

Sizwe Bansi is Dead: on politics, performance and identity

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Abstract

This essay examines the relationship between politics, performance, and identity by entering into dialogue with the play *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona. First staged in 1972, the play delves into questions of identity within apartheid South Africa, telling the story of Sizwe Bansi, a migrant worker who must adopt a new identity to secure a work permit in Port Elizabeth. After tracing the play's origins, the essay provides a detailed analysis of its plot. This is followed by a brief theological exploration of the play, considering its enduring relevance in contemporary identity discussions, both in South Africa and globally.

Keywords

*identity, theology and the theatre, Hans Urs von Balthasar,
South African protest theatre, apartheid and its legacy.*

Introduction

Towards the end of the first volume of his theodramatics, Hans Urs von Balthasar argues that one of the central questions that is brought up in the theatre is “Who am I?”¹ For, Balthasar shows, when attending a theatre performance, we are continuously confronted with different roles being bestowed on and enacted by performers. This in turn prompts us – as members of the audience – to think about the roles we ourselves, as well as others, take up or are required to perform on the world stage.

1 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume I*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 481.

This connection between the theatre stage and the world stage, and the roles that are enacted on both, reaches back to the world of antiquity. It can be noted, for example, that the word “person”, as used today, is derived from the Greek πρόσωπον, which originally referred to masks being worn by actors on stage – masks which both revealed and concealed something of the identity of the character being enacted. It was not long, however, before πρόσωπον – and it’s Latin equivalent *persona* – were also used, both in a rhetorical and philosophical sense, to describe people’s social roles and identities in the world, thus making an explicit connection between the theatre stage and the drama of life.² This connection was maintained throughout the centuries,³ and especially in recent times, with the rise of performance theory,⁴ there has been a renewed focus on how the theatre, and the language and conceptual frameworks it provides, help us to think through and make sense of our personal and communal existence, especially when it comes to questions of identity, the roles we enact, and the interactions between different people.

Given this volume’s consideration of identity, and its relation to migration, racism, xenophobia, and the memory of colonization – all concepts that can be construed in performative terms – it might therefore be helpful to turn to the theatre as a *locus* of theological reflection. In what follows, I will focus on the important South Africa anti-apartheid protest play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona, a play which explicitly deals with the question of identity during the apartheid years. I will begin by providing background to the play (and the South African protest theatre tradition, more generally), before giving an exposition of its

2 David Tracy, *Filaments: Theological Profiles, Selected Essays*, Volume 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 394–395.

3 We can think, for example, of the twelfth-century Christian humanist, John of Salisbury. In his *Policraticus*, a work in which he strongly draws on the writings of the Roman writer, Petronius, he famously speaks of the *Teatrum Mundi*, the world theatre, and states that “all the world acts a play” (*Totus mundus agit histrionem*). These words would, of course, also be used as the motto of London’s Globe Theatre that was erected in 1599, and furthermore provide the inspiration for the famous line in William Shakespeare’s play, *As You Like It* (Act II, Scene VII), where the melancholic traveller, Jacques, exclaims to the fleeing cousins, Rosalind, and Celia, that “all the world’s a stage.” Balthasar, *Theo-Drama, Volume I*, 161–162.

4 For an introduction to performance theory, see Simon Shepherd (ed.), *The Cambridge Introduction to Performance Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

plot. The essay will then offer a brief theological reflection on the play and comment on its continued relevance for discussions on identity today.

South African Protest Theatre and the creation of *Sizwe Bansi*

In many ways, the story of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, and the South African anti-apartheid protest theatre tradition it forms part of, begins in the first half of the twentieth century with a person named Herbert Dhlomo, a writer, dramatist, and political activist, who was one of the founding members of the ANC Youth League. Dhlomo was convinced that the creation and staging of theatre productions – which provided “dramatic representations of African oppression, emancipation and evolution” – could play an important role in exposing and resisting the discrimination and dehumanization marking life in South Africa.⁵ Besides, therefore, staging his own plays, such as the important work *Nongqause the Liberator*, he was instrumental in establishing what came to be called the Bantu Dramatic Society based in a community centre on Eloff Street in Johannesburg. The purpose of this society, as expressed in one of its pamphlets published in the 1930s, was to develop “African dramatic art”. And even though European plays would sometimes be performed, the main focus of the society would be to stage productions that emanated from, and protested against, the realities black South Africans were experiencing on a daily basis, in both urban and rural areas.

As the Bantu Dramatic Society grew, and an increasing number of plays were being staged, the opportunity arose to move to a new building, due to funding that was acquired through a farewell concert that was staged for the missionary and activist, Trevor Huddleston. This new building – a run-down textile factory up the road in Eloff Street – was called Dorkay House and soon became the centre of the alternative and, importantly, politically-motivated creative scene in Johannesburg. It provided rehearsal and performance space for actors and dancers, and, at night, it was turned into a theatre and jazz club, where people from all races could socialize and discuss politics, while watching plays and enjoying music from groups

5 Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, “Why Study Tribal Dramatic Forms [1939].” *English in Africa*, 4, no. 2 (1977), 37.

such as the Malombo Jazz Quartet.⁶ Someone who, from early on, became involved in these activities at Dorkay House was Athol Fugard, who landed in Johannesburg after dropping out of university, hitchhiking to Cairo, and working as a deck-hand on a British tramp steamer sailing across the Pacific.⁷

Upon his return to South Africa, Fugard was initially employed at the Native Commissioner's Court, where pass law offenders were tried and sentenced. Here he was confronted, on a daily basis, with the procession of nameless faces appearing before the judge because their passbooks were not in order, an experience which not only convinced him that apartheid was inherently evil, but also that it needed to be actively opposed.⁸ This led him to Dorkay House where he became involved in the emerging protest theatre scene, as a director and actor, as well as a playwright. Following the staging of a number of powerful productions – which made national headlines and led to repeated police raids on Dorkay House – Fugard decided to move back to his hometown, Port Elizabeth, where he began collaborating with a group of young actor and theatre-makers from the local township New Brighton. This resulted in the founding of the acting workshop, the *Serpent Players*,⁹ which would include people such as Norman Ntshinga, Welcome Duru, Winston Ntshona, and John Kani. It was especially with the two last-mentioned names that Fugard formed an enduring partnership, which would give rise to some of the most important anti-apartheid protest plays in the latter-half of the twentieth century, including *The Island*, *The Coat*, and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, the play we will be discussing in what follows.

6 See Gwen Ansell, *Soweto Blues: Jazz, Popular Music, and Politics in South Africa* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 97–98.

7 Albert Wertheim, *The Dramatic Art of Athol Fugard: From South Africa to the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 1–2.

8 See Fugard's interview with Mary Benson which was published under the title "Keeping an Appointment with the Future."

9 This name was the result of the group of actors being offered the opportunity to rehearse and perform their work in the old Port Elizabeth snake pit which was standing empty at the time. "Intrigued by the idea of performing in the pit, with the audience peering down into its oval, open space they called themselves the Serpent Players." See Dennis Walder, "Introduction," in Athol Fugard. *Township Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxiv.

The idea for *Sizwe Bansi* originally came about when Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona saw a photo of a black man dressed in his “Sunday best”, posing with a cigarette in his one hand and a pipe in the other, with a beaming smile on his face. The stark difference between what this photo attempted to communicate, and the actual realities black South Africans were confronted with daily, was evident. Kani and Ntshona furthermore commented that only someone whose passbook was in order could pretend, in front of a camera, that all was well – an act which, in this instance, went together with conforming to the aesthetic ideals set by the country’s white cultural hegemony. Prompted by this discovery, they began imagining and workshopping a play around the circumstances in which the photo could possibly have emerged. Only a few months later, on 8 October 1972, their new play titled *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* opened in Brian Astbury’s Space Theatre in Cape Town, the only theatre, apart from the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, which could stage productions with multi-racial casts at the time (even though only white audience members were allowed to watch the play).¹⁰ Soon, Kani, Ntshona, and Fugard also took the play to various township settings, with especially memorable performances in St. Stephan’s Hall in New Brighton. Here, the “fourth wall” swiftly came crumbling down, with the audience members actively commenting on, and even taking part in, the action transpiring on stage. Athol Fugard would later write the following about the audience participation at St. Stephan’s:

I realized I was watching a very special example of one of theatre’s major responsibilities in an oppressive society: to break ... the conspiracy of silence. The action of our play was being matched ... by the action of the audience ... A performance on stage had provoked a political event in the auditorium.¹¹

10 The Space Theatre was housed in an old warehouse in an area also zoned for multi-racial use, it managed to defy South Africa’s segregation laws for a few years, even though the authorities still did their absolute best to disrupt the theatre’s productions (by, for example, conducting raids and harassing actors and audience members on a regular basis). Faced with immense political and financial pressure, the theatre eventually closed down by the end of the 1970’s, but for the few years it was active it played an important role in the alternative theatre scene in South Africa.

11 Lauren Kruger, *A Century of South African Theatre* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), 125.

With time, Kani, Ntshona, and Fugard were invited to perform *Sizwe Bansi* in the UK and in America, where it was very well received and even resulted in them winning a Tony award. These international shows were important, as it allowed them, upon their return to South Africa, to freely perform *Sizwe Bansi* in various settings, as the international media was now invested in the play and would report on any run-ins with the law. It nonetheless happened that the three of them – and the audience members who came to see the play – were often harassed and even incarcerated by the Secret Police of South Africa's Government. Instead, however, of serving as a deterrent, this motivated them to look for even more opportunities to perform *Sizwe Bansi* (and the play it was often coupled with, *The Island*). In 1979, for example, the play was staged for many weeks on end at Barney Simon and Mannie Manim's Market Theatre in Newtown, Johannesburg.

But what happens in this play? And how does it address questions of identity, amidst the horrific realities of apartheid South Africa?

Sizwe Bansi is Dead

Like many other protest theatre pieces at the time, *Sizwe Bansi* takes place on a bare stage with very few theatrical trappings. All of the characters and situations are acted out by only two actors, John Kani and Winston Ntshona in the original production. The play opens in Styles' photographic studio in the township, New Brighton, where we find Styles, played by Kani, reading a newspaper. During this opening scene, Kani would usually have the actual newspaper with him, and for an extended time, he would sit and provide commentary on the headlines of the day, asking audience members their opinions on the various national and international stories. In this way, this first part of the play almost served as a political night school, where ideas could be exchanged about current affairs and the way they affected people's everyday lives.

Kani would usually also read made-up headlines about the nearby Ford Automobile Factory, a factory which, through the years, employed many people from the New Brighton township, including Kani himself before he joined the *Serpent Players*. This would allow Kani (in the guise of Styles, the photographer) to tell – and thereby give voice to – the shocking way

black workers were being treated at the factory, yet also of their covert resistance to this treatment, especially by means of humour and mimicry. Here follows one example in this regard, where their white manager – who they call Mr. Baas Bradley – informs them of a site visit of Henry Ford Jr., all the way from the US:

[Styles pulls out a chair. Mr. Baas Bradley speaks on one side, Styles translates on the other]

“Tell the boys in your language, that this is a very big day in their lives.”

“Gentlemen, this old fool says this is a hell of a big day in our lives.”

The men laughed.

“They are very happy to hear that, sir.”

“Tell the boys that Mr. Henry Ford the Second, the owner of this place, is going to visit us ...”

“Gentleman, old Bradley says this Ford is a big bastard. He owns everything in this building, which means you as well.”

A voice came out of the crowd:

“Is he a bigger fool than Baas Bradley?”

“They’re asking, sir, is he bigger than you?”

“Certainly ... [*groping for words*] ... he’s a Makhulu Baas.”

I loved that one!

“Mr. Baas Bradley says most certainly Mr. Ford is bigger than him. In fact, Mr. Ford is the grandmother baas of them all.”¹²

We know, especially from the work of a theorist such as Homi Bhaba, that humour and mimicry-as-mockery can be an effective means of resisting dehumanization and giving agency to the colonized self,¹³ and this is

12 Athol Fugard et al., “Sizwe Bansi is Dead,” in Athol Fugard, *Township Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 153.

13 See the chapter “On Mimicry and Man” in Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 121–31.

indeed what we see in this exchange. The brutality of the situation is, however, never downplayed. In the end, one cannot but be appalled by what transpires in this opening scene.

Kani, as Styles, then goes on to mention that it is because of the horrifying conditions at the automobile plant that he decided to open up his own photo studio in New Brighton. The studio, he notes, does not only give him the opportunity to work for himself – instead of being a “bloody circus monkey ... selling most of his time on this earth to another man”¹⁴ – but also to support and serve his fellow black South Africans. According to Styles, his photo studio is, in fact, “a strongroom of dreams,” where people can – for a moment – become someone, so that they can be remembered as such by their decedents. “That’s what I do,” Styles tells the audience, “put down, in my way, on paper the dreams and hopes of my people so that even their children’s children will remember a man ... ‘This was our Grandfather’ ... and say his name.”¹⁵ He continues: “You must understand one thing. We own nothing except ourselves. This world and its laws allow us nothing, except ourselves. There is nothing we can leave behind when we die, except the memory of ourselves.”¹⁶ It is for this purpose, he notes, that his studio has various props that can transform any ordinary worker into a person of note – whether it be through a top hat, or a pipe and/or cigarette, or a vase full of flowers that would normally appear on someone like Mr. Baas Bradley’s desk.

While Styles is still speaking, a second character – played by Winston Ntshona – makes his arrival. Styles immediately welcomes the new client into his store and begins to tend to the paperwork, so that the photo can be taken. It is in this moment that the most important question of the play is asked, a question about the new character’s name. The scene plays out as follows:

Styles: ... Let me just take your name down. You see, you pay the deposit now, and when you come for the card, you pay the rest.

Man: Yes.

14 Fugard et al., *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, 156.

15 Fugard et al., *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, 159.

16 Fugard et al., *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, 159.

Styles: What is your name? [*the man hesitates, as if not sure of himself.*]

Your name, please?

[*pause*]

Come on, my friend. You must surely have a name?

Man: [*pulling himself together, but still very nervous*]. Robert Zwelinzima.¹⁷

We soon learn that Robert – a migrant worker – wants to take a photo to send to his wife, Nowetu, living in King William’s Town. As he, then, takes his pose in front of Style’s camera, and the flash goes off, the scene freezes, after which Robert begins to dictate the letter that will accompany the photo.

The very first thing he mentions to Nowetu is that he – Sizwe Bansi (meaning, in Sesotho, “the nation is strong”) – has died, and has now, in fact, become Robert Zwelinzima (meaning, in Sesotho, “hard or heavy world”). This confusing bit of information is cleared up in the scenes that follow, some of which form part of the letter being dictated to his wife, and some of which are acted out in real time.

The now-named Robert tells his wife that even though there are indeed work opportunities available in Port Elizabeth, which is the reason why he left home, he has not managed to secure a work permit. This meant that he only had three days to return to King William’s Town or risk being taken there in the back of a police van. With no hope in sight, he decided to accompany a character named Buntu (meaning “humanity” in Sesotho) to a shebeen called Sky’s Place, in order to forget his troubles for one night. This visit to the shebeen turns out to be a highly significant evening.

The first reason why this visit is significant has to do with the way he is treated inside the shebeen. He tells his wife:

Sizwe/Robert: Sky’s place? [*Shakes his head and laughs*] Hey, Nowetu! ... You won’t believe what it was like. You cannot! It

17 Fugard et al., *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, 164.

would be like you walking down Pickering Street in King William's Town and going into Koekemoer's Café to buy bread, and what do you see sitting there at the smart table and chairs? Your husband, Sizwe Bansi, being served ice-cream and cool drinks by old Mrs. Koekemoer herself. Such would be your surprise if you had seen me at Sky's Place. Only they weren't serving cool drinks and ice-cream. No! First-class booze, Nowetu. And it wasn't old Mrs. Koekemoer serving me, but a lady called Miss. Nkonyeni. And it wasn't just your husband sitting there with all the most important people of New Brighton, but *Mister Bansi*. [*He starts to laugh*] Mister Bansi!¹⁸

In a country where Sizwe's humanity is continually denied, the shebeen thus becomes a place of solace and recognition; a place where he is welcomed and seen for who he truly is; a place where he is treated with respect and his name – and identity – is affirmed and celebrated. Yet, upon, leaving the shebeen, a scene that is acted out in real time, the audience is struck again by the reality that, despite what just happened inside, Sizwe remains someone without a valid work permit in his passbook, making him a *persona non grata* in the eyes of the state. All that is, therefore, left to do – as a somewhat inebriated Buntu reminds his friend – is to leave for King William's Town, “a hundred and fifty miles away.”¹⁹

As they finally make their way home, following this last night out at the Shebeen, Buntu goes into a corner to relieve himself; and it is here that he finds a dead man lying in the rubbish. Realizing that it might be “Tsotsis” who have killed the man, his first response is that they should “get the hell out of here before anybody sees [them].”²⁰ Sizwe, however, stops him, saying that they should at least report the death to the police. He also suggests that they have a look at his passbook to find out the name and address of the deceased. He tells Buntu:

Buntu, we can know where he stays. The passbook of his will talk. It talks, friend, like mine. His passbook will tell you ... It will tell you in good English where he stays. My passbook talks good English

18 Fugard et al., *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, 176.

19 Fugard et al., *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, 179.

20 Fugard et al., *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, 180.

too ... big words that Sizwe can't read and doesn't understand. Sizwe wants to stay here in New Brighton and find a job; passbook says, "No! Report back." Sizwe wants to feed his wife and children; passbook says, No. Endorsed out.²¹

Sizwe and Buntu then goes on to retrieve the dead man's passbook from his front pocket and find his name written inside: Robert Zwelinzima. They also find that, while this man, Robert, was currently unemployed, he not only had a work-seeker's permit but also authorization to live in the "Single Men's Quarters", lodging that was made available for migrant workers (who were classified "single" as they had to leave their wives and children at home). And in this moment, Buntu comes up with a solution to Sizwe's problems: to exchange the photos in the two passbooks, so that Sizwe would be the one who had died, and Robert – with his work seeking permit – would be the one still alive. "It's a chance," Buntu calls out, "your only chance."²² This is then followed by long, heart-wrenching exchange between Buntu and Sizwe, who is initially very reluctant to go through with this plan, as it would mean that he would have to give up his name. What, he wonders, would this mean for his family, and the Bansi clan, and the fact that he, as Sizwe, and not Robert, is married to Nowetu and that his children have the surname Bansi? Acting out a church scene, the question is also placed on the table what this would mean for the afterlife, if our names – as preachers proclaimed – are written in the "big book" in heaven?²³ Wouldn't this make him a mere ghost? To this Buntu answers:

Wasn't Sizwe Bansi a ghost? ... No? When the white man looked at you at the Labour Bureau what did he see? A man with dignity or a bloody passbook with an N.I. number? Isn't that a ghost? When the white man see you walk down the street and calls out, "Hey, John! Come here" ... to you, Sizwe Bansi ... isn't that a ghost? Or when his little child calls you "Boy" ... you a man, circumcised, with a wife and four children ... isn't that a ghost? Stop fooling yourself. All

21 Fugard et al., *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, 181.

22 Fugard et al., *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, 183.

23 Fugard et al., *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, 188.

I'm saying is, be a real ghost, if that is what they want, what they've turned us into. Spook them into hell, man!²⁴

In the last few scenes, we then see how Sizwe becomes Robert; how – in different situation – he, reluctantly, uses his new name, and even gives his new Passbook number (a number Buntu helps him remember), until the play ends where it initially started, with Styles asking for his customer's name before taking his photo.

A few theological remarks

In the beginning of this essay, it was said that, for Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the most pertinent questions posed in and through the theatre is “Who am I?” This question, as Balthasar goes on to argue, is obviously not merely an existential question, but also a deeply theological one – which is why, he believes, the theatre could be one of the most “promising points of departure” for theological reflection;²⁵ and why, it could be added, it is important for theologians to study a cultural text such as *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, with its explicit focus on the issue of identity.

As, then, a theological response, I want to suggest that the play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, helps us to see to what extent identity – whether in apartheid South Africa or today – is formed and performed in relation to the other. While, theologically speaking, a person's deepest identity-marker may be, as is often proclaimed, the fact that they've been created by God in God's image and belong – in body and soul, in life and in death, as the Heidelberg reads – to Christ, this truth can be actualized or refuted, acknowledged or negated, through the dramatic actions and interactions taking place on the world stage, with far-reaching implications for the understanding and representation of the self. This is what we continually see in the play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*.

Throughout the play, characters are, on the one hand, enabled and encouraged *to be*, by the way they are seen, spoken to, and treated by others, that is, by the dramatic actions of their fellow performers. In

24 Fugard et al., *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* 185.

25 Balthasar, *Theo-Drama, Volume I*, 11.

a sense, it can be argued that Style's photographic studio does not turn people into *that which they are not*, but, in fact, turns *that which is not* – in the drama of apartheid South Africa – into people, into human beings that are recognized and will be remembered and named, even after they have passed. Perhaps the props being used by Styles, such as flowers and smoking pipes and newspapers, do not merely uphold the white cultural hegemony, but subvert, disarm, and transform it, opening up a space for it to be cast down. These actions of seeing, listening to, and, importantly, naming the other *into existence* are also found in the shebeen-scene, which has an eucharistic quality to it. Both through the friendship with Buntu – whose name, meaning humanity, is important here – as well as through fact that he is recognized and served as Mr. Bansi at the counter, Sizwe's identity, which is tied up with his name, is acknowledged and affirmed, which affects and directs the way he acts towards others. This is ultimately seen in his insistence that one cannot simply walk away from a dead body; that the murder that has been committed needs to be reported, as – surely – this life also mattered.

On the other hand, there are, however, also ample examples of exactly the opposite happening in *Sizwe Bantu is Dead*; of performative acts – forming part of, and being performed in, larger societal structures – which restrict and deny people's identities, which obliterate their sense of self, which silence their names, and turn them into mere ghosts, to use Bantu's description. This is seen throughout the play: in the Ford factory, in the tales that are told in Style's studio, and, above all, in the way Sizwe's whole life, everything he is, and hopes to be, is continually determined by, and reduced to an inscription in a passbook. It can be said that this denial and undoing of a person's "somebodiness", to use the words of Martin Luther King Jr.,²⁶ belongs to the very heart of the evil – and *sinfulness* – of apartheid, and colonialism more generally. Sin, as Paul Tillich argues, can after all be viewed as separation, which includes the separation of people

26 See Martin Luther King Jr., *King Jr, Martin Luther* 1998. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* Edited by Clayborne Carson (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1998), 197. This notion of "somebodiness" would also often be used in the works of James M. Cone. See, for example, James M. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1972), 17, 34, 113.

from one another and people from their God-given selves.²⁷ Indeed, if God is the one who creates human beings in God's image and likeness, and knows and calls them by name, and even has their names written up in the "big book" in heaven, as Sizwe notes, any acts consisting of the *unmaking* and *unnaming* of the other contradict and stand in opposition to the work and will of God. And while, again, such acts cannot fundamentally undo the deepest truth of a person's identity – an identity which can and should be construed in relation to God, as often happens in theological discourse – they can nonetheless cause these truths to be denied in the drama of everyday life, by oppressor and oppressed alike. It is this denial of (the other's) self that the play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, presents us with and, importantly, protests against – not least through the final scene where Sizwe takes up a new name, a highly ambiguous act which speaks both of hopeful defiance and deep loss.

This prompts us to think theologically about how people's identities are affirmed or denied in relation to others; about how our actions and interactions on the world stage enable or keep people from flourishing as human beings created in the images of God. It is one thing to give a normative description of the other's identity and worth, and another to perform this reality, in relation to the other, in a tangible manner. For this to happen, we need – as *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* illustrates – an embodied theology of recognition, where the other is rightly seen and also, importantly, rightly named. For someone like Balthasar, the performance of Christ on the world stage as the climax of the drama of salvation history is paradigmatic in this regard. Throughout his work Balthasar shows that one of the defining aspects of the drama of Christ is the form his interactions with those around him takes. According to him, Christ's life and ministry is indeed marked by the way in which he recognizes and speaks to his fellow actors on the world stage. Two examples Balthasar points to include Christ's interaction with Zacchaeus²⁸ and, perhaps most pertinently, his encounter with Mary Magdalene. In his poetic reflection *Heart of the World*, which loosely serves as a retelling and spiritual interpretation of John's Gospel,

27 Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 154.

28 See e.g. the discussion in Angelo Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 110.

Balthasar dramatizes the scene of Jesus' encounter with Mary outside the empty grave as follows:

And then an abrupt word: your name! Your own dear name coming from the mouth of Love: your being, your very essence – yourself! – bounding from the mouth thought dead ... O word, O name, you, my own name! Spoken to me, breathed forth with a smile and a promise. O stream of light. O faith, hope, love! ... Now I know who I am, and now I *may* be who I am, for my love loves me, my love has bestowed trust on me.²⁹

For Balthasar, this dramatic act of Christ speaking Mary's name, of Christ saying Mary's name out loud, can be seen as the ultimate act of recognition. As a performative deed, it does not only lead to her own recognition of Christ, but also – importantly – serves as the deepest affirmation of her identity as one who is loved and called and sent by God. Christ's act of naming calls her “to herself” and “to an identification through his voice of herself with him”, as Graham Ward notes.³⁰ In the wake of death, the speaking of Mary's name announces, communicates, and brings forth new life. This demonstrates just how significant the act of rightly recognizing and naming others are, both as an avowal of what is, but also of what could be, as creation and people increasingly find their telos in the transformative grace and love of God.³¹ It also, then, calls us to follow Christ in this regard, to reperform the Christ-drama in and through our own lives, so that also our words and deeds can enable and encourage others *to be* – and *become* – who they *are* as creations in the image of God.

Conclusion

In South Africa, the horrific system of apartheid is no more. The country is, however, still haunted by the evils of its colonial and apartheid past. While

29 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World*, trans. Erasmo S. Leiva (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1979), 159.

30 Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 123–4.

31 See Rowan Williams, “Naming the World, Liturgy and the Transformation of Time and Matter,” in Teresa Berger (ed.), *Full of your Glory, Liturgy, Cosmos, Creation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2019), 23–44.

the country's Bill of Rights, as included in Chapter 2 of the Constitution, affirms the inherent dignity, freedom, and equality of all, people are still regularly excluded, treated unjustly, and deprived of their dignity and self-worth – both on account of other's actions and larger societal structures, which continue to uphold and perpetuate the dehumanizing logic of apartheid. Amidst this reality, questions of identity, recognition, and the value and significance of a person's name continue to loom large, which is why a play such as *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* remains relevant – more than four decades after it was first devised and performed. By asking Balthasar's question "Who am I?", it holds a mirror up to the drama of everyday life and asks of its audience to ponder, also theologically, how we can act differently and bring about change on the world stage so that someone like Sizwe Bansi does not have to "die" – that is, do away with their identity – for them to live and flourish. In the Gospel dramas, Jesus called out Mary's name, perhaps it is our responsibility to call out Sizwe's?

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