

The Radical Paradigm in South African Theatre Studies : A Review of Theatre and Cultural Struggle in South Africa by Robert Mshengu Kavanagh.
Zed Press, London, 1985. 237pp.

by Ian Steadman

Since 1980 academic work by South African scholars has begun to draw attention to a new sense of theatre's role in cultural change. Concomitantly, such work has drawn attention to a distressingly underdeveloped base in the study of theatre. Innovative work by practitioners of the theatre in South Africa has not been matched by the work of academic commentators. University departments established for the study of theatre and allied disciplines have been hermitically sealed from the radical revisionism which characterised the social sciences in the 1970s. By the end of the decade, indeed, it was possible to believe that such departments had been established for no other purpose than the perpetuation of an untheorised tradition of training in 'speech and drama' (symbolised, at a conference, by the hair-raising comment from one professor of this tradition that he didn't see the point of 'all this theory'). Meanwhile, other scholars in the social sciences usurped the role of the theatre scholars. They began to supplement their studies of South African political economy and class formation with sidelong glances at the role of performance in shaping culture and consciousness. Gradually this important work began to permeate through to those whose claimed territory was performance studies.

In 1980 two doctoral theses on South African performance, both exhibiting the influence of the revisionist historiography of the 1970s, were submitted: the first by Robert McLaren in England and the second by David Coplan in the USA. In 1981 a third doctorate, although uninfluenced by the new paradigm, was submitted by Peter Larlham in the USA. In the same year the journal *Critical Arts* produced an issue on South African theatre and identified its position within the radical paradigm, though with perhaps too mechanistic an application of Althusserianist strategies. Then various writers in the *South African Labour Bulletin* and *English in Africa* demonstrated the significance of the new critical strategies in various essays on South African theatre. Meanwhile, Stephen Gray had always been there somewhere, through careful scrutiny showing how the theatre scholars had neglected their history. McLaren's doctoral research produced a number of journal essays — one of them stirring the dust with a rigorous though somewhat capricious critique of Fugard from within the radical paradigm. Then Hauptfleisch and Steadman's 1984 anthology of South African plays raised further problems with an insufficiently theorised introduction to their bold categorisation of different theatrical traditions in South Africa.

By the middle of the 1980s scholars of South African theatre had arrived at a point of ambivalence. On the one hand, South African theatre had been subpoenaed by some rigorous radical theorising to bear witness to cultural and political change. On the other hand, this was the problem: *some* radical theorising. After the initial attack, a period of consolidation was necessary in order to discuss both the merits and the flaws of the new work. In 1985 the publication of McLaren's (1980) thesis is, in these terms, a significant event.

It may come as a surprise to many that a book published in 1985 with the auspicious title *Theatre and Cultural Struggle in South Africa* makes no mention of The Market Theatre, of young Sowetan dramatists like Matsemela Manaka and Maishe Maponya, of the important phenomenon of trade union "worker's theatre", or of current popular theatre in the townships. In the current context of struggle and resistance in South Africa, where the theatre has continued to play an important part, the very notion of cultural struggle immediately invokes the work of theatre practitioners *currently* involved. Despite the important developments in this area since 1976, however, the reader of this book will have to be content with a study which ends its project in 1976. Furthermore, the reader will have to be content with a book which, apart from cursory glances at other works, sets out to study four plays only. The author has chosen Fugard's *No-Good Friday*, the sensational musical *King Kong*, Gibson Kente's township musical *Too Late* and Mthuli Shezi's Black Consciousness play *Shanti*. An introduction prepares us for a rigorous Marxist analysis of the *function* of each of the plays in the context of revolutionary struggle and change. The first three chapters map the ground for an application of both the broad theoretical models provided by Marx, Lenin and Gramsci, and the local theoretical models provided by Wolpe and others, to the study of the theatre as cultural action. A fourth chapter provides a survey of the development of South African theatre until 1976. Chapters five to eight deal with each of the four plays, and a final chapter nine concludes with a proposition of the potential for a concept of 'majority' theatre which will function as cultural action in the struggle for a post-revolutionary society which, it is assumed, must necessarily be socialist.

Mshengu — McLaren — Tshabalala — Kavanagh (he has used each of the names on different occasions) was a prominent figure in theatre on the Witwatersrand during the mid-1970s. A university lecturer in English, editor of the magazine *S'ketsh'*, driving creative force behind Workshop '71, and critical commentator on the emerging 'radical' theatre, he was both theorist and practitioner of the theatre during a period of important political and cultural change. His involvement in the radical theatre movement has not been without a specific kind of modesty, expressed in 1983 thus:

"I was deeply involved in the work of Experimental Theatre Workshop '71. The assessment of this group is therefore better left to an independent observer. However, I feel I should make it clear that right from the beginning we were quite aware of the need to base our

theatre work in the languages and culture of the majority, and in fact we virtually pioneered the use of 'tsotsitaal' and other urban dialects as legitimate languages of the theatre."

It is not the exaggeration of this claim — ignoring developments in many different traditions of South Africa theatre — which one recalls on reading the book. What is most disturbing is a gradual awareness that Kavanagh is by no means going to leave the assessment of his contribution to South African theatre to an independent observer. Instead, he is going to do it himself. Thus the four plays are analysed to show how they inscribe the elitest values of their creators — something, it is argued, which ultimately precluded their genuine contact with 'the majority' in South Africa. As one reads the critical assessments of each of these works, a suspicion begins to lurk that all this is leading somewhere: surely there must be *someone* whose work in the theatre is capable of achieving an honest contact with 'the majority'? And indeed, the book answers exactly that question. For it is shown that the group which came closest to achieving this was Workshop '71, and Workshop '71 was, of course, the group led by Kavanagh himself.

Now this is not to be capricious. Kavanagh's study is a useful one — in many ways an innovative one. For he very clearly locates his study within an important space. The task of locating South African theatre within the space provided by the Gramscian model is still in its infancy, and this book takes the argument further and more comprehensively than has been previously attempted. Even if, while reading the first three chapters, the reader becomes weary of the genuflections to Lenin and Wolpe — whose work is surely sufficiently known to be *somewhat* assumed rather than *constantly* invoked to prove a point — there is no doubt that Kavanagh provides a rigorous assessment of the conjuncture of race, class and nationalism as it is expressed in the plays he has selected for study. His analyses of the plays also contain some excellent work on the language used in each case. What is lacking, however, is the application of certain methods and strategies which, in theatre studies, are by now orthodox means of avoiding traditional form/content/context vulgarities. Thus the failure to speak of theatre language as *discourse*, the failure to consider theatrical dialogue as utterance, and the failure to consider theatre as *symbolic* communication leads the author to schematize complex processes and discourses. At its worst, his critical approach manifests itself in some untenable assertions. In his critique of *Shanti* as an elitest Black Consciousness play, Kavanagh asserts his point by reference to one street scene where a character buys a newspaper from a vendor. We do not, Kavanagh says (p 174), sense 'the real existence of a community': therefore, such a scene reflects an elitest writer out of touch with 'the majority'. Now, we do not expect (say) Brecht, in *The Exception and the Rule*, to reinforce his argument by populating his stage with a supporting cast of proletarian extras. But Kavanagh insists that the 'curiously deserted' streets in this scene reflect the elitism of the producing group, which failed to make contact with 'the

majority'. Elsewhere, selecting Fugard's *No-Good Friday*, Kavanagh presents an accurate critique of the dialogue. This critique, however, then becomes the platform from which to launch salvos at Fugard's liberal misconception of the black struggle for liberation. The way in which this is done is extraordinary. Kavanagh's reasoning goes thus: Shark, Fugard's gangster villain, mentions at one point 'the police . . . the bastards who lock us up for not carrying our passes'. Because, however, Fugard has made Shark the villain in the play:

"... the accurate analysis in this speech of the function of the South African police and its relation to the community is discredited because it is Shark, a criminal and a murderer, who expresses it." (p.77)

The criticism goes on in this vein. Kavanagh shows how each of the plays *should* have been written in order to bring them into line with revolutionary socialism. Making no reference whatever to the moment *in performance*, Kavanagh describes the moment in *King Kong* when a building-gang is at work, the signs of poverty all around them:

"Then they are paid. This is the moment of choice. Instead of making the political connection between their pay packet and their labour and rags, i.e. the inadequacy of their wages and the degree of exploitation, Bloom brings on Lucky and his gang . . ." (p.100)

And so on. Kavanagh is an angry man. It shows on every page of this book, from the preface to the endnotes. He has every right to be, with regard to the corruption of his country. Unfortunately, this affects both scholarship and criticism. It precludes the presentation of a fuller picture. If Fugard's apprentice work is to be criticised on the basis of its dialogue and its distance from the dynamic language of 'the majority', then we need to know why *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* does not come in for consideration. If the South African Black Theatre Union is invoked on four different occasions as an example of the way black militant theatre was being organised, then we also need to be told that that Union collapsed before it could achieve anything. Just as Kavanagh criticises his playwrights for what they leave out rather than what they put in, so this book must be seen as a partial view written to endorse a very specific perspective. That no mention is made of Reverend Maqina's powerful play *Give us this Day* — a play which became a symbol of black theatre's role in the pre-1976 period — is but one indication that this book fills in but a small portion of the project signified by its title.

Despite these criticisms, however, Kavanagh makes an important contribution to the project of revising the liberal paradigm in Southern African cultural studies. By rejecting the false dichotomies established by the construction of racial categories in the study of theatre, and re-asserting the importance of class and nationalism, he has helped us to understand the ways in which culture and

consciousness shape and are in turn shaped by the world in which we live. If the postulation of a concept of 'majority theatre' implies a kind of organicism almost as false as that of 'black' theatre, then that is a problem to which the radical theorists will have to turn their attention. More important than that is the fact that the work has begun, and Kavanagh has played a major part.

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