

Introduction

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‘Tsotsi’ was a style. Young black men in Johannesburg’s townships, entranced by 1940s American gangster films, adopted their dress-sense along with their contempt for law and order. ‘Life was cheap; the gun and the knife ruled at night’, recalled Nelson Mandela in his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*. ‘Gangsters – known as tsotsis – carrying flick-knives or switchblades were plentiful and prominent; in those days they emulated American movie stars and wore fedoras and double-breasted suits and wide, colourful ties.’ The word *tsotsi* may have been derived from an Africanisation of ‘zoot-suit’, or perhaps it came from the Sesotho term *bo tsotsa*, meaning ‘to make sharp’. Besides a look, it evolved its own argot, *tsotsitaal*, a fluid amalgam of phrases from the Babel of languages prevailing in South Africa, with regional variations; in one township Afrikaans-based, in another structured on Zulu.

It is this range of cultural influences that illuminates Athol Fugard’s plays, his dialogue a richly idiomatic mix of English, Afrikaans and African languages that expresses to the South African ear explicit gradations of social standing. Born in the eastern Cape in 1932, near the village of Middelburg in the arid Karoo, Harold

Athol Lannigan Fugard was the child of a father of English descent and an Afrikaner mother. His childhood was spent in the company of the black workers in the tearoom run by his family in the town of Port Elizabeth. The racial discrimination that he observed while growing up would eventually set into the rigid ideology of apartheid, whose consequences have provided the baleful energy behind much of Fugard's writing.

Ever since the 1913 Land Act, which appropriated 77 per cent of the country for white use, successive South African governments had refused to recognise blacks as having residence rights in the townships that sprang up as labour dormitories around the cities. With workers unable to have their families live with them, the resulting social pressures brought prostitution, illegal drinking dives – shebeens – and crime. The phenomenon of township gangsterdom surged in the 1940s, during the great shift to the cities that accompanied burgeoning industrialisation during the Second World War. The authorities made little attempt to understand its causes, preferring only to shut it away from the white cities. In the first post-war election, in 1948, white voters, fearful of an increasingly competitive black workforce, elected the Afrikaner Nationalist Party, which made a barricade of apartheid statutes: influx controls, the Pass Laws, the Group Areas Act.

Aimed at halting black urbanisation, these restricted freedom of movement by permitting blacks to be in the townships only as long as they ministered to white needs. A pass was required to get work. Those caught

without one faced prison and deportation back to the jobless black rural 'homelands'. Avenues of legitimate employment became scarce for township youth. Forced into an underground existence, criminality offered a chance for survival; only the most ruthless might thrive. By the late 1950s, when Fugard wrote this book, tsotsis had become the scourge of people's already straitened lives in the townships. They preyed on their fellow Africans, robbing, murdering and raping with impunity, for the authorities did little to keep order in the townships apart from the constant *ratissage* of the Pass raids.

As a child in South Africa I heard about tsotsis and grew up with an impression of their menace, a force of unbridled violence as pitiless and unthinking as the sharks that lay in wait outside the nets off Durban beach. Beyond the perimeter of our 'civilised' white euphoria – guarded, we were told, by the thin blue line of the South African Police – lay the township world, shadowy and unfathomable. Tsotsis were its predators, killers with a superlative attention to mortal detail. In my years as a medical student I saw their victims delivered to us with the neatest of wounds. We learned to inspect the collapsed patient for the almost invisible puncture in the armpit from a sharpened bicycle spoke, slipped between the ribs into the heart to cause a tamponade: a squirt of blood into the pericardial sac that as it filled, pressed on the heart, strangling it in its own labour.

Our professors credited these assassins with almost

mystical powers of evil, a hermeneutic knowledge of anatomy and physiology that allowed them to calibrate precisely the dimensions of the suffering they wrought. Sometimes, instead of murder, a lancet blade or knife-edged spoke would be stuck into the spine at the exact level to achieve a specific outcome – paraplegia, quadriplegia, with or without the ability to achieve an erection. In these cases the blade was sterilised before use so that vengeance would not be thwarted by an early death from infection.

It was while studying medicine that I first saw Fugard perform. In 1972 he'd been involved in the establishment of a theatre called The Space/Die Ruimte/Indawo in a converted warehouse below Cape Town's old Malay Quarter, where I watched him play opposite his regular collaborator, Yvonne Bryceland, in the theatre's opening production. *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act* explored the deformity of human love wrought by authoritarian power – in this case the notorious piece of apartheid legislation officially termed the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act – which banned sexual contact, indeed all forms of intimacy, between people of different racial groups.

Fugard himself had had personal experience of the machinery of repression when his passport was revoked by the South African government in 1967 'for reasons of state safety and security', following the production of an earlier work, *The Blood Knot*, on British television. The first of his plays to be publicly performed – in

Johannesburg, in 1961 – *The Blood Knot* introduced a central theme of Fugard's work; the struggle of people trapped in bonds of family, love or dependency, oppressed by systems to which they lack the keys of analysis or insight. He had written it over the previous two years, at the same time that he was setting down his only novel, *Tsotsi*.

Tsotsi had its genesis in Fugard's rare insight (for a white South African) into the brutality of the apartheid system. Arriving in Johannesburg in 1958 from Port Elizabeth, he had taken the first job available: as a clerk in a Native Commissioner's Court that dealt with violations of the Pass Laws. 'Seeing the machinery in action,' he said, 'taught me how it works and in fact what it does to people.' Further understanding came with his introduction to Sophiatown, Johannesburg's violent, colourful ghetto: '... tremendous poverty, a capacity for humour that was almost proverbial, bitterness and hope'.

Sophiatown was a 'freehold' township where blacks had historically been allowed to own title to their properties. Its lively jazz and shebeen subculture, where black and white could drink and dance together, formed the febrile centre of an urban African renaissance of music and theatre. The government now set about suppressing this creative independence. Pass raids were stepped up to catch those blacks in the township who were 'surplus to labour requirements'. Black writers and musicians found themselves banned or forced into exile. Under the Group Areas Act, Sophiatown was 're-zoned' as a white suburb

– to be called Triomf (Triumph) – and its demolition began, the area's long-established neighbourhoods relocated block by block to the grim wasteland of the new South Western Townships, Soweto.

The pressures of survival under extreme conditions had been the motif of Fugard's first 'Township' plays, *No-Good Friday* (1958) and *Nongogo* (1959). These were 'workshop' productions with amateur actors that used the lives of Sophiatown characters – a jazz musician, a gangster, an aspiring student, a shebeen queen – to reflect apartheid's damage. The effect of its unsparing regime of humiliation, he suggested, was to abort hope and drive the persecuted to turn on those lower down the survival chain. The character of Fugard's *Tsotsi* is a product of this implacable process.

We are introduced to his murderous protagonist as he is about to nominate the night's victim: ' . . . the youngest of the four, the one who had said the least, the one they called Tsotsi, leaned forward and brought his slim, delicate hands together, the fingers interlocked in the manner of prayer. The others looked at him and waited.' Tsotsi's gang, his apostles, are a drunkard, a psychopath and a thug. Few that reside in this subterranean world have the hope of salvation, including the innocent: rural blacks who have come to the city for work. Their dreams are mocked and they are fed upon and die, or are consumed like raw materials by the white man's industries.

Fugard only slowly allows us the measure of his monster. He places him in a void of impermanence, against

the disappearing geography of Sophiatown. Tsotsi's very work is transience, the casual termination of human life. He repeats to himself, 'It is the same as always', yet Tsotsi knows nothing of himself, not name, nor age, nor origins. Shorn of history, he has no identity, and when he thinks of himself he thinks of darkness. How does one reach an accommodation with such an entity? Initially Fugard implies that it cannot be done; his character appears to have no point of human access, like the malevolent system that has created him.

It is when Tsotsi rediscovers his memory that he realises he is alive, and as in Fugard's plays, this revelation comes in a collision of shocking, primal images. Thereafter it is as though he cannot close his eyes to life's intensity. The political background to his circumstances, previously unheeded, begins to intrude. During the period of political ferment that coincided with the rise of the tsotsis – demonstrations against the destruction of Sophiatown, boycotts of the state bus service, rallies against the Pass Laws – the ANC Youth League and the Pan-Africanist Congress had attempted to mobilise young urban blacks including, unsuccessfully, the township gangs. These generally shunned the mass action movements, and it was only with the Soweto student uprising in 1976 that tsotsis joined the common rage against the police and fought their incursions into the townships, some being hailed as revolutionaries. In one of the novel's anticipatory ironies, Tsotsi, re-entering the community of mankind, is taken by some for a people's leader.



After completing the book, Fugard appears to have put it aside and it was discovered twenty years later in a suitcase of his manuscripts stored at South Africa's National English Documentation Centre. Published in 1980, *Tsotsi's* resurrection came as the regime faced growing resistance from the urbanised black proletariat, whose strength the apartheid theorists had feared. Eventually the combination of social and economic pressures would bring about the end of white rule, with the holding of the country's first democratic elections in 1994. The new South Africa is attempting to overcome persistent crime and unemployment and to offer all its citizens the hope of a better future. Earthbound, lost, blinded by the pain of his oppression but finally capable of transcendence, Tsotsi turns out to be a surprisingly prophetic model for his country's redemption.

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There had been a silence, as always happened at about the same time, a long silence when none of them moved except maybe to lift up a glass and hold it high over their heads for the dregs to drip into their open mouths, or to yawn and stretch and then slump back into their chairs, when one of them might scratch himself, another consider the voice of the woman in the backyard, the old woman who was scolding, rattling her words like stones in a tin, and all of them in their own time looking at the street outside, and the shadows, wondering if they were not yet long enough. It was not a deliberate silence; there was no reason for it, being at first just the pause between something said and the next remark, but growing from that because they were suddenly all without any more words. It ended, as always happened at about the same time, when the young one, the youngest of the four, the one who had said the least, who had sat there and listened to the other three, the one they called Tsotsi, leant forward and brought his slim, delicate hands together, the fingers interlocking in the manner of prayer. The other three looked up at him and waited.

Before that the one called Boston had been telling his story. Boston always had a story. He started early in the afternoon when they came together in Tsotsi's room and settled down with the first bottle of beer, telling it from then

for a long time, almost to the hour when the shadows were long enough and Tsotsi told them what they would be doing that night. He told it slowly, taking his time, the words coming in an easy rhythm between the swallows of beer, the belches, the bother of opening another bottle and the other interruptions like leaving the room for the backyard where you rested against the hot corrugated iron fence with an outstretched arm and pissed into the sand, and watched it soak up and dry away before you had left the spot. When he got back he would ask, where was I, and sometimes someone remembered and most times no one cared because it wasn't important. All that mattered was that his voice filled that last reluctant hour of an afternoon that was heavy with the weight of idle hands. They toyed with their glasses, they drew out the wet rings left by the beer bottles into strange patterns on the tabletop, while Boston with a gesture that was becoming habitual rubbed his eyes with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. It was a strain to be without glasses.

The other two were mostly listeners. Die Aap, so called because of his long arms—his knuckles seemed to drag in the dust—listened attentively to every word. Sometimes he had something to say, or asked a question, and he laboured a lot in finding words and putting them together. The last of the four, the one called Butcher, built like Tsotsi with lithe supple bones, but different in his small, dangerous eyes and his pendulous lower lip, Butcher also listened, but with impatience. Why all the words? His stories were told in ten words or less. But there was nothing else to do except listen.

Boston's stories were of no consequence. The time he did this, where he did it and how and with whom...

A hawker with a pushcart trundles past in the street outside. They see the shadow long after the man has disappeared.

Or the time this happened and why it did and how that happening started off a lot of other things that unfold one after the interminable other in the effortless drone of Boston's voice.

A window of the house across the street, which they can see clearly through their open door, the window burns fiercely with the reflected light of the sun. It must be low. Not long now.

Or that man. That strange man of a time back who went there and never returned.

The old woman is shaking her tin of scolding words in the backyard. A child cries.

Butcher shifts with a sudden spasm of impatience.

Why? Why? Die Aap is asking a question. Boston laughs. 'Because...' Another bottle comes up from under the table. They fill their glasses. 'Because,' Boston continues, 'because of this cherry. Ja man. Buggered him up she did.'

This then being the pause, and then more than the pause because it was also the end of the story and no one had any more words, and they sat silent a long time until the youngest of the four, the one they called Tsotsi, until suddenly his hands were together and the other three looking at him and waiting.

Boston smiled, Butcher twisted in another spasm of

impatience and hate for the silent man, Die Aap waited impassively.

Tsotsi saw it all. The smile that hid fear, the eyes that hid hate, the face that hid nothing. You I can trust, he said to himself, looking at Die Aap. You I must never turn my back on, and it was Butcher he looked at. And you, Boston. You smile at me and your smile hides fear.

‘What’s it Tsotsi?’ Boston asked. He held Tsotsi’s gaze for a few seconds, but when the muscles at the end of his mouth began to stiffen he looked down into his empty glass.

‘Ja. What’s it man?’ Butcher asked.

Die Aap remained silent.

‘It’s Friday night,’ Tsotsi said, and looked out of the door. The shadows were long enough. It would soon be dark.

‘The trains,’ he said. ‘Let’s take one on the trains.’

Butcher was the first to react. He smiled and then laughed, a cold sound, sharp as a knife blade. ‘Ja man. One on the trains,’ he said.

But it was Boston that Tsotsi was watching, and Boston knew it and he kept his eyes down, no longer seeing the glass in his hands. But even like that Tsotsi could see his forehead and that was enough because very soon the first film of sweat was shining there.

Die Aap needed time. He repeated what Tsotsi had said. ‘The trains. Let’s take one on the trains.’ He thought about it, framed the picture, his part in it. It was simple. He knew it all. He nodded. ‘Ja.’ That was all he had to say.

Boston looked up. All three were watching him now.

‘Why?’ he asked, and played nervously with the glass between his hands.

‘Why not?’ Tsotsi’s voice had an edge.

Boston shrugged his shoulders, tried to yawn but it didn’t work. So he sighed, as if bored. ‘Sometimes you pick one and he’s got nothing.’

Tsotsi let him wait for the reply. ‘I never make a mistake.’

Die Aap nodded. ‘That’s true. Not once.’

Butcher moved with impatience in his seat. Why all the talk. He liked it. ‘It’s good man. Ja man. It’s good.’ He stood up. ‘Let’s go.’

But Tsotsi was still waiting for Boston, still watching him and his elusive eyes, his dry lips, his pink tongue as he tried to moisten them. Boston found nothing else to say against the idea, nothing that they would understand and maybe accept. ‘Okay,’ he said, ‘okay’, so they all stood up and waited while Tsotsi put on his coat, and then followed him out of the room and into the street, Die Aap second then Boston who was saying, ‘Okay’, saying it many times between sighs and forced yawns and exaggerated indifference with Butcher leaving last because he had fetched a bicycle spoke from a box in the corner of the room. That was the reason for his name. He had never missed.

The street they took was crooked and buckled as bad as the corrugated iron fences they passed on the side and Tsotsi led them a way that was sharp with stones, and eyes, and dog’s teeth. It was dusty and the end of a day, but still light, when they left the room. It had been hot as well, it being

that time of the year, and the township was heavy that moment of their moving, with hope for the dark clouds in the east and thoughts about a wet world. It was a moment of respite, a slow moment between the long day and the lot done and the lot more to come with the longer night, and the township wore that hour the way a beggar wears his rags, the cast-offs of a better time, accepted but without gratitude, worn without pride. Children were despondent because there were no more games to play, busy women found themselves with empty hands, dogs stood around on awkward legs, old men dozing in the sun felt the sun go and awoke to find their bodies cold. It was an hour of despondent attitudes, when you kicked the dust if you had played in it all day, or stood up and spat into it if you had slept there in the sun. And having kicked you just stood, or having stood just waited, like the women with their idle hands, and tried not to see yourself in the other postures of uselessness.

But the moment of *their* passing, the four of them walking down the street with a purpose, was also the passing of that moment of respite, and more than respite, a moment of reckoning it had also been, when neighbour missed neighbour because the slum clearance men had been at work in that area and a few more roofs were down and the walls, without doors and windows, gaped like skulls in the fading light and you could still see the dust settling inside while you remembered the disbelief, the angry impotence, the confusion in the faces that had followed the cart loaded high with the sticks of furniture; a reckoning also for the old man who was prompted by the cold in his bones to count the days past and hope for tomorrow; a reckoning for the

women who balanced the little money their men would bring home against their many needs, spending at the same time a meagre portion of hope on their safe return because this day had been Friday and ahead was the night and the four men passing that moment were harbingers of the night, that moment gone now because *they* had passed and rooms were suddenly grey and cold and mothers calling their children off the streets where shadows were running like rats after the four pipers.

And Tsotsi knew it. Knowing it not only as a fact as big as the brave men who stepped aside to let him pass, and the shopkeeper who hurried out to board up his windows and bolt his door, or as small as fatherless children and the whispers of hate that scuttled away down the alleys, he knew it also as his meaning. Life had taught him no other. His knowledge was without any edge of enjoyment. It was simply the way it should be, feeling in this the way other men feel when they see the sun in the morning. The big men, the brave ones, stood down because of him, the fear was of him, the hate was for him. It was all there because of him. He knew he *was*. He knew he was there, at that moment, leading the others to take one on the trains.

That is why in his passing down the crooked street, men looked the other way and women wept into the dust.

His name was Gumboot Dhlamini and he had been chosen. But he never knew until it was too late. They gave him no warning.

Gumboot was a man. Measured in hope he stood in his shoes tall amongst men, but even barefoot on a day back

with an empty belly and a chesty laugh sounding the vastness of his humour as he walked into the city so that those who heard him looked up and laughed at him, even then Gumboot had stood as high as a head in heaven.

‘Maxulu,’ he had said a thousand miles away, standing on the side of the road with his wife, ‘Maxulu, I will be back.’ The white man had pointed along the road to Sabata’s place as the way to the Golden City, so he started walking that way. His wife stood and watched him for a long time and later when she got tired, because she was heavy with child, she sat down on the grass and he saw her like that until the road took him over the hill, and he remembered her like that ever since.

He had also asked the white man how many days it would take and the white man had said he reached the city travelling in two days in his motor car, which of course was faster than walking. Anyway, he started counting and when he reached ten and could count no further he made a notch in his stick. Thereafter he made a notch in his stick every time he had counted another ten. There were quite a few notches in his stick when he broke it killing the snake and had to throw it away. So he stopped counting.

The weather had been warm when he left his wife on the side of the road, and his belly full, but with time the nights grew colder, his one blanket thinner and there were days of hunger. He worked once and with the money he earned bought himself a pair of shoes which he carried wrapped up in his blanket. He lived through days of vast silence, tramping along the road with the unending veld stretching away unseen on every side, tramping through the

clouds of dust left by the hurrying cars, always silent, very alone, but never without hope. Then on a big day of the new world he was in, the brown, flat, unbroken world he had walked into, on a certain big day, topping a rise he saw the buildings of the Golden City in a purple distance. And they were big, and that day Gumboot found his voice, and laughed, and hoped high again, and put on his shoes for the last day of his long walk.

In the city he found work on the mines and a room in one of the townships, and for a year he had been travelling from the one to the other in the early morning, with a multitude of others on the crowded trains, to work, and back in the evening, with the same multitude on the same trains, to sleep. He travelled safe for a year because he heeded the advice of others, and in that same year he worked hard and earned well and wore through the new shoes he had bought on the road, and had them mended, then wore through them again and then through them again and bought a new pair.

In some ways the year was a short one, and in others it was long, especially when he remembered Maxulu sitting on the side of the road and he got him a man who could make words to do him a letter back home. And now at last the year was almost over. In a week, only one more week of early steaming mornings and work under the ground, he would be going back with the money he had saved. Maxulu would be getting back her man very much the same as he had left, with his laugh still big, and his hands that were generous in the gestures of love and even in shoes, still as high as hope.

But Gumboot was a man and that has a second meaning. It has to do with death and the frailty of even those earthen cups that hold passionate draughts of laughter, that can be broken and all the life of a man spilt in the dust. Gumboot was this man also, in this meaning, because on that Friday night train going back to the township, a week before going home, Butcher was behind him and Butcher knew with unfailing accuracy the position of the heart.

Gumboot had made three mistakes. Firstly, he smiled. It was because of the long queue at the station entrance, you see, because it was only a week to going home and ahead of him was a weekend of no work and a man coming round to his room to write Maxulu the letter that he was coming back—it was because of the people, his people (there were so many of his people!); the smell of these other men, their impatience to be home, some sad, most happy; it was because of all this that he smiled and Tsotsi noticed him because that smile was as white as light.

His second mistake was the tie. Flaming red it was, with bolts of silver lightning playing on his chest, like those sunset storms he had seen as a boy when he had stopped on the long trek home with the cattle after a day in the mountain pastures, stopping under the torn and brooding sky to shout his exultation to the world and hear it echoing down the long valleys and then to run with fear when the sky answered and lightning struck deep in the mountains. He had bought the tie at lunchtime from the Indian hawker who trundled his cart of scarves and beads and bangles and bright things to the mine gate every Friday, bought simply because he had never had one and it would surely impress

Maxulu. But it was a bright tie and made it easy for Tsotsi to follow him at a distance as the queue shuffled on its thousand legs, like a millipede, to the ticket office.

And there, the third mistake. He bought the ticket with money from his pay packet. In the moment and its exuberance he had forgotten a cardinal piece of advice for getting home safe on the Friday night train...don't let anyone see your money. Why after all remember the silly warning when thousands of his own people stood around him, who like him were honest men and about their own business of getting home safely and quickly. One whole year and never any trouble on the 5:49 (always ten minutes late)...and so he forgot to slip a small coin apart when they had paid him, and instead now tore his pay packet open in a hurry, because the others behind him were in a hurry, because of their laughter and curses, tearing the pay packet open to find a small coin among the notes.

He hurried to the platform and waited there. See! He was still alive! But Tsotsi was closing in on his man, and when the train, the 5:49 (always ten minutes late), pulled into the station and the crowd surged for the doors, he used that moment to close in on his man.

And now in the train (still alive!), jammed in with as many as the coach could hold, going home in a smell of hard work and tobacco smoke, his ears as full as his nose with the low murmur of tired voices, himself impatient because the writing man was coming to his room at six-thirty and there was still a half-hour walk from the station, and in between all this thinking of Maxulu, then his tie, and seeing it crumpled by the rush to get in, wanting to straighten it but finding

with slow surprise that he could not move either arm.

He never had time to register the full meaning of that moment. He tried a second time, but Die Aap was strong.

Tsotsi smiled at the growing bewilderment on the big bastard's face, waiting for and catching the explosion of darkness in the eyes as Butcher worked the spoke up and into his heart. Even as that was happening, Tsotsi bent close to the dying man and in his ear whispered an obscene reference to his mother. A moment of hate at the last, he had learnt, disfigured the face in death.

Die Aap still had his arms locked around the man's waist. As the body slumped the other three crowded in and with the combined pressure of their bodies held it erect...a move unnoticed in the crowded coach. Boston who was nearest, and who was also sick, sick right through his brain, through his heart into his stomach, and was fighting to keep it down, Boston it was who slipped his hand into the pocket and took out the pay packet.

When the train pulled into the station the crowd made a second surge for the door, as happened every night, and the few on the station who wanted to go further up the line battled their way against this flood to get into the coaches, as also happened every night, but the 5:49 (ten minutes late) did not pull away, as happened occasionally on Friday nights, because those left behind in the coach and the few who got in found Gumboot Dhlamini and saw the end of the bicycle spoke.