

CITATION: BONISILE JOHN KANI

One of the pioneers of contemporary theatre in South Africa, John Kani's legacy is one shaped by an extraordinary command of language, storytelling and performance. It is a legacy that has been embedded in performance cultures, theatres and learning spaces across the globe – his body of work studied, performed and archived for future generations.

Kani's deft storytelling, emboldened performances and frank social gaze are a testament to the artist's broad expressive range, skilled delivery and insightful representation of reality. However, his mastery of acting, directing and writing does not alone encapsulate his significance as an artist; it is his chronicling of South Africa's historical journey through his art over the last five decades that is of even more importance to our country and beyond.

Kani's unwavering commitment towards social justice is rooted in his creative research through theatre, television and film, as well as his civil society engagements, providing a complex, humane socio-political critique of South Africa's relational landscape.

Bonisile John Kani was born on 30 August 1943 in the Port Elizabeth township of New Brighton, in South Africa's Eastern Cape province. His prolific career grew from performance to writing and dramaturgy, to directing in theatre, to television and, more recently, to working in film. Today, Kani is an internationally acclaimed actor and writer.

His first major encounter with theatre was through the ground-breaking Serpent Players in 1965 in New Brighton. Here, the formidable trio of Kani, Winston Ntshona and Athol Fugard took root, a relationship that saw the creation of *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* and *The Island*, which were first performed in the early 1970s. The works are the epitome of grand-scale storytelling, born of a rich tradition of what would come to be known as workshop theatre, a process of improvised, researched storytelling that culminates in collaborative writing. This rehearsal and writing method has had a lasting impact on successive generations of theatre-makers throughout South Africa.

Sizwe Banzi is Dead and *The Island* captured the heart of the devastating impact of apartheid. They were brave inscriptions of the systematic genocide of the human spirit and, ultimately, bold acts of resistance too.

Following the triumphant performance of the plays in New York and on other international stages, Kani and Ntshona both won a Tony Award in 1975 – a feat that only a handful of South Africans have achieved. On their return to South Africa, the actors faced detention, harassment and violence at the hands of the apartheid police. Kani survived an attempt on his life. His courage to speak truth to power through his art never wavered through this period.

Kani's extensive body of work boasts an impressive global reach and spans award-winning performances, significant roles across the performing arts spectrum, and creative collaborations with leading directors, playhouses and producers. Among his most prestigious engagements are performances with the Royal Shakespeare Company in *Hamlet* (2006) and *The Tempest* (2012).

He has worked closely with the likes of Janice Honeyman, Dame Janet Suzman and Sir Antony Sher. His recent film performance in the ground-breaking *Black Panther* (2018), directed by Ryan Coogler, has elevated his international stature. His film credits are growing rapidly, with the new iteration of *The Lion King* as the latest addition, and he also directed the film version of his award-winning play *Nothing but the Truth*.

Nothing but the Truth (2002), like *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* and *The Island*, stands out as a seminal work in the South African theatre landscape. Setting his play in post-apartheid South Africa, Kani set out to explore the complexity of truth telling, healing and justice in a family ravaged by the traumatic impact of the country's war for freedom. Kani, capturing the mood of the time, questions what it will take for black South Africans to reconcile. In 2003, he won three Fleur du Cap Awards and five Naledi Theatre Awards for *Nothing but the Truth*.

Kani's latest play, *Kunene and the King* (2019), promises to be of equal status. The play deals with the effects of apartheid 25 years into democracy through the relationship between two elderly men – one white, one black. *Kunene and the King*, according to arts critics, captures the critical reality that South Africa's contemporary socio-political relationships face.

In addition to his creative output and influence, Kani's active citizenry is notable. He has been a member of the University of the Witwatersrand Council. Prior to that, Kani was appointed as a Distinguished Carnegie Equity Scholar by the university's transformation office in partnership with Drama for Life. Kani's keynote address at the seminal *Apartheid Archives Conference* during this time demonstrated his mastery of storytelling as a catalyst for capturing the complex human experience.

Kani's extraordinary career has led to countless awards and honours, including honorary doctorates from the universities of Durban-Westville, Rhodes, Cape Town, and Nelson Mandela University. He has also received the Hiroshima Foundation Award for Peace, as well as Fleur du Cap and Naledi lifetime achievement awards (in addition to a Naledi International Impact Award). The Afrikaans community rewarded him with the kykNET lifetime achievement award, and in 2005 he also received a national honour from the South African president – the Order of Ikamanga in Silver – recognising his contribution in the struggle for the liberation of his country through his work in the arts.

Kani is a patron of the Market Theatre Foundation and, in 2015, it named the complex's main theatre the John Kani Theatre, in recognition of the critical role he continues to play in the creative industries. In 2017, Whites Road in Port Elizabeth's city centre was renamed John Kani Road. In 2018, he was awarded the JF Kennedy Gold Medal by the Kennedy Arts Centre for his service to humanity and excellence in the arts. He is also the recipient of the prestigious Sortugui Afrique Cinema Honour in Burkina Faso. Most recently, Kani was awarded the Voices in Freedom Award by Shared Interest in New York. Previous recipients include Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu.

In South Africa, Kani's written texts form part of the prescribed curriculum in high schools as well as in many university performance and literature departments. His legacy continues to be felt across all generations. It is fair to state that today, his voice remains as commanding, critical and forthright about our country's current social circumstances as it was in the darkest days of the anti-apartheid movement, and it is therefore befitting that the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, bestow an honorary doctorate degree on Bonisile John Kani.