

An Absurd Greek Tragedy in South Africa

The Island is a political protest play that conveys its anti-apartheid message through the blending of the current sociopolitical atmosphere of South Africa in the 1970s with the well-known Greek tragedy and the modern dramatic conventions of the twentieth century.

The meta-theatrical performance of *Antigone* serves to structure the emphasis on human rights, hope and justice. In contrast, the play proper is framed inside an absurd, mechanical and dehumanizing world of prison that implicitly evokes the world in which Vladimir and Estragon are encaged.

The dynamics between the play's two characters, Winston and John, switch between a brotherly affection of two inmates who need one another and a relationship of power between a domineering figure and his rebellious opponent: John and Winston as Creon and Antigone.

The Island (1973) shows that Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona's imagining of a future for their native South Africa involved a fusion of resistance and reconciliation.

An Intellectual Incongruity

On the one hand, there is a Greek tragedy, which famously argues for the priority of heroic meaning of resistance, with a protagonist associated with the idea of self-sacrifice. On the other hand, there is a modernist play produced with the negation of all ideals and advances the idea of living in a world devoid of meaning and hope. The two seemingly incompatible worldviews collide in the infamous Robben Island.

A world of political oppression, racial segregation, and an atmosphere of hopelessness and desolation meet the possibility of change and liberation from injustice. From one world to another, one unmistakable message remains: resistance.

"Winston : Your Antigone is a child's play, man."

It is argued that engaging with the Western canon carries a colonial stamp and encourages/evokes a colonial representation of South Africa's struggles. (see Mshengu)

However, what Fugard, Kani and Ntshona suggest with *The Island* is to create a polyphonic, heterogeneous text, which encourages to imagine a multicultural, multiracial South Africa.

This hybrid approach, a combination of myth, history and absurd, tends to blur cultural and historical specificity and points to a transhistorical representation of human suffering and calls for a collective effort to find a way out from this injustice.

Bibliography:

Fugard, Athol. "The Island." *The Township Plays*, edited by Dennis Walder, Oxford UP, 1993, pp. 191-227 (210).
Mshengu. "Political Theatre in South Africa and the Work of Athol Fugard." *Theatre Research International*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1982, pp. 160-179., doi:10.1017/S0307883300000626.

The Island: A Postcolonial Reconfiguration of Antigone and Waiting for Godot

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