push. A man by the name of Brian Ashbury, and the police called the four of us together and said, "If you proceed with the performance that is scheduled to start in a half hour's time, we are going to arrest the four of you afterwards".

PD: On what grounds?

AF: On grounds, well, we said, "On what grounds are you going to charge us?" They said, "We are going to charge you for having violated the Group Areas Act. They are black actors and this is a white area and you are occupying these premises".

Our first performances of *Sizwe Bansi* was the same case it was for seven players, all seven players were black actors. We managed to get away with this problem by making them private. The loophole that we sort of used, the loophole in the law, that if you have actually invited each individual who was present it constituted a private performance and a private performance was a private affair, it was not public. Prosecution under the Group areas Act could only take place if in fact you had given a public performance, and that was advice that we had got from lawyers. The police said "No, we believe we can prosecute you and get away with it regardless". Anyway on this particular night when they said, If we go on, we checked it out with our lawyers again, Brian Ashbury did, and he came back to us, it was now about five minutes from the start of the performance and Brian said, "Our lawyers are convinced that we are within the law because it was private performance and that we cannot be, we will not be found guilty even if they tried to institute proceedings", and he said to John and Winston, "You know, our lawyers might be wrong, and it is up to you chaps to decide if you want to proceed with that performance or not". Well, I think typically of John and Winston and the courage and in situations like that they said, "No, we are going to go on". The police sat in the audience, watched the performance, and John and Winston didn't modify a single element because they were there. At the end of the performance, the police said, "Well we won't be doing this now, but we'll be serving a court order on you, to that effect". The court order never came. But that was sort of, I suppose, the culminating moment in terms of police harassment. I suppose John and Winston have got something more to say, their experiences go further in terms of their detention in the Transkei after that performance there, but I wasn't involved in that, I wasn't involved in that, I was in Port Elizabeth at the

time. I was certainly involved in the operation to get them released, but I wasn't in the Transkei when that happened.

PD: And you had no, in the case of police harassment, you had no redress against the police whatsoever, presumably?

AF: No, no, no. They are beyond the law, they are beyond, they are above it, everything, you just, nothing you can do. It was very interesting, one of the things that did protect us, both with *Sizwe* and with *The Island*, is that I think we might have had a censorship problem had there been a script of the play and they said, Can we please have a script? and in all honesty we could say to them, It doesn't exist. But I think we would have run into a censorship problem if we had to hand over a script, 50-60 pages, which they could have submitted to the censorship board, and which the censorship board would then have declared undesirable or banned. We could then not have proceeded with performances.

PD: Could they have gone to the trouble of making a tape recording of the performance and transcribing it. What would have happened then?

AF: No, I think the wording of the act that deals with censorship, or the various acts that deal with censorship, are very specific about publication. In fact the censorship board, the correct title for our censorship system in South Africa is called the Publications Control Board and there was nothing that had been published or existed in paper.

PD: Now clearly in a situation like this and in similar situations throughout the world you have a certain latitude of action which you exploit to the full, and at a certain point the authorities come in and stop you.

AF: Yes

PD: ... and then you look for other ways out.

AF: Ja.

PD: Because all the time you are on your mettle, it is very good for the wits.

AF: (laughter)

PD: What point are you at now in South Africa?

AF: The situation is radically, radically different. Er, now, Peter in terms of the running battles that we had to fight in the old days, like the days of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* when we first staged it. The only running battle that still remains is the one with the Publications Control Board. Censorship is the one sort of harassment or the one problem, and it is a big problem, that remains. For the rest, the theatres, some of them, put a long time in defiance of the law but the situation now is that the theatres are open, audiences are mixed and you can mix your cast on stage. I mean four weeks ago, just before coming here, the Pretoria, with great pride, opened its thirty million new opera house complex- opera house, big theatre and small theatre, thirty million, equipped with everything anybody could ask for in terms of gimmickry. Pretoria, that theatre is totally open, that theatre is totally

open.

Let me make sure that I am answering your question in depth. So the problems John and Winston and I had in terms of always having to perform privately, that does not exist. The fact that John, Winston and in some context in certain plays that I had when I wanted to join the actors on stage in a role in a play, that doesn't exist anymore. Any now also the pioneering days are past. There exists a formidable amount of theatrical activity in the black ghetto areas, in the black townships. Not all of it of any significant standard, but you can really think of a Township circuit now. There is an audience, in other words audiences have been created, educated and coming to the theatre.

PD: When dealing with South African authorities there is always a possibility that the reason it is permitted is that they don't feel threatened by it, the other reason is it is beyond their control. Which of those is it?

AF: I've never, I've obviously been asked that question many times, and I have never felt satisfied with any of the answers I have given to it. I mean, I don't think, I don't think it's a situation which is beyond their control, I mean we've got enough evidence of just how ruthless they can be when they see a situation developing and that goes beyond their control. I mean if they felt that John, Winston and I constituted a threat, why not ban us, we have never been banned. I think that most probably, Peter, it just reflects their sense that theatre is not important, theatre is not going to change society, and I think they are wrong in that because I think the education, the civilising effect of plays like *Sizwe Bansi* and it's been joined now by a host of other plays in South Africa, has been very considerable. And has made a contribution to the political life of our society.

PD: I'll pick up on a word you used, "civilising effect", I thought that this is the word that is usually applied to African people, but you are applying it to white South Africans.

AF: Yes, that's correct. Black theatre has civilised, has had a civilising effect on white South Africans.

PD: I think also, and this is very important and this may be pointing to the question of the artists' boycott which I think has pretty well gone away now.

AF: Yes, yes, yes. A few people still hang out, in terms of it, I think [John] Osborne still refuses to let his work be done in South Africa, [Robert] Bolt does as well, but by and large I think that all the major writers supported the boycott, and rightly so because they were being asked to have their work to be seen under segregated circumstances, but now that the situation has changed they have eased up.

PD: So I think, it is obviously terribly important in terms of...

AF: I would like to... sorry... it is just because it is important, speaking about the civilising effect that black theatre has had on white people. One of the ways in

which it has operated is to, to, to counter the appalling ignorance that the majority of white South Africans had, and they still have in vast areas, of the circumstances under which black people live. I mean in the days of *Sizwe Bansi*, for example, in the early days of *Sizwe Bansi*, I mean the number of times after a performance, a white person, sometimes English-speaking, sometimes Afrikaner, would just come up and say “God, we never knew, we never realised, we didn’t know”. That’s one of the clever aspects of the system which had steadily been eroded away.

Whether it has been eroded away fast enough is of course a different question. That one of the clever things in terms of the system, the apartheid system, the way that was structured and organised and operated was the way it kept people ignorant of facts. I mean Nazi Germany was a lot like that as well, too. I mean I suppose with a lot of honesty a lot of Germans can say – we didn’t know about the camps. Would you buy that? I find a hard one to accept, but I mean...

PD: Well, I do accept it, and of course there is also people don’t want to know...

AF: That’s correct. But it is a certain pose, ignorance. I just wanted to go back on that point and clarify it for you.

PD: What I was going to say, what is vitally important, and the same situation applies in Soviet Russia, it is vitally important to have links outside the country, I’d like you to say something, they do depend very much on that international support. You’re not alone.

AF: There are two things to say in that connection. Straight away is that they attach no significance to *Sizwe Bansi* and... no, no, not a question of attaching no significance, will obviously in the way I described try to prevent it happening and they found that they couldn’t prevent it happening, and they most probably thought, “Ah well, it is so bloody unimportant let it proceed”. It’s not really a threat to us. When they woke up to our existences again, it was after we’d staged the play in London the West End, New York and they suddenly were in the situation where even if they had wanted to act there was going to be a lot of protests from abroad, and at the point when they were becoming very sensitive to protest abroad, and were in fact were trying to present themselves as moving in a liberal, liberalising direction. The measure of all of this is when John and Winston were in fact detained in the Transkei there is absolutely no question about it. It was the very loud and very clear protests on their behalf in London and in New York that secured their release. And it was very interesting, there was one or two exceptions, virtually no protest on their behalf inside of South Africa. I mean the same is true, as far as I am concerned in terms of them taking away my passport for those four years and eventually giving it back to me firstly under very limited circumstances but it was continued protests on my behalf overseas, abroad, that got that back and allowed me to start travelling again.

It’s this question, and it still surprises me inordinately how the stories I have tried

to tell, both by way of the plays I have written in privacy or the experiences I have made with actors like in *Sizwe Bansi* and *The Island*. Now those stories entrenched, and uncompromisingly entrenched, in the specifics of that little corner of the world about which so little is known by and large, how these stories seem to actually work for audiences abroad, both in London, in America, I mean *Sizwe Bansi* and *A Lesson From Aloes* and *The Island* have been translated into French, into German, *Sizwe Bansi* was done by two white actors in Berlin and was astonishingly well received and apparently astonishingly well done, for me still very amazing. It is a source of great encouragement obviously to feel that you can just stay with the specifics of your time and place and, depending upon your quality as a storyteller and the significance of your story, that it can have a life or have a meaning for other people, and that's your time and place, that's obviously a very, very encouraging fact but it is still for me a very surprising one as well.

PD: Do you know Flannery O'Connor?

AF: I was reading her in Port Elizabeth about six weeks ago.

PD: She's fantastic. She said "I don't have to go beyond my gate to get my stories".

AF: Beautiful, beautiful.

PD: And it is, it is fantastic, that you can still in our day and age do something cosmic ...

AF: That's right, and resonate outside of your specific time and place. Ja, because the first bit of advice that was ever given to me was contrary to that. I mentioned earlier that the first play of mine to give me a chance as a writer was *The Blood Knot*, and there did come the time when it was staged in London and now it has been staged many times there, but that first performance was totally wiped out by Ken Tynan. Who was at the peak of his power on *The Observer*, and when I got back to South Africa everybody immediately embarked in a post-mortem because they had liked the play, Why hadn't Ken Tynan liked it? And the post-mortem which the critics undertook in their columns produced the conclusion that *The Blood Knot* was too regional and too specifically South African, and that the lesson I must learn from this experience, from that experience, was in future, Write your plays in a more... write your plays for a broader audience, but don't address yourself specifically to South Africans. I never took that advice, but that was the advice that was given to me.

PD: What was Tynan's problem?

AF: Ah, what was Tynan's problem - he found it boring. He ended off this devastating review - in fact he wrote two reviews, the first one was handed back to him by the literary editor of *The Observer* who said, "If we print that, Fugard's going to sue us for libel, and he'll win, better rewrite it". Well, god knows what that first one must have read like because the second one wasn't too bad. He said,

“Well, I can remember two things which most probably sum it all up”. It was a very long review, it took a lot of time to do his demolition, the review started off by saying “Thank god this play had an alarm clock in it which rang intermittently as that helped keep me awake”. In other words, he was bored. And then secondly, he ended his review, and I think this is also very interesting, he ended his review by saying “I wouldn’t have a problem if my sister decided to marry a black man”. Those two say it all, don’t they?

PD: Do you have a clearly perceived theory of theatre?

AF: Yes, clearly perceived theatre Very clearly perceived. God, I could talk about that until the cows come home. Ah, nothing I enjoy as much as talking about the craft of my work. Nothing I now find more exhausting than talking about the politics of it, but to talk about a craft, oh god yes, I love that because I enjoy the craft. I like my title, playwright, maker of plays. It’s interesting that you asked that question because the first thing I am going to say, one of my first guiding principles, one of the things I like to hand myself over to as a writer is something that alone among my plays *Sizwe Bansi* has violated, and that is the three unities. I just feel that time, place and story, tight, tight, tight discipline, imposes a discipline, in terms of you know handling the material, telling your story with those three savage, no, not savage - ruthless- disciplines, is gloriously challenging for me and obviously *Sizwe Bansi* does not, violates those unities a number of ways. Let’s think about how: it violates it in terms of place, it moves all over the place, it moves backwards and forwards in time. It’s basically got one story, but I mean, two of the unities are violated there.

PD: That’s just a personal discipline, that’s not an absolute for theatre, you wouldn’t impose the unities on theatre as a whole?

AF: No, it’s just those are what I like to operate within, which I am doing marvellously with the new play that I am writing, to get back. I suppose the next statement in terms of a coherent theory of drama, of theatre, is an understanding on my side, and it’s ongoing, I discover more each time, every time I write a play. The space, no, not the space, the three dimensions to a significant theatrical experience as far as I am concerned: they are time - like music it is a time experience, a play is a time machine, a piece of theatre is a time machine. There is an allotted span, depending upon what you decide to occupy. There is silence, that is another dimension. Silence which you fill with words and sometimes with nothing, you just use the silence itself. And then there is space, which you fill with gesture and action.

PD: You are very concerned with role-playing. For me there is a sense of - to draw some comparisons for South Africans. It is a kind of prison society for those who are in prison, it is a prison for wardens as well as prisoners. You have a great concern with that kind of confined atmosphere. *The Island* is an example

where people are close together, and where they change roles, where they are forced to assume a different personality. That I found very interesting.

AF: Give me an example of that in my work.

PD: Well *Sizwe Bansi, The Island*... well, I think I would have to look at the text, but you are aware of that are you, that you do that?

AF: Not really, that's why I was asking.

PD: OK, but it happens frequently, that someone's asked to play a role, *The Blood Knot*.

AF: They are asked to play roles other than those that the actual identities are.

PD: Other than what they are, they assume different roles and this is, I think...

AF: Why do I do that?

PD: Well, I suggest it's because of... a pre-occupation, which I am sure you are aware of from time to time with South African society, that whites do not understand black life and they must, this is what Nadine Gordimer does in *July's People*.

AF: I've got it, I'm with you now. It is unquestionably, that is I think is always the hallmark of a restrictive evil, whatever you would like to call it, social system, people are forced to wear masks or where people are *seen* as wearing masks.

That people are seen as wearing masks. I mean we were talking earlier about *Sizwe Bansi* for example, and I see that one of the ways in which this play had a civilising effect on white audiences was to realise what was involved in what the reality of a black man's life with a passbook that didn't have the correct endorsements and what the reality of what that life involved, which is in other words to say that a white audience for a moment and hopefully for a long time afterwards, just stopped seeing a black mask and actually saw the face of the man.

PD: Do you know the essay by George Orwell, *Shooting an Elephant*?

AF: No.

PD: It is fascinating, Orwell was in the Burma police and he describes what happened there. There was an elephant that had run amuck and killed someone and when that happens you have to shoot the elephant.

AF: Sure.

PD: So he said, "We went out into the field and the elephant was there, the elephant was perfectly calm, would probably never do this again, and it was a very expensive piece of property, it had that value, it was working property to the people". He understood all this and there he was, he has to shoot it and he could see no reason why he should shoot it, except his position, that he was there and these people expected him to shoot it, so he had to shoot it. It really is a colonial situation.

AF: Ja, no, I hadn't sort of realised that aspect of my work, role playing.

PD: I think it occurs further.

AF: No, now that I am turning it over...

PD: The fact that they are going to do *Antigone* in prison, another kind of illustration, and do in fact.

AF: That's a by-product, obviously, of a South African experience surfaced in my writing.

PD: It is just a rationalisation, it might not be.

AF: Ja. You've got to fight very hard in that system to actually keep your face, just to keep your face. I mean you are forced into a role, I mean, I was just thinking, because I just ran through my, through my mind some of the roles I would encounter, or some of the masks I would be forced to put on in the course of one day of my, my very quiet life in Port Elizabeth. Firstly I hope is the real human face which is the one I have with Sheila [Fugard] which is myself, my personal private life. We have two black people living on the bit of land with us. He and I try to grow vegetables, sometimes with success, depending on the rain, sometimes without, and she would help Sheila in the house. And as much as I would like it, they don't allow me to,... they put a mask on me, but in the course of that same day, John and Winston might come out there and suddenly I'm ... my identity changes again. I could go in the course of the same day and drop in and visit my brother who has very different political attitudes to mine. The only arguing I ever do about politics is in my plays, I refuse to actually,.. I don't mind saying what I want to say, but I'm not going to try and argue. With my brother for example, suddenly I'm in the context of another mask, two white men, brothers. Now, wouldn't that be true of somebody living in New York though also? Not to the same degree.

PD: No, I don't think it is to the same degree.

AF: No, no.

PD: Obviously a profession, a job imposes some restrictions.

AF: And after you could change your identity from in one moment being a master in one relationship, to being, I'm thinking of, the two black people I told you who are living on that bit of land with us, from being master, I don't want to be, but being master in that relationship, that's what they call me, to being Athol to John and Winston in seconds.

PD: You are talking about the unities and if I could talk about role-playing in that context too. You choose very few characters.

AF: Yes.

PD: So in a certain sense you force yourself into that position of role changing,

AF: Yes, yes, yes you are quite right. I mean all sorts of consequences are attendant on staying as tight in my sort of, again now to a certain state of a result of necessity, I mean the first two plays I wrote, the first play I wrote a play called *No-Good Friday*, about black Township life in Sophiatown, had a cast of about 10

or 11, and my second play [*Nongogo*], had a cast of about 5 or 6, and god knows doing those plays, because those casts were big, were very, very difficult, and when it came to writing *The Blood Knot*, which is where it really starts, I chose two characters. Now why did I do that? Because that's going back 20 years. Was it a sense on my side that it would be easier this time around if you could just sort of tell your story in that way? Or was it also my natural inclination to use a small canvas? Because my canvasses are small always, they are not great big sweeping canvasses. The music I like to listen to is chamber music. I mean I don't turn off the radio when the big symphonic numbers come on, but give me Bach on unaccompanied violin, or Bach on unaccompanied cello and I'm happy. One voice singing or a combination, all sorts of actors.

PD: If we can ramble for a bit. One of the things that struck me in South Africa... Maybe we could start with a particular experience that was to see mine dancing. There was one group among the mine dancers which was a singing group...

AF: Ja.

PD: ...and that I thought was extraordinary, because everyone else was so physical and there was this group, but all the dancing had gone into the song. For me out of the whole six or seven groups that performed, that was really the most compelling. The music was very fine and there was a discipline in the movements of the body as they were singing, that was a kind of aspiration to dance, but it wasn't actually dance because the dance had gone into the voice.

AF: Yes, I understand exactly what you are saying.

PD: And then I thought well, the Afrikaners have no music. That was the thing that struck me about the Afrikaners...

AF: Absolutely right.

PD: Nothing that I find.. they have patriotic songs but there's nothing. But in these African people, there's extraordinary music.

AF: Correct.

PD: The variety, it's just enormous, and if I had to choose just from art, production of art between the two societies, there would be no comparison.

AF: Correct, correct.

PD: And I suppose this leads me back to what you were talking about the other day, which I think I understand about making something sing, even when you are writing it it's an uplifting quality. At a certain point you say this is singing, this lifts me up.

AF: That's right. And in the new play, the new play, it's very interesting, I'm almost looking back at times wondering, that if you followed the progression of my work, I don't know whether this is, would be a correct observation or not, but it has occurred to me simply because I have been so conscious with this new play that I am writing of the fact that I want song, I want lyricism, I want lyricism.

Both in word and in action and whether it hasn't, starting say like with *The Blood Knot*, which has almost got too much, the play is almost confused by its attempt to sing, successful or unsuccessful as the case may be at different points in it, whether there hasn't been for different reasons, or a variety of reasons, a lot of them are personal, a progressive loss of my voice as a singing voice because if you look at a play like *A Lesson From Aloes*, apart from Steve, no maybe not, but it is certainly very earthbound.

PD: Yes, I think I understand.

AF: It's, it's down there, even though I invested an enormous amount of myself, and of my passions as an Afrikaner. Pieter Bezuidenhout, isn't that a singer?

PD: No.

AF: Steve Daniels touches it maybe, once or twice in the second act. I'm so conscious of how, because I am writing this new play of what songs are about again. And this new one, if I get it right, I can only get it right on the basis of going to singing lessons (laughs) and it's an incredibly uplifting experience, I mean I had an incredibly good time writing *A Lesson From Aloes*, heavy, heavy, heavy.

PD: Depression, is it depression?

AF: Yes, its earthbound whereas this one, I mean the new play is not without its moment of ugliness but the final, final scene, I hope I'm going to leave an audience if I get it right, is of having heard or having had a lyric experience.

Lyrical is a nice word, lyrical, which is another word for song. There's that marvellous, explain to me, I always misquote it but the sense of it is correct, that Socrates, not knowing that the cup of hemlock was waiting for him around the corner but his daimon, knowing that it was, iterated the instruction, "make more music make more music Socrates". Brecht has a marvellous, a marvellous statement in the *Messingkauf Dialogues*, well, he said, "The moment a human being, in pain or distress or desperation starts to make a noise, he begins to conquer", and that was so vivid my sense of what those four men were saying to me when they came to me that night in 1963 and said "Can you help us make theatre, we want to make a noise about our lives, we want to break the silence, there's too much silence in our lives". I think that's by and large true, that is a very accurate diagnosis of a lot of African reality, the conspiracy of silence that wraps things up, tries to just...ja, a nice thought.

PD; II think I'll go through this and probably select a few things to do on camera.

PD: OK. But for me I don't think it is irrelevant. I've got no problems with that. For me, one of the ultimate sounds, as more and more experience accumulates behind me, and as more and more of my life is led, you become a lot more ruthless about certain things and I think I am going to end up believing very passionately what I already am prepared to say, that for me one of the ultimate sounds is a woman's voice in a song. I find that thrilling, I really find that very, very

thrilling. You realise of course that with *Sizwe* and *The Island*, the other exception being *Blood Knot*, I don't have a woman in the play, and normally in all my plays actually, I have invested my affirmative statements in a woman. But that's a very, that's very South African as well. The role that women have played in South Africa going back to Olive Schreiner to Nadine Gordimer today to *The Black Sash*, women have played an inordinately positive role, almost out of proportion. I don't know, when you think about it. I mean do you have, I am not talking about the women's' feminist movement, but do you have voices that champion decency proportionately as many women's' voices championing decency in America or in England as you do in South Africa?

PD: I think there may be different reasons for that.

AF: I am sure there will be different reasons, but you know I am just, I am sure that comes out of, you know, unique to South Africa but...

PD: No, I think that they are there, it's just that we don't know so much, but I suspect that South Africa, being a colonial situation, that the white women's voice has been one of the relatively few that will be heard more clearly than in say London in the nineteenth century.

AF: Ja, OK, ja, ja. OK, I take that point, I take that point.

PD: I think it is all part of the education that we are undergoing now.

AF: Would you agree, though, that it is a lot more dangerous for a white woman to raise her voice in the cause of decency in South Africa than it is in a lot of other places. I'll have my women you see (laughs).

PD A great experience was to read [Olive Schreiner's *The story of an African Farm* which I did comparatively recently

AF: Have you much...

PD: Just that one piece.

AF: It remains to this day the great South African novel. As great and as gifted as Nadine here is. None of her achievements are as monolithic as that.

PD: Is it Ross [Devenish] who is doing a film on Schreiner?

AF: Is there a film being done on Olive Schreiner?

PD: I think it is based on recent...

AF: No, Ross at the moment on German television doing a series on Doris Lessing short stories, and Ross is doing two of those.

Very interesting, the South African experience that lies behind me and thank god still lies ahead of me, is impossible to cope, is almost impossible to cope with at a distance. I'm already so desperate to be back there. I want to live there. I can't deal with it at a distance, got be in the middle of it, it is making me achingly homesick already.

PD: Very interesting what you have to say about South Africa because an artist has only one subject.

AF: Well, you know, the point is all that I know about, and that might be a little, but all that I know about, the most important thing a human being can do, which is to love. It was taught me by that country. And I mean, how do you repay that debt? That said, I'm bankrupt in the face of that. The only thing I can give South Africa back.

PD: You worked a few times outside of South Africa.

AF: Yes, oh yes. I'm finding it progressively unrewarding.

PD: Did you get any satisfaction at all from the work you did outside South Africa?

AF: Oh yes, yes, but it's not working in that way anymore. What's running out...

[END]