



BOESMAN AND LENA

by Athol Fugard

directed by Yaël Farber

SignatureTheatre **STUDY GUIDE**

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Zainab Jah and Sahr Ngaujah. Photo by Joan Marcus.

INTRODUCTION

SYNOPSIS

Boesman and Lena follows a Coloured South African couple, Boesman and Lena, as they wander, homeless, through the mudflats on the river Swartkops outside of Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Unable to own property under apartheid law and with their previous shelter in a refugee camp bulldozed by White South Africans, Boesman and Lena travel from town to town looking for work. As they search for a spot to set up camp one night, Boesman and Lena encounter an old African man from a Xhosa-speaking community. Lena wants to take him in, seeking solace in his loneliness, but Boesman wants no association with the man and pressures Lena to get rid of him. *Boesman and Lena* explores the entrenched racial inequality and classism of apartheid South Africa and the impact of inequity on the power we exert over or the mercy we grant to those different from ourselves.



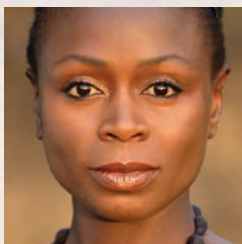
Zainab Jah and Sahr Ngaujah. Photo by Joan Marcus.

CHARACTERS



Boesman (Sahr Ngaujah)

A poor, middle-aged Coloured man whose temporary home has been destroyed by White South Africans, leaving him homeless and carrying his belongings on his back. He is abusive towards his wife Lena, both physically and emotionally. While Lena dwells in the past, Boesman tries relentlessly to only think about the present.



Lena (Zainab Jah)

A poor, Coloured woman and Boesman's wife. Lena's body shows signs of Boesman's physical abuse, and she talks and thinks perpetually of the past. She speaks of leaving Boesman, but never does.



Outa (Thomas Silcott)

An elderly African man who only speaks Xhosa. He is wandering through the mudflats when Lena finds him and invites him into their camp for the night.

A CLOSER LOOK: A NOTE FROM DIRECTOR YAËL FARBER

I was born and raised in apartheid South Africa. The legislated, obsessional classifying of each of us according to our race or ethnic group determined every single aspect of our lives.

The population was meticulously categorized (simply put) into “white”, “asian,” “coloured” and “black.” It is indeed crucial to understanding Fugard’s *Boesman and Lena* that in apartheid South Africa the term “coloured” was a separate ethnic classification from “black,” and markedly different to how the term “coloured” has been used in the past in America. “Coloured” is a group of mixed ancestry and this classification afforded people marginally more rights than South Africa’s “black” population, but was ultimately a group as disenfranchised as the architects of apartheid could have hoped. Ensuring people are kept divided ensures they are kept conquered.

We lived amidst an insanity that was entrenched with astonishing precision, which succeeded for the most part in dehumanizing people from one another. This alienation was successful at all levels, articulated in *Boesman and Lena*’s treatment of Outa when he first appears on the mudflats. In the enclaves of the white suburbs, one lived in a denialism ensured by a state-controlled media. The press was censored and distorted to hide the atrocities being committed, but the injustice everywhere was undeniable. We knew. As a teenager, finding Athol Fugard’s stories at The Market Theatre made me feel that I had stumbled upon one of the only means I could rely upon to be told the truth. Here in the dark of a theatre auditorium, I could witness lives in all their complexity amidst the pain of apartheid.

“Eyes, Outa,” says Lena. “Someone to see you.” Countless productions were banned in those years, but spaces like the Market Theatre in Johannesburg found loopholes through which stories would slip briefly into the light life to allow us to see the other. It was in theatre that we had access to the simple profound knowledge that behind the obsessive categorizing lay the dangerous truth that we are all ultimately alike and therefore not dismissible as less deserving of the rights to land, safety and food for our children, the right to love whom we choose and to live with the dignity each of us is entitled to.

The great mastery of Fugard’s *Boesman and Lena* is not that it is a play about apartheid, but that it is a play about human beings...



Thomas Silcott, Zainab Jah, Yaël Farber, and Sahr Ngaujah. Photo by ??.



Yaël Farber. Photo by ??.

Out on the mudflats three human beings, stripped of everything by apartheid show us who we are and would be beyond the comforts and privileges life may have afforded us until now. Apartheid was real. Its legacy remains devastatingly so for the majority of South Africans. But to view this work as historical is to miss the reach of Fugard’s work: across time and space into the present obsession with who has the right to be where and how walls will ensure that those less entitled to all we want for ourselves need to be kept on the periphery... out there in the mudflats of the world. Through this remarkable play, the hope is that Fugard’s *Boesman and Lena* blaze briefly to life tonight in front of you - and remind us of the struggle of being human.

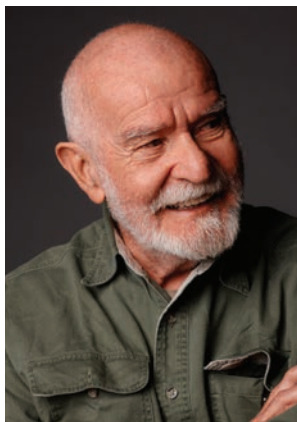
It is through this work that we might meet ourselves in these embattled refugees, should the hand of fate ever revoke the privileges that keep us safe in our enclaves on the safe side of the wall.

That is – to me – the power of Fugard...and the power of theatre.

– Yaël Farber

A CLOSER LOOK: INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT ATHOL FUGARD

Athol Fugard. Photo by Gregory Costanzo.



How did you get your start in theatre? What drew you to playwriting?

My start in theatre began with the amateur drama group in my high school, the Port Elizabeth Technical College. By the time I was a young writer in my twenties I was drawn both to prose, poetry and drama. My wife at the time, Sheila Fugard, was a professional actress and that provided one way in. I think,

however, the real draw towards theatre was my increasing fascination with the spoken language in people's mouths.

You wrote *Boesman and Lena* in the 1960s during apartheid. What were you seeing in South Africa around this time, and how did it inspire your work on the play?

As I think you will be able to read in my published notebooks, I once saw a couple crossing the road on the mudflats near Swartkops, not at all far from where I was living at the time. She had a basin on her head with all of their possessions, and the couple haunted me until I wrote the play. But I was seeing a lot more besides this - South Africans who the government regarded as non-White were suffering on a daily basis.

My interest is in people and their stories, it's only that it is impossible to tell a South African story that is not inherently political in one way or another.

When your plays first started being performed, how were they received in South Africa?

One of my earliest memories of the reception of my work is of staging *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* for two domestic workers in a garage. One of them walked out halfway. You must remember that when I was a young man, there were not many South African stories on stages here - it was mainly imported British comedies. I have another memory, of the great South African actor Andre Huegenot asking me incredulously who I thought would be interested in a story about two Coloured brothers living in a shack in Korsten. The play in question was *The Blood Knot*. Later, of course, South African stages and audiences began to pay attention and my work got a small following. In some ways, my big break was taking that very same play to Broadway.

How have things changed or improved in South Africa since you started writing, and what issues concern you about South Africa today?

The sad truth is that not enough has changed. Our government is riddled with corruption and unfortunately, it is again

our Coloured and Black citizens who are suffering the consequences. This is of course because White South Africans generally have an easier start in life with access to generational wealth, education, social capital, etcetera.

This will be your sixth play at Signature. What do you think resonates with American audiences about your work?

Like me, they like listening to stories. The parallels between South African and American society mean that they recognize themselves in what I write.

Your work is inherently political, and you've faced pressure and government-imposed restrictions on a personal and professional level. How has this influenced your work and your understanding of the importance of artistic practice?

I have often enough said that I am not a political playwright. My interest is in people and their stories, it's only that it is impossible to tell a South African story that is not inherently political in one way or another.

What do you want audiences to take away from *Boesman and Lena*?

Lena's load.

Do you have any advice for aspiring theatre makers?

Listen and look around you.



Sahr Ngaujah and Zainab Jah. Photo by Joan Marcus.

INSIDE THE WORLD OF THE PLAY:

Apartheid South Africa

The Old African man that Boesman and Lena encounter can only speak **XHOSA**, an African language spoken by millions of South Africans. Xhosa is one of 11 official languages recognized by the South African Constitution. In 1953, the South African Government delegated Bantustans – territories for Black Africans – including two regions for Xhosa people called Transkei and Ciskei. These regions were independent countries according to the South African government under apartheid. Consequently, Xhosa people were denied South African citizenship and were forcibly relocated to Transkei and Ciskei.

After the fall of apartheid in 1994, Bantustans were abolished. South Africa's first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela, was a Xhosa- speaker.

TIMELINE

Apartheid in South Africa

1948 Policy of apartheid (apartness) adopted when National Party takes power.

1949

1950

Population classified by race. Group Areas Act passed to segregate blacks and whites. Communist Party banned. African National Congress (ANC) responds with campaign of civil disobedience, led by Nelson Mandela.

1952

1953



Outside Port Elizabeth, South Africa.

Major Apartheid Legislation

PROHIBITION OF MIXED MARRIAGES ACT

Together with the 1927 Immorality Act, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act prohibited any sexual or conjugal relations between whites and non-whites.

POPULATION REGISTRATION ACT

All South Africans were divided and registered as belonging to one of three racial groups: white, black, or coloured (a catchall term that included mixed-race). An individual's entire range of action was circumscribed by their racial categorization.

GROUP AREAS ACT

Under the Group Areas Act, land use was tightly segregated, leading to the growth of the black townships outside white cities.

SUPPRESSION OF COMMUNISM ACT

Although ostensibly meant to curtail the activities of the Communist Party, the Suppression of Communism Act was in practice used to persecute any person or organization advocating an end to apartheid.

NATIVES ABOLITION OF PASSES AND COORDINATION OF DOCUMENTS ACT

The hated "passbooks" were identification documents meant to control the movement and economic opportunities of blacks. A defiance campaign against this repressive measure culminated in the massacre at Sharpeville in 1960, in which 69 blacks were killed.

RESERVATION OF SEPARATE AMENITIES ACT

Known as "petty apartheid," this law institutionalized the segregation of public amenities such as taxis, trains, beaches, bathrooms, benches, parks, movie theaters, restaurants, and hotels.

TIMELINE

Apartheid in South Africa

1960s International pressure against government begins, South Africa excluded from Olympic Games.

1960 Seventy black demonstrators killed at Sharpeville. ANC banned.

1961 South Africa declared a republic, leaves the Commonwealth. Mandela heads ANC's new military wing, which launches sabotage campaign.

1964 ANC leader Nelson Mandela sentenced to life imprisonment.

1966 Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd assassinated.

1970s More than 3 million people forcibly resettled in black 'homelands.'

1976 More than 600 killed in clashes between black student protesters and security forces during uprising in Soweto.

1977 Steve Biko interviewed shortly before his arrest and subsequent death in police custody.

1984-89 Township revolt, government declares state of emergency.

1989 FW de Klerk replaces PW Botha as president, meets Mandela. Public facilities desegregated. Many ANC activists freed.

1990 ANC unbanned, Mandela released after 27 years in prison. Namibia becomes independent.

1991 Start of multi-party talks. De Klerk repeals remaining apartheid laws, international sanctions lifted. Major fighting between ANC and Zulu Inkatha movement.

1993 Agreement on interim constitution.

1994 April ANC wins first non-racial elections. Mandela becomes president, Government of National Unity formed, Commonwealth membership restored, remaining sanctions lifted. South Africa takes seat in UN General Assembly after 20-year absence.

An old Chevy.



Thomas Silcott, Zainab Jah, and Sahr Ngaujah. Photo by Joan Marcus.



Thomas Silcott, Sahr Ngaujah, and Zainab Jah. Photo by Joan Marcus.



Karoo, South Africa.

INTERVIEW WITH COSTUME AND SCENIC DESIGNER SUSAN HILFERTY

Susan Hilferty. Photo by Ahron R. Foster.



How did you get your start in theatre? What drew you to design?

I spent a year abroad in London while I was getting my BFA from Syracuse University. I was studying visual arts but before going to London, I had never seen a professional theatre production. Perhaps ironically, the production that had an enormous impact on me was Athol's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, which I saw at the Royal Court Theatre.

A chair, a blackboard and an empty stage. That was all the play needed, and it was all I needed to know I wanted a career telling human stories.

You're working as both the costume and scenic designer for *Boesman and Lena*. What's it like to design two elements of a show? How does one design element influence the other?

In any design process, the goal is to build a world. That is always what I am striving to create with my director and fellow designers. It has been a very exciting process designing both sets and clothes for *Boesman and Lena* because both of those elements are affected by the same atmosphere. The weather, temperature, moisture, sun exposure etc. of the Swartkops are variables that affect our characters, their skin, their hair as well as their clothes, their possessions and the rural road they must traverse. This is so exciting to design because I have so much opportunity to create an environment (along with Amith our lighting designer and Matt our sound designer) and transport our audience to the opposite side of the world.

Do you do any research before you start designing? How do conversations with the director, writer, actors, and other designers inform your process?

I do a lot of research and it's one of my favorite parts of the process. I try to consume as much as I can: music, photography, fine art, literature when beginning my design process and often I return to those tools throughout. I am a designer who really values my collaborations with directors. There are some directors (and designers) whom I work with repeatedly, such as Athol and Yaël, and together we have developed a language which, of course, influences how we create together.

You've known Athol for many years and have worked on multiple productions of his plays. As a designer, what's the impact of working repeatedly with a writer on their body of work?

I think it's important to mention that Athol has also directed the majority of those productions. I love writers but often my work begins with the director. Working with someone like Athol (or Richard Nelson or Doug Wright) is so thrilling because no one knows more about the play than them because they wrote it! I am able to get such a unique insight on the story, especially when they are as personal as Athol's

are to him. I have designed *Boesman and Lena* before and what has been so thrilling about this time has been Yaël's perspective. Hers is, of course, different from Athol's and so, literally, I am seeing the play again with fresh eyes.

Are there particular questions or themes you've found yourself drawn to while working on *Boesman and Lena*?

Defiance has been a theme that keeps surfacing for me. Especially at this moment. We are all so lucky to be in rehearsal on an extraordinary play, with extraordinary people all doing what they love, but while we do this 800,000 government workers are working without pay. In responding to this, the new congress has had to be defiant and strong and clear and steadfast. That keeps popping up in my head watching the journeys of Lena and Boesman in this play.

You've spoken before about theatre's political power. How does understanding theatre as a tool for social change affect your process and inform your work?

I think to understand theatre as a tool for social change is to know how big a responsibility we have as artists and storytellers. And to understand that responsibility we have to be honest with ourselves and one with our conscience. No one is perfect, but we can all strive to remind ourselves that what we do is important both for audiences but also for our community of artists.

Do you have any advice for students, particularly those who may be interested in design?

I am also the chair of graduate design department at NYU/Tisch School of the Arts. I meet so many young people who are so concerned with the future and where they are going and how they will get there that they lose track of the journey. Be in the moment. Experience things. Read. Travel. Expand your horizons. Be in the practice of learning something new every day. One thing will lead to the next. It always does! And maybe you'll find yourself somewhere you least expect.



Sahr Ngaujah and Zainab Jah. Photo by Joan Marcus.

ABOUT SIGNATURE

Signature Theatre celebrates playwrights and gives them an artistic home.



The Pershing Square Signature Center. Photo © David Sundberg / Esto.

Signature makes an extended commitment to a playwright's body of work. By producing a series of plays by each resident writer, Signature delivers an intimate and immersive journey into the playwright's singular vision. In 2014, Signature became the first New York City company to receive the Regional Theater Tony Award®.

Signature serves its mission at The Pershing Square Signature Center, a three-theatre facility on West 42nd Street designed by Frank Gehry Architects to host Signature's three distinct playwrights' residencies and

foster a cultural community. At the Center, Signature continues its original Playwright-in-Residence model as Residency 1, a year-long intensive exploration of a single writer's body of work. Residency 5, the only program of its kind, was launched at the Center to support multiple playwrights as they build bodies of work by guaranteeing each writer three productions over a five-year period. The Legacy Program, launched during Signature's 10th Anniversary, invites writers from both residencies back for productions of premiere or earlier plays.



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