Citation: Zanemvula Kizito Gatyeni (Zakes) Mda

Born in 1948 in the Herschel District of the Eastern Cape, Zanemvula Kizito Gatyeni (Zakes) Mda grew up in Orlando and then Dobsonville, Soweto. His father was a vocal opponent of apartheid, first as a member of the African National Congress Youth League, and later as a founding member of the Pan- African Congress. In 1963, following his arrest for political activities, he and his family left South Africa to live in political exile in Lesotho.

It was when he was at Peka High School in Lesotho that the young Zakes Mda first tried his hand at playwriting. His first plays were indebted to the pathfinding works of Gibson Kente, both in their use of music and dance and their melodramatic tropes. From the 1966 production of *Dead End* (published only in 1978), Mda began to refine his approach to the conjunction of political and existential theatre. In 1976, he received his first degree, a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the International Academy of Arts and Letters in Zurich, Switzerland. He went on to complete an MA in Fine Arts (drama, radio and television) at Ohio University and a PhD at the University of Cape Town.

Mda’s mature plays are remarkable for their stark settings and their presentation of characters engaged in the unyielding struggle to secure the means of life and to have their humanity recognized. His best-known plays, performed in the late-1980s, are *We Shall Sing of the Fatherland*, *The Hill*, *Joys of War* and *The Girls in Their Sunday Dresses*. Each explores, in a distinct register, the limbo situation of the colonised caught between structural social violence and the individual’s endeavour to refuse its internalisation. They combine to form one of the most creative engagements with the familial, social and psychic consequences of colonial oppression and migrancy. Mda’s plays can be understood as highly significant anti-Apartheid works and an invaluable contribution to the decolonization of theatre more generally.

As a playwright-director, Mda understands community theatre as political activism. He has always advocated that drama should be understood as a social activity that is available to everyone. Most of his works foreground the actor and are not dependent on lights, costumes or sets, which has made it possible to travel to the most remote of locations without compromising the plays.

In 1991, Mda was writer-in-residence at the University of Durham, during 1992, he was a visiting research fellow in the Southern African Research Program at Yale and in the following year, he taught African literature and theatre at the University of Vermont. He returned to South Africa in 1994 to take up a visiting professorship in Dramatic Art at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Zakes Mda established his reputation as one South Africa’s preeminent novelists with the publication of both *She Plays with the Darkness* and *Ways of Dying* in 1995. As one of the first writers to face and address the complexities of the post-1990 transition, his fiction not only became the subject of widespread scholarly comment, it was also quickly taken up in secondary and tertiary institutions. *Ways of Dying* was awarded the M-Net Book Prize in 1997 and has been translated into twenty-one languages, the most recent being Turkish.

Since 1995, Mda has published a succession of novels that have received favourable comment and have won an array of prizes. Perhaps the most highly regarded is *The Heart of Redness*. Among other accolades, *The Heart of Redness* was awarded the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize: Africa, the Hurston- Wright Legacy Award and the *Sunday Times* Fiction Prize.

There is undoubtedly an understanding that Mda’s plays and his novels constitute a body of work that scholars will always place at the centre of apartheid and post-apartheid literature. If we think of our literature as constituted at the intersection of social awareness and aesthetic exploration, Mda’s sustained endeavour is a lens through which we can discern its possibilities. His work has expanded our sense of what it means to be South African, how one can enter a literary dialogue with global concerns, and how ideas and insights can be translated across genres and modes of cultural practice. As the increasing number of serious studies of his work attests, we are still coming to terms with all that he has written, and we are all privileged to be making this journey.

It is therefore befitting that the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, bestow an Honorary D o c t o r a t e Degree on Zakes Mda in acknowledgment of his contribution to South Africa and the world’s cultural and literary sphere.