

Writing *Avalon*:
A new South African township play:
*A dramaturgical casebook of a new township theatre play set in democratic South
Africa*

Lunga John Radebe

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Dramaturgy
The Theatre Arts Program of the
School of the Arts

Columbia University
1 May 2014

Contents

Abstract	3
Declaration	4
Dedication	5
Acknowledgements	6
Introduction: <i>finding Avalon</i>	7
1. The Origins: <i>dramaturgy, a study of...?</i>	11
- <i>Defining Dramaturgy – a conundrum</i>	
- <i>Dramaturging Avalon</i>	
2. Plot: <i>kwasuka sukela...</i>	15
- The question of approaching art	
- Origins: the role of the <i>synopsis</i>	
3. Action	23
- The peasant's pen	
- Which <i>audience</i> ?	
- First draft <i>blues...</i>	
- Post draft observations	
4. Character(s) development: <i>concerning transformation</i>	32
- You B(l)ack?	
- The role of the <i>biography: who's who?</i>	

<i>Avalon</i> : a dramaturgical casebook	
- Biographies	
5. Setting: <i>from the graveyard to the theatre</i>	42
- <i>Avalon, how great thou art!</i>	
- Set-less set	
- All that <i>Jazz</i> ...	
6. Thought & Commentary	45
Bibliography	49
APPENDICES	51
(a) First synopsis	
(b) Second synopsis	
(c) Third synopsis	
(d) Pictures of Avalon cemetery	
<i>Avalon</i> : a new South African township play	64

Abstract

Due to its significant role in the fight against apartheid, it is no surprise that South African township theatre will always be upheld and romanticized as a thing of the past. It is often described as such because of its inextricable link to protest and resistance. As a result, the majority of plays that were *published* during that time have now fallen into the South African theatre canon. However, there has been a substantial amount of theatre emerging out of the township since South Africa's democratization in 1994 - even though this theatre is arguably less prominent than that of its predecessors. This very work, much like that of pre-1994, continues to speak to the country's socio-political and economic conditions. In a thorough examination of my dramaturgical journey in writing the play *Avalon*, this casebook seeks to unpack my processes as a township theatre playwright, in a humble attempt to further the discourse and understanding of how township theatre can still function and be understood today.

Declaration

I, Lunga John Radebe, declare that this casebook together with the play to which it is based is my own, unaided work except to the extent indicated in the acknowledgements. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Dramaturgy in Columbia University, New York. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.

Lunga John Radebe

.....

1 May 2014

Dedication

This is a humble dedication to my maternal grandparents, ntate le mme Tsoari, who instilled in me from a very impressionable age the value of education. Beyond the historical significance of Avalon cemetery to South Africa, its poignancy strums at my deep felt heartstrings as mme Tsoari was laid to rest there in 1991. The play rings true on so many levels for my mother Smangele Radebe, to whom this is also dedicated and to whom I have the utmost admiration and love for, struggled for the longest time to afford both her parents gravestones until we decided to build them with our own hands. I'm grateful to these two archangels for continuing to lookout for me at every turn. I will honour them wherever I tread.

Ngiyohlala ngizithobile futhi nginiphonipha nina bazali bakanina!

Acknowledgements

I would like to tender a warm thank you to the following people who made this study a reality. I remain indebted and grateful to:

Maestro Xoli “Chet” Norman; one of the chosen ones who truly fathoms that the *Word* that came at the beginning was an incarnation of a B-flat note blown through a trumpet. What can I say man? You are something else! Your guidance through this process, and in life generally, is of *uMveliqangi*’s order, *enkosi tata!*

Refiloe Lepere, I’m yet to understand how you became so patient with me. Your love baffles the term itself.

Brother Eugene Paramoer, *aluta continua ek se!* Without you and Refiloe by my side, I don’t know how I would have survived New York City. Dankie commander!

To Marlon and Aika Swai; my big brother and sister in the diaspora. Your apartment in Harlem has been a safe haven and home for all of us wondering and wandering South Africans to just be.

To the Silvers; my family away from home. Who can ever forget those nights in Vermont filled with warmth, laughter, conversation, booze and of course - *jazz?* May they never end!

To some of the soldiers of the pen and stage who continually inspire me in what I do: Monageng Vice Motshabi, Omphile Molusi, Mncedisi Shabangu, Mpumelelo Paul Grootboom and others too many to mention.

And finally to Professor Christian Parker and the Dramaturgy class of 2014. Y’all are the epitome of what dramaturgy is about!

Introduction

finding Avalon

Historically, the art of oral storytelling has played an integral part in the well-being and spiritual nourishment of African communities. I refer to Africa as a generic whole because this oral tradition was once, and still is, at least in some communities, an inextricable thread to which all black Africans have been nurtured. Oral storytelling has manifested in the form of music, poetry and the spoken word. Some notable examples of oral storytellers that have belted a resonant voice in the continent, amongst a sea of others of course, are the griots in Senegal¹ and the *imbongi*² in the Zulu and Xhosa communities of South Africa. However, on a far less grand yet equally important level, oral storytelling has existed in the African homestead for many centuries. I so often recall the crisp winters in which my grandmother, using nothing but spoken word and song, would relate to my cousins and I *izingankwane*³ around her old coal stove. This tradition, although becoming increasingly archaic in its original forms, has managed to translocate and transform itself into local media i.e. television, print media and also, more importantly for the purposes of this study - *theatre*. It is through the vein of my ancestry that the need to tell *story* was born, and this need has since inspired me profoundly in my journey as a theatre practitioner thus far. I feel that it is important to provide this context so that the reader can appreciate where my journey with *story* began, to form a better understanding of how *Avalon* the playtext was conceived.

¹ Nikiprowetzky (1963, 79)

² Spelt *iimbongi* in isiXhosa.

³ *Izinganekwane* refer to traditional isiZulu folklore consisting of stories that have existed for many years.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

The township theatre tradition, to which I am a direct descendant of, naturally fulfils the task of telling stories in a way that befits the tradition I refer to above. By this statement I do not mean the literal act of sitting around an old coal stove and telling *izinganekwane*. Instead I refer to a group of actors relating stories to each other and finding creative means of representing these narratives in a dramatic fashion. A significant amount of work that was performed during apartheid resulted from a workshop environment. In these kinds of spaces artists that faced systemic persecution as a result of being black, related either their personal stories of how the system continued to wrong them, or stories to which they had heard from others in their respective communities – Ngema and Mthwa’s play *Asinamali* is an impeccable example of this. It is for this reason that it is, most often than not, difficult to find the written texts of a lot of the work that was produced during this time. Everything concerning these productions i.e. the rehearsal process, performances etc. only resides in the memories of those that were fortunate enough to experience the work first hand. Those of us that weren’t around are only left with the nostalgic and often sentimental accounts of those that were present.

Notwithstanding the politics of authorship, instances like that of the Junction Avenue Theatre Company’s case with regards to the play *Sophiatown* are rare, in which the company workshopped the play then a single company member was, “sent off for six weeks to shape the material into a working script” (1989, xii). The rarity I speak of is in the publishing of the text, and also in the documenting of the process although this is only captured in a two-page introduction. Even though the introduction gives us a sense of the processes that took place in creating *Sophiatown*, it does not serve as a fully fleshed out dramaturgical case study. Practitioners like Barney Simon and Athol Fugard are other

examples of individuals who would make mention of a few general notes regarding their processes even though these weren't detailed dramaturgical accounts. It seems that the emphasis and preoccupation at that time was to get the work out into the world so as to conscientise the masses and the global community about the political situation that was haunting the country. Although the aforementioned playwrights received international acclaim for writing mostly about the black lived experience, there are only a few black artists that have written extensively about their own work. This in my view, and of course in a broader dialectic sense, is crucial if we are to add to the scholarship around township theatre. At the risk of sounding as if I'm equating the magical happenings of the rehearsal room and performance, with documenting dramaturgical processes, I have to say that although the latter is fundamental, it cannot replace how an audience connects to the work. However, conceptualizing an investigative or rather a dramaturgical casebook of the process helps to capture, in a literary sense these occurrences so as to not only add to the scholarship of theatre, but also to form a toolkit for practitioners aiming to unpack the work further in the future. These are the principal reasons why I have decided to embark on writing this study.

This casebook will, in its humble efforts, attempt to capture the processes that took place in the writing of the play *Avalon*. These detailed thoughts will serve as a dramaturgical account of my process as a playwright, and also as a dramaturg in working on the play as a performance text. It is thus important to note that *Avalon* as both a literary and performance text, including this very study is a work in progress. Even though I have just recently commenced rehearsals for *Avalon*, it is also important to note that this study only focuses on my process of writing *Avalon* and nothing else.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

The chapters of this study will include *Origins: Dramaturgy...a study of?* In which I will be discussing the conundrum of defining dramaturgy, and how this has led me to construct an ever evolving self-definition of the term which, in turn, has propelled the developmental vein that has birthed *Avalon*. The following chapter entitled *Plot: kwasuka sukela* describes the dilemma of creating art from an intellectual standpoint and/or letting it emanate from a purely organic sensibility. The chapter continues to describe the significance of the *synopsis* in unpacking the story which is essentially - the play. In the next chapter; *Character(s) development: concerning transformation* defines what I refer to as *black* in order to problematize the duality that is presented in the character(s) Sabantu/Thunas. From this brief section I discuss the role of the *biography* in attempting to learn more about a character from both a literary and performance perspective. The following chapter on *Action* describes the socio-economic politics to which the play is born. It makes reference to the key literature that has inspired the work and more importantly, sheds light on the playwright's thoughts regarding the subject matter. From thereafter the chapter examines the lessons and discoveries observed from the first draft of the playtext moving forward. The chapter on *Setting* will describe the complexities of representing on stage, a graveyard holding thousands of people without the use of an elaborate set. It will also observe the importance of jazz as a musical thrust to the story, and how minimalism both in the music and in the set is employed. The final chapter entitled *Thought and Commentary* will shed commentary on the world that begot the piece and sum up the playwrights overall feelings regarding the dramaturgy of the play *Avalon*.

Origins

dramaturgy, a study of...?

Defining dramaturgy – a conundrum

It can be seen as somewhat ironic that in the past two years of studying *dramaturgy* in an academic institution, and in the pursuit of seeking a comprehensive definition of what *dramaturgy* is, that what has become increasingly apparent and imperative for me as a dramaturg, is the need for an ever evolving self-definition of what the practice of *dramaturgy* should be. As you will note from the definitions below, which stem from various sources, there has been much deliberation about what a dramaturg is and what their role in the theatre is. As you will gather, many of these arguments revolve around the dramaturg as being a literary manager-cum-practitioner associated with a theatre, mainly assisting other theatre practitioners in the creation and/or the realization of their plays. What is particularly interesting is that the use of the terms *dramaturgy* and *dramaturg(e)* are as contentious as its history. According to Mary Luckhurst in her book *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in the Theatre*:

There are indications that the terms *dramaturgy* and *dramaturg(e)* entered English between 1755 (Johnson records neither) and 1801 from Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (2006, 8).

Even though these terms came into use from as early as this, they have been absent in specialist English dictionaries for many years (*ibid*). Below is a definition that comes directly from the *Penguin Dictionary of the Theatre*:

Dramaturg: German term which resists determined attempts at acclimatization, despite its usefulness. A dramaturg is a sort of reader-cum-literary editor to a permanent theatrical company; his primary responsibility is the selection of plays

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

for production, working with authors (where necessary) on the revision and adaptation of their texts, and writing programme notes, etc.⁴ (2006, 7)

This definition assumes the dramaturg as a literary editor of playtexts.

Moreover, it places the dramaturg in a more literary managerial position in which their key role is to select plays for production. It's also interesting to note that the section in parenthesis highlights the fact that the dramaturg works with authors only where necessary, hence suggesting that the need of a practitioner of this nature is not a necessity. In South Africa for example, the position of a literary manager has also become increasingly rare if not obsolete as it is mainly the artistic director's role to decide which play should be produced. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and the Performing Arts* gives a slightly different and fairly broader definition of what a dramaturg does. According to this encyclopedia:

A dramaturg is a person with a knowledge of the history, theory, and practice of theatre, who helps a director, designer, playwright, or actor realize their intentions in a production. The dramaturg – sometimes called a literary manager, is an in-house artistic consultant cognizant of an institution's mission, a playwright's passion, or a director's vision, and who helps bring them all to life in a theatrically compelling manner. This goal can be accomplished in a myriad ways and the dramaturg's role often shifts according to context and is always fluid. As there is no one way to create theatre, there is no single model of the dramaturg⁵ (2006, p. 8).

The Oxford Encyclopedia definition presents the dramaturg in a more generalized sense, which, I have come to gather, is the primary reason for the reluctance that most theatres and practitioners have in working with dramaturgs. The aforementioned definition makes the assumption that directors, designers, playwrights and actors need help with realizing

⁴ *Penguin Dictionary of the Theatre* as cited in Luckhurst, (2006, p. 9).

⁵ *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and the Performing Arts* as cited in Luckhurst, (2006, 8).

their intentions in production. This, according to a lot of theatre practitioners that I have worked with, isn't necessarily always the case. Most directors, designers, playwrights and actors (individually and/or collectively), are confident in their abilities to function competently in a theatrical environment. The assertion that they need assistance in realizing their work can be construed as presumptuous or even arrogant for that matter. The definition also inadvertently subscribes the dramaturg to the "jack of all trades but master of none" category in the greater theatrical scheme of things. I do not imply that the author of this definition was in effect trying to diminish the role of the dramaturg; however, having been in several collaborative environments myself, there has always been some contention about what the dramaturg's role should be. This is not always the case as some directors feel the need for a dramaturg since they personally believe to function effectively when one is present in the room. It is imperative that the reader understands that my critical observations above only serve as a means to engage these concepts further not to dismiss them. As both an actor and a playwright who also happens to be a trained dramaturg, I am very much aware and am sensitive to the complexities of the collaborative process in this regard.

Dramaturging *Avalon*:

Dramaturgy, in many respects, allows us as theatre practitioners to be cognisant of each and every step of the *finding* process, or *the creative process* as it is commonly known. I have chosen to place major emphasis on the term *finding* because at its core, *Avalon* seeks to better understand, question and engage human behaviour under very trying and desperate circumstances which, in my humble my opinion, is the basis of all

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

tragic drama (notwithstanding the play's political themes of course). In both the conceptualization and ultimate execution of *Avalon* as a playtext, I aimed not only to document my dramaturgical processes as a playwright emerging from the township (as made reference to in the introduction of this paper), but also to give meaning to what remains a fairly unknown and seemingly arbitrary practice⁶. The reasons for this are to engage, not only the curious reader, but also myself as a young theatre practitioner trying to carve my path in what could easily become an archaic, if not an already abstract artform. In light of what has been noted above regarding the question of dramaturgy as a practice, the decision to write *Avalon* including a dramaturgical casebook to accompany it, serves as a culmination of what I have learnt about dramaturgy to what I believe the practice should entail.

Another important thing to note is that most of the dramaturgical choices that have been employed are a result of my impulses as a stage actor. I have approached *Avalon* in such a way that challenges me as a performer, as well as a playwright in an attempt to interrogate my approach to the art of dramaturgy. Assuming multiple roles both in an envisioned production sense, as well as in a literary sense has stretched me in ways that I could not have imagined if I had approached the creative process in a singular capacity. I have thus been able to critically assess my strengths and weaknesses as a theatre maker moving forward.

⁶ This shall be lifelong process as I continue to reimagine myself as a theatre practitioner.

Plot
*kwasuka sukela*⁷...

The question of approaching art

One morning, while working on the conclusion of the first draft of *Avalon*, serendipity delivered to me a rerun of episode 12 from the first season of John Jacobsen's PBS television show *The Artist Toolbox*. In this episode Jacobsen was interviewing the renowned jazz pianist Ramsey Lewis. At the very moment my eyes caught Lewis on the television screen he happened to be making a statement that accurately expressed what I continue to experience in the creation of my work to date. His statement seemed to encapsulate a dilemma I had been facing since the beginning of the writing process. Lewis, in response to a question about how he approached the composition of a piece of music, proclaimed that he avoided composing music intellectually i.e. starting with the key e.g. B major, then figuring out which chords to use to form the harmony. He concluded his retort to the question by declaring that one must, "never intellectually approach a work of art [...] as it becomes sterile" (Jacobsen, *The Artist Toolbox* S1/Ep12). These words struck a resonant chord in me not only because I concur with Mr Lewis, but because I'm constantly battling with how to reconcile this very dilemma in my own work i.e. whether to approach the creation of art from an intellectual standpoint or to discover the work in a more organic way. Or alternatively, and more interestingly; how to work through the complexities of these two methodologies when they are combined so they can function together. Although I intend to perform the play in a professional

⁷ In IsiZulu, *izinganekwane* or folktales are usually begun by saying "*kwasuka sukela...*" The English equivalent for this would be "*once upon a time...*"

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

capacity and give it a life beyond the scope of my Masters degree, *Avalon* (including the casebook), although personal and representative of issues I'm profoundly passionate about, still exists as a work that is meant to fulfil the requirements of a graduate degree. This study as much as it is approached as a journal (to a certain degree) still observes astutely the processes that govern the intellectual life of a play. And since I have been working on this study concurrently with the playtext, I fear that my intellectual self, i.e. my position as a scholar of theatre, may risk overpowering or perhaps even disrupting the organic processes involved when creating art as Mr. Lewis asserts. Be that as it may, I wouldn't have embarked on this project if I did not deem it to be an important contribution to the discourse around township theatre dramaturgy post South Africa's democratization.

Origins: the role of the *synopsis*

While nurturing the concept of a one man play in which one actor would play two main characters (who are seen together for the majority of the play), and various other characters at certain instances of the play, a myriad of questions or concerns rather sprung to the fore. Most of these concerns came not only from myself as a playwright/dramaturg, but also from the selected few that had graciously offered to read the initial drafts of the play once the process of writing had begun. Some of these questions have contributed to the overall dramaturgy of *Avalon* and are relevant till this day. *Note*: I will be addressing these concerns throughout the paper but first I would like to present the questions that have lingered in my head way before I even wrote down the first lines of dialogue:-

Dramaturgical concerns:

- (1) Who are Sabantu and Thunas?
- (2) Why are Thunas and Sabantu telling this story now?
- (3) When does the play begin?
- (4) Who or what does the audience represent?
- (5) Why is Sabantu telling this story?
- (6) Why has he decided to build this tombstone today if his mother died so long ago⁸?
- (7) If there's a single actor on stage how is he to portray conversations between characters without tempering the integrity of a particular moment?
- (8) What does he need in order to build this tombstone?
- (9) How is the cemetery represented on stage?

As stressed above, these questions have formed the basis of the playtext and have since sought greater clarity from the playwright with every draft that has been composed. They have continually governed all the attempts I have imparted to develop the piece further. As expressed in the introduction of this paper, my allegiance to the artform has always been cultivated by the ancient art of storytelling, which has nurtured my people for many centuries. The subheading for this chapter is *kwasuka sukela* “*once upon a time*” - the genesis of every African⁹ story told for many a decade. It is in this fashion that my own grandmother began each *inganekwane*¹⁰ as we absorbed the warmth of both the stories and the old coal stove. This noble tradition inspired me to begin several drafts of

⁸ In my initial conception of the play Thunas would be the play's protagonist and his quest would be to build his mother a grave (Refer to *Appendix A*).

⁹ In different dialects of course.

¹⁰ Refer to footnote 2 for definition.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

synopses in this manner. As I alluded to in the *Acknowledgements* section of this study, the play was enthused by certain real life events in which the overarching theme of *finding* transpired. The autobiographical segments I speak of refer to the literal search in which my mother and I embarked on while pursuing my maternal grandmother's grave in Avalon cemetery a few years ago.

If you refer to *Appendix A*, an extract taken from the proposal for this project, you will notice that *Avalon* was initially set out to be a story about a destitute hunchback by the name of Thunas, who had found solace and a sense of belonging at Avalon cemetery because the outside world had treated him like a pariah. Thunas' quest was to build a gravestone for his mother who had passed away many years ago after giving birth to him. The creation of this tombstone would serve as a personal homage to his mother, and his challenge would be in finding materials and raising money to build a decent grave for her. Thunas' hindrances in fulfilling this task would reflect the socio-economic realities of the majority of the black working class in South Africa. As in Aristotelian notions of plot in tragic drama, my task as a writer would be to find a series of incidents or rather structure a series of incidents in such a way that would contribute to the suffering of Thunas – my protagonist. Although this sounded attainable on my end, I did feel however, that something was missing. I couldn't find a way of answering the sixth question on my list of dramaturgical concerns; why was he only building this tombstone now. After all the years of roaming around the cemetery and claiming to be its chosen guardian, why would he only make the decision to pay homage to this woman he so dearly loved now? I also felt; especially being an artist of strong social and political consciousness, that there was something more to the story that would be reflective of

South Africa's societal pains post its democratization. During the time I started I couldn't exactly place a firm grasp on what this would be but intuited that the realities I speak of would be better shown if an outsider infiltrated the world that I was endeavouring to create. This character would potentially disrupt the order of things in a profoundly significant way - even though it might not have been their intention to do so. A strong motivating factor for this was that Thunas (at least in my head) always seemed to carry an omniscient quality that I did not want to tampered with. This is not to say that he needn't face dramatic conflict and moments of realization himself.

The narrative and thematic instincts I refer to above led me to write another synopsis (refer to *Appendix B*). This time I included another character into the world, one that would enter the cemetery as a desperate outsider. This character would infiltrate the world of the dead with hopes that the dead would somehow solve the problems of his world, problems that ironically harboured on the cusp of life and death - a theme that I carried up until the final draft (refer to *Appendix E*). In my second attempt at writing a synopsis, I wrote in a new character by the name of Sabantu Xolelisizwe Zwane. This character would become the protagonist and would ultimately bear the brunt of a tragic ending. Unlike in Aristotle's *mythos*, Sabantu wouldn't have a change in fortune but would be doomed from the beginning – any prospect of hope from thereafter would be dubious. A great deal of township theatre pre-1994 seemed to comment on the wanting state of affairs to which the black man and woman faced on a day to day basis. Yet even though these figures fought for freedom, the bleak situation that overwhelmed them seemed to carry much tragedy than it did hope. There are a multitude of plays that depict the evident wave of despair as a result of South Africa's ailing political situation pre-

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

1994, some of these include *Asinamali*, *The Island*, *Gangsters* etc. Similarly, there has been a myriad of plays written post-1994 indicative of a despairing country dangling on a weak thread of hope. Some of these include: *Hallelujah* (Xoli Norman), *Itsoseng* (Omphile Molusi), *Foreplay* (Mpumelelo Paul Grootboom) and many others that continue to be written and performed. Excuse the brief digression but my point with these examples only serves as a means to show the political tradition to which township theatre was created, and how even when many sang and fought for freedom, it was despair that ultimately reigned over the masses.

In my second synopsis we meet a down and out Sabantu getting off the train and walking into Avalon cemetery wearing shoes that claim to have engaged better days. Sabantu carries a Shoprite plastic bag containing *umqombothi*, *impepho*¹¹ and snuff. Sabantu has been instructed to find his grandmother's grave, and to perform a ritual at the site of the grave before the sun sets. This ritual is meant to appease his grandmother Ma Zwane to help his ailing mother get better. The ritual Sabantu is to perform is essentially meant to restore *hope* and order onto the Zwane home. On his overwhelming quest to find this *lost* grave, he encounters a mysterious hunchback by the name of Thunas whom he asks for help in finding the grave. Thunas in turn mentions that he is also on a mission to build a tombstone for his mother. Sabantu offers to pay him a minimal fee to contribute to the building materials of the tombstone in return for his assistance. Towards the end Sabantu confesses that he lied about paying Thunas because he doesn't have a cent to his name. This confession leads to a fist fight between the two characters during which they stumble upon Sabantu's grandmother's grave. Sabantu tries to quickly

¹¹ Traditional incense that is burnt to facilitate communication with the ancestors.

perform the ritual but by the time he does this the sun has already set. In this particular version, one laments over the fact that Sabantu finds the grave too late. In this version, the central question is whether this ritual was to save his mother in the first place should he have arrived on time. In essence, a questionable thread of hope is dangled in front of Sabantu, and as the audience we want him to be triumphant even though we are not sure if this ritual will salvage the situation. This version of the synopsis contained thematic elements that are evident in the dramaturgy of hope model, or what I like to call the dramaturgy of the tragedy of hope which is synonymous to most political township theatre especially in post-1994. I was confident in how the plot had taken shape thus far and felt ready to begin writing.

However, in a conversation with Xoli Norman, an erudite theatre scholar, playwright and composer I revere, I was soon made aware of how similar Sabantu's character was to Thunas. What would make for interesting tension would be the dissimilarity in stature between the two. Hence in my third attempt of a draft of the synopsis (refer to *Appendix C*) I created an entirely new Sabantu; A Sabantu who also grew up in the township but who subsequently graduated to the upper echelons of the so called black elite in South Africa's new democratic dispensation. However, as in Aristotle's *peripeteia*, Sabantu's fortune would soon change. Similar to the Sabantu in draft two of the synopsis, he would also enter the world of the dead with a desperate need to help his ailing mother. His tragic outcome would result in inheriting Thunas' hunchback. On a thematic level, Sabantu's encounter with Thunas, and his subsequent transformation would interrogate the political realities of South Africa in which only a select black few become part of the middle class, while the wretched of the earth, as the title to Fanon's book suggests, continue to reside

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

far below the poverty line. The play would essentially signify that these two characters, although on opposite ends of the economic scale, are essentially connected. This duality/dichotomy informs my dramaturgical decision to make *Avalon* a one-man play. After reworking the synopsis several times i.e. developing the plot, I felt that I was ready to begin writing. Even though the play continues to change in its development, it was important for me to have written several drafts of the synopsis so as to create a blueprint for what *Avalon* would eventually be.

Action

Drama has origins in human struggles with nature and with others
- Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o¹²

The peasant's pen

I write as a means to take action. I write so that my words may solicit action. If not, that they may at least inspire thought to take action. *Avalon* stems from an ideological pen that bleeds the pains of its people. Wa Thiong'o's words above capture the essence of what the art of drama can do and that which *Avalon* seeks to do – resonate the struggles of the forgotten masses of South Africa. *Avalon* as a playtext also attempts to echo Frantz Fanon's literary declarations to and about the working class. South Africa, twenty years post its first democratic elections finds itself in a painfully discordant phase in which those that had benefitted from its dis-ease during apartheid, continue to thrive while those that were persecuted for being black still face the stench of poverty and despair. In this ill-fateful imbalance resides a small black elite that has been systemically placed to appease the working class in believing that they could also emerge into the upper echelons of society. *Avalon*, in its conception problematizes these realities by placing two characters (played by one actor) from opposite ends of the economic scale, in a single space in which a previously disadvantaged now 'risen' black finds himself needing the help of a destitute hunchback, who lives amongst the dead in an overwhelmingly sized graveyard. The dramatic possibilities emergent from these constructs serve as the action of *Avalon*. The playwright's pen acknowledges that today a

¹² Decolonising the Mind: *The Politics of language in African Literature*, 1986, 36.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

new struggle has emerged which haunts the land, and it is this very land that is in contention. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon declares that:

For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity (1963, 34).

This declaration is the foundation for the play and echoes the cries of the marginalised in South Africa. Our new founded democracy has neglected the fact that the land was robbed of the people and was never returned to them. By land I refer not only to the physical space, but all that belongs to it. It is thus by conscious effort that I set the play in one of the largest cemeteries in the country. The devastating irony being in the fact that black people, especially those of the peasantry and working class, only seem to inherit the largest chunk of the land once their dead. In Wole Soyinka's introduction to *Woza Afrika: An Anthology of South African Plays*, he declares:

Much sooner than later, the last word will revert to the people, and the Rasechabas¹³ of the struggle will inscribe the epitaph of Apartheid (1986, xi).

Beyond the question of the people inheriting the physical space i.e. the land, another intriguing idea, which essentially lives beyond the last page of *Avalon*, is the notion of the people having the last word and what this word will fundamentally entail. This is the question that is yet to be answered, and hopefully theatre will still be around to tell the story of how this response was dealt. Another dramatic question that oozes from the playtext is what will happen on the day when the new elite find themselves at the mercy of the poor?

¹³ Rasechaba is an oppressed character in Maishe Maponya's play *Gangstars*.

Which audience?

The question of audience and which audience a piece of theatre is meant to be directed to has always been an interesting one in my opinion. Having studied theatre in New York for the past three years I have been fascinated by the hundreds of theatres in the city that ostensibly cater to different kinds of audiences. Apart from commercial theatres that buy in work, especially musicals from America, like the Joburg Theatre in Braamfontein, or the theatre at Monte Casino in Fourways, the question around audience in South Africa is an issue that is not as clearcut as in New York. Since most theatres are state funded the work that is produced is inadvertently meant to espouse and redress issues around our newfound democracy. As emphasized earlier my impulse as a theatre practitioner emerges from the desire to tell stories and in that case my stories are meant to engage those that are willing to listen to them. I'm not predisposed to who is meant to engage my work thus the issue of audience seems irrelevant given the theatrical environment I come from. Even though township theatre is a direct product of the township in its unpacking of the socio-economic and political issues of the township, it shouldn't be limited to geography. The reality of the situation is that I will most likely premiere a play like *Avalon* in a city New York given its broad cultural audience base. However, I have no reservations to performing it in the Soweto Theatre or the Market Theatre for that matter. Township theatre is known today because of its expansive reach to the global community and it is important that it remains this way so that it doesn't die.

First draft blues...

In my humble opinion, I find writing the first draft of a play to be the most

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

challenging out of all the other drafts that follow - the primary reason for this being the vulnerability of a playwright during this nascent stage. Be that as it may, the first draft carries the most vital dramaturgical impulses that become the essence of play. At its core, the first draft preserves the playwright's unadulterated and purest thoughts and compulsions. As highlighted in *Plot: kwasuka sukela*, I knew that I wanted to write a play about a man tasked with visiting a grave to save his sick mother. I knew that the play stemmed from a place which longed to comment on the socio-political and economic realities of South Africa. I also knew that it was township, and that it was a story that needed to be told. I had made all the necessary preparations to begin writing - all that needed to happen was for the pen to bleed on the page.

The process of writing *Avalon* was challenging as much as it was fulfilling. It was challenging not only because of how large the subject I was trying to deal with is but also because *Avalon* is my first attempt at a one man play. Equally, it was fulfilling because every word, line and page that I wrote begot its own set of dramaturgical complications. After reading the first draft several times then passing it onto a few people, one question that lent itself a lot was, "why not make it a two hander instead?" In other words, why was I making things so difficult for myself? I was at times tempted to do just that but had to continually remind myself what the duality and/or dichotomy was meant to achieve - show the thinly veiled line that intercuts the poor and the new black elite. It was important for me to show that Sabantu and Thunas are essentially the same person – this dramaturgy reflects how both the poor and wealthy black man are essentially cut from the same cloth. No matter how capitalist you are at heart, by mere virtue of being black and previously disadvantaged, you emanate and are part of the same struggle as those that

knock on the window of your car begging for loose change. What better way to show this than to use one actor representing the disparate economic realities of two characters in one body? I will unpack the implications of characterization extensively in the following chapter on *Character(s): concerning transformation*.

Post first draft observations

It's important for the reader to note that throughout this paper I make extensive reference to the first draft more than all the other drafts that follow. I have taken a conscious decision to do so since the first draft informs all the other drafts and carries, as I have noted above, the essence of what I had initially set out to accomplish with writing *Avalon*. I have always known that Sabantu's journey would begin on a train to Tshiawelo station¹⁴, and although this beginning would explicitly signify the transformative journey to come, at least in my mind and hopefully in the collective mind of the audience, what would happen beyond the last page would leave many questions as a result of the fear of dread imposed and implied by the tone of the piece. Without filling pages with overt polemic proclamations, I aimed to set a nuanced socio-political tone throughout the play so as to reflect the state of the country post its democratization – in critiquing what remains as a result of its history of racial segregation. Did I achieve this? Well, not entirely due to a series of dramaturgical stumble blocks I had encountered along the way. However, I was very relieved that I had completed a draft of the play¹⁵ so I could work through these stumble blocks in retrospect.

I had initially begun the play with the scene in the train (refer to *Appendix E*) in

¹⁴ Tshiawelo Station is situated right at the foot of Avalon cemetery.

¹⁵ The first draft of *Avalon* was completed on December 19, 2013.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

which Sabantu stands uncomfortably in an overcrowded local train on his way to the cemetery. While the train is in motion we hear a series of shadowy conversations from what we soon discover to be the souls of dead people who, from what's being said, seem to congregate somewhere and end up in the train in the morning to return to their graves. As fascinating as the idea of having ghosts in a train conversing about how dead they are, I had forgotten about Sabantu and this came across in the scene. In my reading of the draft I realised that these voices had no impact on him. The individuals that I had chosen to read the text were confused as to whether or not these characters are alive. Thus dramaturgically the scene came across as if it was merely designed for the reader's entertainment and consumption - but it was more than that (at least in my mind). The scene was meant to set the tone for what is in store for Sabantu in the cemetery. Furthermore, the scene is a commentary on the voices that are ignored in the greater political spectrum. I had to rectify this in the following drafts and I did. Sabantu, as you can see in *Appendix E* reacts to the voices even though no one else in the train does. I also knew that at the end of the play Sabantu would have the misfortune of carrying Thunas' monkey and would consequently inherit his hunchback (details of this transformation explored in the next chapter). Even though the scene inside the train felt intriguing as the opening scene, I wanted the audience to meet Sabantu in his current state (with the hunchback) - this led to the decision of having the short scene (prologue) where Sabantu engages Thunas' ancestors (the audience). The dramaturgical decision to do this was meant to formally introduce Sabantu (in his current state) to the audience as opposed to meeting him as a stranger in the train. This was also meant to raise questions as to how he became the way he is. However, in my reading of the text post the first draft, I still felt

that the audience wouldn't know Sabantu enough to care about him. I had always suspected that this would be a problem but somehow overlooked it when I wrote the first draft. A close friend and fine theatre practitioner, Monageng Motshabi eloquently summed up my conundrum by stating that, "it seems the story begins very late" (Motshabi, pers. comm, 2013). According to Motshabi, "throughout the play, the itch, the thing bleeding at the core of [my] story [was] absent" (ibid). I came to learn that it would be difficult for the audience to engage the subject deeply if the things in which Sabantu cares for or is even guilty of are outside the play. I also felt that I had to be clear on what the totality of his task would be beyond the play so as to fairly critique him. The command to "take back the land" would need to be unpacked a bit more extensively in the drafts to follow. Similarly, it wasn't clear in this particular draft what qualified Thunas to take back the land. In other words, what does Thunas do to earn this great task that is bestowed upon him? Apart from Thunas emerging from the *wretched* class as in Fanonian discourse, what had he done differently that would pronounce him a leader in this regard. The play (as it stood in the first draft) begged for clarification regarding some of the dramaturgical choices that I had made. Furthermore, it implored me as the playwright to delve a bit more into the consequences of my characters' actions. I have had to rethink what it means to be part of a social class so I can assert much clarity on who my characters are. These concerns have impelled me to revisit Ma Zwane's recurring Fanonian mantra towards the climax of the play:

"Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it." (1963, 206).

My other concern was fluidity. In fact, this has always been a great concern for me in making theatre, especially when I'm playing the role of the playwright. It is one thing to

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

write a complete draft of a play but how it ultimately flows is a different matter. I had taken a risk on embarking on a one-man play given the struggle I've had with the majority of one-man plays I have seen in the past. The reason for my reluctance in embracing them positively has always been how prone they are to becoming monotonous and/or their tendency to lack fluidity. In terms of *Avalon*, I needed to be mindful of what I wanted to achieve by making a piece which could easily be a two-man play, a one man play. It is a fact that plays are in their very nature known to be ever-changing, sometimes even after they have been published. The reality is that this play could become something else beyond the submission of this document but for now I have decided to reflect on it as it stands. Regardless of this fact, I stand firm on my dramaturgical decision to make *Avalon* a one man play.

Another critical decision that required to be made was how much I needed my character(s) to tell and how much they needed to experience. Even with this decision, I had figure to out what Thunas needed to do to be seen as an appropriate candidate to finally get out of the graveyard and save his people's land. Inversely, I needed to unearth what it is exactly that Sabantu fails to do that binds him to this cradle of death perpetually. How I would eventually write this would either emanate from a place of judgment i.e. they (Sabantu and his class) betrayed us and failed to fight for the land so they deserve punishment, or alternatively find a way to help the audience empathise with Sabantu in such a deep sense that they begin to see those he represents as themselves. Hence in Sabantu's failure they would recognise their own failures. This would therefore allow Thunas' symbolic release to be an opportunity to engage the 'enemy' in a different way. Of course, the latter struck a more resounding bell for me even though it wouldn't

be an easy task to achieve. To this day, I'm constantly seeking ways of delving deeper into the story so that these dramatic possibilities can be met.

Character(s) Development concerning transformation

*A man's character disposes him to act in certain ways, but he actually acts only in response to the changing circumstances of his life.*¹⁶ - Aristotle

You B(l)ack?

Before I explore the significance of the *biography* in the development of the playtext, I feel that it is important to define *blackness* since I make such extensive references to black people (in context to “taking back the land”) in both the play, and in this casebook. The definition I provide below further problematizes the duality/dichotomy I explore in the characterization of Sabantu and Thunas, especially since they will be portrayed by one *black* actor. The definition I speak of closely, if not accurately denotes what I aimed to explore in the text and comes from Steve Biko’s renowned selection of writings entitled *I Write What I Like*. According to Biko:

We have in our policy manifesto (Black Consciousness Movement manifesto), defined blacks as those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realization of their aspirations (2004, p.52).

Biko continues to declare that, “being black is not a matter of pigmentation – being black is a reflection of mental attitude” (ibid). This point is an important one in reference to the character Sabantu whose pigmentation although black, refutes the mental attitude synonymous to being *black*. At the end of the play, Sabantu makes what turns out to be a devastating choice that disproves his blackness and consequently pays the ultimate price.

¹⁶ Aristotle's *Poetics* (1961, p. 8)

The role of the *biography: who's who?*

Avalon, as discussed in the chapter on *Plot*, was conceived as a one-man play telling the story of two men from opposite ends of the economic scale under very abnormal and trying circumstances. Much like the development of each of the synopses, it was a crucial exercise for me to work extensively on each character's biography, an exercise that I continue to explore to date. It never occurred to me how much of a test this exercise would be. The conception of each character has spoken to and informed the plot intricately, and this inextricable or should I say symbiotic relationship to the dramaturgy of the play has meant that I constantly refine who these characters are. The preoccupation with this particular exercise has become equally as important to my process as an actor preparing to portray both these characters.

Below is an extract taken from Mxolisi Norman's¹⁷ essay on the cultural representations of coloured bodies on stage. I have chosen to reference this extract because it eloquently expresses my choice in choosing to represent Sabantu and Thunas in one body.

On stage, human bodies incarnate the play's syntax, and invest the otherwise ethereal world of the play with immediacy and credibility. The familiarity of the body's corporeality, transmuted directly from social life, mediates the false reality that all representation is dependent upon. That the "actor" can simultaneously assume a character while maintaining its role as social reference comments on the paradox that attends the nature of the human body and its malleability. This paradox comments on the body's ability to reposition itself, by transcending its familiar social identity in order to become the idea it embodies in representational schema. While audiences consciously suspend disbelief in theatre, they also consume the spectacle of the body as social "truth" at the same time as we open ourselves to the allure of the body to transport us to the mysticism of realms of representation. (2009, p. 10)

¹⁷ Mxolisi Norman is an erudite theatre scholar, playwright and composer. His works include *Hallelujah* (winner of the Oliver Schreiner award), *Ma's Got the Blues* and many others.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

The ability of an actor to portray the characters' duality/dichotomy respectively reflects the malleability of the human as Norman attests. Furthermore, beyond the mysticism evoked by the world of the play in its narrative, in the creation of the characters and also the actor's ability to portray them in his body, I'm interested in the allure that Norman speaks of which colludes with the mysticism of these realms. Note that the characterization of Sabantu and Thunas also speaks to my existential dilemma of having being sired in the township, and today being perceived as middle class due to my exposure to the world of the educated elite. In the reality of the township, my background remains vilified because of my education – even though ironically I still reside there.

A difficulty that occurred in the writing was finding an economical way to execute the storytelling from both characters. Furthermore, trying to decide whether or not this economy of narrative was necessary. I knew that I wanted the telling of the story to be directed towards the audience, which according to the prologue, would represent Thunas' ancestors in search of their now prodigal son yet to return. Although the idea was planted this way it was never followed through. Even though I had a clearer sense of Sabantu as a character in terms of his stature in society, I couldn't exactly place Thunas since in his original conception he was trapped in the vague world pertaining to the mystical. However, I needed to find out how he became what he is (a hunchback) because merely labeling him as a "mystical" character wouldn't be enough. I had to unravel his history so as to get a better understanding of his so called mystic. What helped me in this regard was constantly working and reworking his biography (refer to Thunas' biography as it stands below). Sabantu, on the other hand, eventually developed as a protagonist and thus became the carrier of the story. This meant that he would

engage the audience directly. In this regard, Thunas solely remains as a character in Sabantu's narrative. However, in one instance I chose to break the rules of the play, and allowed Thunas to direct a monologue to the audience describing Sabantu's emotional plea to him. This decision aimed to expose Thunas' humanity and give us a sense of his perspective.

In reading my first draft, Mxolisi Norman critiqued my work as being, "trapped too much in logic" (Norman, pers. comm, 2013). In my conversation with him, Norman mentioned that I was "being too safe on my characters" (ibid). His critique of the text came from my yet to be deepened sensibility to the world of magic realism. The graveyard and the mysticism that I had initiated in the first draft needed to be expounded a lot more and that could only come from how much I stretched my characters and the circumstances they found themselves in. I had created a world in which human beings spoke to dead people, and in which the line between life and death was so blurry that being *safe* with my characters would only diminish the effectiveness of the work. I had to dramaturgically find a way of setting up the rules of the world so as to guide the reader/audience.

Drawing from what has been expressed above; let me turn to my exploration of Sabantu and Thunas as characters through their respective biographies. As noted, I began the process with working both characters biographies extensively so I could achieve both narrative and performative clarity¹⁸. Below are the biographies of both Sabantu and Thunas as they stand. I am not blind to the fact that these will continually evolve for the

¹⁸ Note that I have written biographies for all the characters in the play including the minor characters that appear. However, I have chosen to explore the two main characters due to their significance in the development of the play.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

purposes of both text and production hence I feel it necessary to reemphasize that this is a work in process. I have included them below for the reader to see how they have influenced *Avalon* thus far. It is also interesting to note that a lot of rich information I had proffered in the biographies was not employed in the first draft and thereafter, and this remains a great motivating factor to keep on working on the play.

Biographies

Sabantu Xolelisizwe Zwane (32) was born in his mother's house at Sebokeng Zone 7. Apparently his mother refused to give birth at a hospital and insisted that her mother uMa Zwane (or gogo as she was often referred to) perform the role of her midwife. Sabantu was always a timid child and cried for his mother every time a stranger would attempt to carry him. It took his mother three weeks before deciding on a name for him. She eventually named him *Sabantubonke* meaning "afraid of everyone". Although Sabantu's mother found this name endearing, Ma Zwane believed that this name would only become an impediment to the child because he would grow up being truthful to it. Ma Zwane's words became manifest as Sabantu grew up being fearful. He refused to play with other children and resorted to clinging onto his mother. He was called a *mama's boy* as a result of this and his grandmother blamed all of this on the fact that he had an absent father. "A boy needs his father!" she used to say. Gogo was also a firm believer in her cultural beliefs and urged the family to do right by the ancestors. She always made sure to slaughter a chicken from time again, and brew *umqomboti*¹⁹ for the

¹⁹ Traditional South African beer made from sorghum malt, maize malt, maize, yeast and water.

ancestors. This ritual was accompanied by the family making frequent visits to gogo's parents' graves.

Since Sabantu refused to play outside with other children, he devoted his time on reading and it soon became apparent how bright he was. Sabantu's grandmother was both the breadwinner and lifeline to the family and when Sabantu was in high school she passed away. From thereafter, things went south for the Zwanes. Sabantu was now forced to become the man of the house. His mother urged him to "man up" and in following his mother's behest Sabantu worked extremely hard at school while performing menial jobs to put food on the table. Sabantu finished high school with an overall distinction for every subject and subsequently earned a scholarship to study business at the University of Witwatersrand. He completed both his Honours and Masters degrees cum laude drawing the attention of many corporations. However, Sabantu resisted committing to a single company and began to freelance as a consultant. He made a lot of money from this and their financial situation at home changed dramatically. Sabantu's success also veiled him with a kind of false confidence and arrogance that contradicted his namesake. With his newfound success, Sabantu drifted away from the teachings of his grandmother especially with regards to maintaining strong ties with the ancestors.

Sabantu was soon offered BEE (Black Economic Empowerment)²⁰ partnership to a multi-million rand strategic management consulting and construction company called

²⁰ Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) is a programme launched by the South African government to redress the inequalities of Apartheid by giving previously disadvantaged groups (Black Africans, Coloureds, Indians and some Chinese)^[1] of South African citizens economic privileges previously not available to them. It includes measures such as Employment Preference, skills development, ownership, management, socioeconomic development, and preferential procurement. (Department of Trade and Industry)

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Sonqoba Management Consulting & Construction (SMCC), a once hundred per cent Afrikaner owned company formerly known as *De Klerk & Klopper Management Consulting & Construction* under the former apartheid regime. Sabantu was now worth millions and had to devote all his time and energy into the company. His absorption into SMCC increased the company's BEE points and subsequently won SMCC a multi-million tender to build a mall by an old township in which a small community of black people had resided for generations. This meant that all these people would lose their homes and their heritage. Around this time Sabantu's mother became mentally ill and her feet started to swell up. She was taken to the best doctors but none could heal or even diagnose her condition. Sabantu was then advised by a neighbour to seek the help of a well-known *inyanga* by the name of bab' uNyoni in Evaton, who had helped a lot of people with similar ailments. While consulting with the *inyanga*, Sabantu was informed that his ancestors had turned their backs on him and his family because since Ma Zwane died, he hasn't performed the necessary rituals to thank and seek protection from the ancestors. This in turn has left his family vulnerable and susceptible to the wicked ways of those that do not wish them good. Bab' uNyoni advised Sabantu to slaughter a chicken for the ancestors and make traditional beer for them. He continued to advise Sabantu to embark on a trip in the wee hours of the morning using public transportation to seek his grandmother's grave. Sabantu would have to perform a ritual to appease the ancestors before the sun sets. This ritual would include burning *impepho*²¹ at the site of the grave, then scattering snuff and pouring *umqombothi* over Ma Zwane's grave. Sabantu would have to appease to uMa Zwane to lift the curse off the Zwane family.

²¹ Traditional incense used to facilitate communication between the ancestors.

Uthulile “Thunas” Mtshali (53) was born in a four-roomed house in Tshiawelo to a 51-year-old domestic worker. He was named Uthulile meaning “*he is silent*” because he made his entry into this world without crying. The weight of this silence resonated in the room like news of a tragic death because for a very brief eternity it was believed that he was stillborn. The temporary shock lasted only until his big eyes met the teary ones of his overwhelmed mother. His uncle held that his stare resembled that of an ancient soul that had long been travelling the earth. His mother lived only for a week after Thunas was born and died as a result of complications from this untimely birth. She was buried at Avalon cemetery. After his mother died his two aunts developed a strong dislike for Thunas and later refused to have their children play with him. Their cruel treatment towards him exacerbated when his uncle Boy, the only person that truly cared for and protected him, passed away too. Boy was the only person that stood for Thunas and after he died Thunas felt the brunt of hatred at the hands of his aunts. Boy loved Thunas so much that just before he died he gave him his Bach Stradivarius trumpet that he had played at the Salvation Army. His two aunts were jealous of Boy’s love for Thunas and stopped him from playing the horn in the yard claiming that it was noisy. They kicked him out of the main house and into the dilapidated room at the back of the house. What made matters worse was Thunas’ strange obsession/relationship with death. Whenever he encountered a dead animal that had been run over he would bury it in the yard then play a dirge on his trumpet. Since Avalon cemetery is a stone throwing distance away from his home, Thunas would make it a point to be present at the cemetery just to observe how people mourned. If there happened to be no funeral (which was rare) he would just pace about with his trumpet under his arm, quietly looking at every grave as if he knew those

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

that lay in them. This was of course unusual for a child his age and subsequently led to many beatings from his aunts, who threatened to repeat them every time he went to the graveyard.

As a result many rumours were born regarding this strange child. Apart from being labelled crazy, some rumoured that his mother was bewitched and that his birth was an immaculate conception gone wrong. These rumours followed Thunas his entire life. Other children were banned from playing with him because he was supposedly cursed and possessed a bad spirit. Thunas was forced to drop out of high school because he couldn't handle the abuse that he suffered at the hands of his peers.

As he got older his aunts gave up on beating "sense into him" although their hatred for him remained. His frequent visits to the graveyard now became nocturnal and as is known in black communities; no one goes to the cemetery at night. One windy night Thunas embarked on his customary visit to Avalon but on this inauspicious night no one, including himself, was prepared for what would happen. Thunas entered the cemetery as a normal man but the image of what he was when he came out traumatized all of those that saw him. Thunas came back bleeding from the rib cage carrying a 'cursed' hunchback as if he had been fighting with a creature not of this world. Even his aunts, who had tormented him his entire life, were horrified by the man they saw. No one dared to ask him what had happened. Thunas returned to take his horn and left for the hill that lies overlooking the cemetery. People started calling him Thunas, which is a colloquialism, derived from the term *ithuna* meaning a tomb. Since this incident Thunas found a home in the cemetery thus developing a relationship with the dead. He would be seen talking to the invisible creature on his back. Sometimes he would spark

conversations with the dead as if he was their appointed guardian. Thunas knew the cemetery like the back of his palm. However, what happens to him when he meets the young BEE man by the name of Sabantu changes his life forever.

Setting
from the graveyard to the theatre

Avalon, how great thou art!

Avalon cemetery has been a part of the fabric of my mind for as long as I can remember. I have attended more funerals at this cemetery than I can even begin to count. This excluding the number of times I visited the graveyard while embarking on the research for the play and this paper. Even though I have walked the cemetery many times I'm still overwhelmed by how great the *gravescape* is. The cemetery spans 172 hectares holding graves of more than 300 000 people; a huge number since the cemetery opened its gates in 1972 (<http://www.jhbcityparks.com>). In 2004, it was said that Avalon cemetery would be filled to the brim with graves however, due to its proximity to most of the black townships, and also its historical significance, the space was extended and continues to serve as a place of rest for thousands of people. Every weekend the cemetery is congested with buses, cars and people who have come to bury their loved ones. The aforementioned context serves to give the reader an idea of the size of the physical cemetery so that the dramaturgical choices I have employed with regards to the set are elucidated. Please refer to *Appendix E* for miniature snapshots of Avalon cemetery.

Set-less set

Let me preface by stating that I am not a stage or production designer, and have only decided to write this brief chapter on set because I am intrigued by the vastness of the physical space of Avalon cemetery. A question that kept lurking at the back of my

mind since I began the preliminary research on the play was, “how does one, on a theatre stage, represent more than 300 000 graves?” While filming the dimensions of the cemetery with my phone camera one day, it occurred to me that perhaps I should counter my impulse of imposing an elaborate set on the designer who will be working on the play. I have always found that the most effective kind of theatre is that which forces the audience to stretch their imaginations (not assuming that theatre is not meant to do this in the first place). What I mean however, is that it is always a lot more interesting when an artist imagines the antithesis as opposed to the obvious. I use the term artist broadly because antithesis appeals to every kind of artist whether it is an actor reimagining the opposite reaction to a particular moment in a scene, or a director making a directorial choice that counters what an audience would expect etc. So instead of building a lot of graves, I figured that a more interesting approach would be to only have a modest representation of the grave in question i.e. Ma Zwane’s grave (although I’m still questioning how necessary this is). The lack of set will allow the audience to imagine the world as implied by the text. The decision to approach the set in this play was also inspired by the work in Mncedisi Shabangu’s *Ten Bush* in which he uses minimalist props i.e. micro representations of things in order to represent the macro. A vivid example of this as seen in *Ten Bush* would be how a single branch from a tree represents an entire forest. Or in Omphile Molusi’s *Itoseng* in which he represents characters from the small town of Itoseng with various objects that he carries in his large suitcase. Again at the risk of redundancy, it is important for me to reiterate that the play is a work in progress, and that certain things might change post the submission of this document. Nonetheless, this is how I envision the world of *Avalon* up until this point.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

All that Jazz...

Anyone who knows me will attest to that fact that I am a jazz aficionado, and in fact, a student of the trumpet. Jazz has manifested in every play I have written as it speaks to who I am and the struggles, joys and woes of my people. In this vein, *Avalon* through its music is a culmination of these very struggles, joys and woes, all told through a B-flat trumpet. I have thus intentionally put music under the chapter on *Setting* because much like Ma Zwane's modest representation of a grave, and the vast yet minimally represented gravescape characterised by grids formed by the shadows of lights; the music is equally as sparse and emanates from two trumpets. The music I continue to compose together with Maestro Norman is minimalist in its approach, and carries a series of long notes as influenced by the music of Miles Davis and the likes of Enrico Rava. The only time I do not use original music is when I refer to Feya Faku's song *Journey Home*. Even though I haven't decided whether or not I want to use *Journey Home* in production, I am attached to it because something about it speaks to the theme of finding and longing.

Thought & Commentary

Much heart and effort has gone into writing this casebook and, of course, the playtext of *Avalon* as it stands currently. Not only is the work meant to be a fulfilment of my Masters degree, which, I hope goes without saying is of profound importance to me as a practising practitioner and scholar, but it is also a fulfilment of a desire to tell a story of a greater political significance to South Africa and dare I say Africa. A story inspired and loosely based on a personal journey as is reflected in the *Dedication* section of this paper. The act of going to the cemetery to visit loved ones who have since passed on is a culture which is most prevalent and sacrosanct amongst black people in South Africa. This act of *visiting*, as in Sabantu's case, is most often than not, an opportunity for those who are alive to seek hope and meaning from the dead for they have crossed to the other side. In a significant way, with regards to the history of apartheid in South Africa, the play gives a voice to the dead, and tries to interrogate what the dead yearn for? The "dead" also referring to the silenced and marginalised voices in South Africa's new democratic dispensation. In its modest efforts, the also play seeks to serve as a theatrical voice for these constituents. Hauptfleisch and Steadman in their attempts to define black theatre declare that:

Black theatre can be seen to be theatre, which *identifies* with a set of values. It is theatre which deals with the lives, the needs and the aspirations of the majority of South Africans, and which tries to instil a consciousness in its audience of what it means to be 'Black' (Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1984, p. 140).

Hauptfleisch and Steadman's words ring true to what I'm attempting to do with the play *Avalon*, especially as a township theatre practitioner. In fact, I believe that at the

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

heart of it all, this is what South African township theatre has always aimed to achieve – identify with the lives, the needs and the aspirations of the majority of the black people of South Africa. This is why I made the decision to tell the story about the meeting of Sabantu and Thunas - two individuals emerging from the same world yet with dissimilar trajectories under a single socio-economic and political umbrella.

Avalon speaks to a nation that continually bleeds while it searches for freedom because that which was attained in 1994 seems to be inadequate on so many socio-economic fronts. I have sought the best approach to telling a story about a character in search of healing for his ailing mother, only to realize that he himself is spiritually ill. Telling this story has raised larger questions like: as black Africans how do we collectively define freedom? Also, when will we attain this very freedom that so many have died for? Thunas' transformation at the end of the play becomes a metaphor for the redistribution of wealth to which we seek. Once we obtain this, what happens next?

In retrospect, I'm grateful that I came back to South Africa to write the play having spent two years in New York City. I have had the fortune of surrounding myself with like-minded artists also coming out of the township and engaging in a theatrical language similar to that of mine. This has benefitted me profoundly in my quest to write about, in a critical and exploratory sense, the dramaturgical choices I have employed in the creation of my work. This will not only enhance my knowledge of the worlds to which I aim to create but will provide insight to readers of my work and those interested in discourses around township theatre today. I firmly believe that *Avalon* as a playtext continues to evolve the tradition of township theatre because of its inextricable ties to the township both geographically and in its thematic content. Moreover, and more

importantly so, it reimagines itself as a township play post-1994 not just because it has been written today but because it continues to engage the socio-economic and political concerns and issues that plague the working and elite black class of today's South Africa. In a sense, it still preserves the resistant nature of the past while going further by posing questions yet to be answered.

I open this chapter by revealing how much effort has gone into this work because in moments of existential enquiry, one often questions why we bleed so much for our art. In attempting to answer this question, I came across an extract from Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Grotowski, in a question that he poses himself about this matter asks, "why do we sacrifice so much energy to our art? (1968, p. 212). In his retort he eloquently states:

Not in order to teach others but to learn with them what our existence, our organism, our personal and unrepeatable experience have to give us; to learn to break down barriers which surround us and to free ourselves from the breaks which hold us back, from the lies about ourselves and for others; to destroy the limitations caused by our ignorance and lack of courage; in short, to fill the emptiness in us: to fulfil ourselves. (*ibid*)

Grotowski encapsulates what I aim to do with this play and my work in general, teach others about this world that I have been a part and parcel of, and also to break new territory as a theatre practitioner by attempting to interrogate my own limitations and comfort zones. Writing *Avalon* has challenged me in a lot of ways, as I noted earlier, I have never written a one-man play before, more especially one that I will personally perform myself. Also, I usually write quite freely without taking into consideration the dramaturgical processes employed in creating the work. To reiterate a point I have already made, this comes from the need to tell story. As much as this particular exercise

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

was born from a need to tell story, it also sought to record the processes and building blocks of that story. I offer this dramaturgical casebook to you the reader and hope that you will be engaged in this journey as much as it has engaged and challenged me. I also hope that after reading it you will proffer your critique so I can continue to grow in this vein of furthering the discourse around township theatre today and in the future.

Bibliography

Books:

Biko, S. 2004. *I Write What I Like*. Johannesburg. Picador Africa.

Fanon, F. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. England. Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc.

Fergusson, F & Butcher, S. H (*trans*). 1961. *Aristotle's Poetics*. New York. Hill and Wang.

Grotowski, J. 1968. *Towards A Poor Theatre*. Great Britain. Methuen & Co Ltd.

Hauptfleisch, T. & Steadman, I. (*eds*). 1984. *S.African: Four plays and an introduction*. PTA: HAUM Educational.

Luckhurst, M. 2006. *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in the Theatre*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

Ndlovu, D. 1986. *Woza Afrika! An Anthology of South African Plays*. United States. George Braziller, Inc.

Purkey, M (*ed*). 1993. *Sophiatown: A Play by Junction Avenue Theatre Company*. Johannesburg. Wits University Press.

Journals:

Nikiprowetzky, T. 1963. *Journal of the International Folk Music Council: The Griots of Senegal and their Instruments pp. 79-82*.

Thesis:

Norman, M. V. (thesis). 2009. *Representations of Coloured Identities on the Witwatersrand Reef: No Room for Squares and Umm...Somebody Say Something*. Wits University.

Interviews:

Motshabi, Monageng. Personal interview. 1 Dec. 2013.

Norman, Mxolisi. Personal interview. 21 Dec. 2013

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Filmography:

The Artists Toolbox. Dir. John Jacobsen, Kevin Sabourin. PBS. 2011

Websites:

Johannesburg City Parks

<http://www.jhbcityparks.com/index.php/cemeteries-contents-61/find-a-cemetery-contents-42>

Appendix A
First Synopsis

(Extract from the proposal)

Set in one of the largest cemeteries in South Africa, *Avalon* follows Thunas, a destitute hunchback and trumpet player who finds himself solace and a sense of belonging at a cemetery called Avalon. This is the very cemetery where his mother was buried just a week after giving birth to him. Thunas makes a measly excuse of a living from assisting willing visitors at the cemetery to clean the resting places of their loved ones. A disheartening exercise since not everyone who visits the cemetery is welcoming due to his wanting state and seemingly strange demeanor. Regardless of this reality, the cemetery is the only place in the world where Thunas feels at home as his immediate world is harsh towards him. The poverty that surrounds the outside fence of the cemetery has turned Avalon into a place of (un)rest as desperate ones invade the cemetery in the wee hours of the morning to steal tombstones. This is so that they can sell them in the black market (mostly to the people that own undertakers who in turn “recycle” them by cleaning out the engravings and re-selling them to grieving and unknowing customers). Thunas has since been appalled by these unsacred acts of vandalism but these feelings are exacerbated when, to his shock, he finds his mother’s place of rest having fallen victim to the same fate. Since tombstones cost a fortune, Thunas decides to build one for her by using found objects. We see him working tooth and nail to do this but when he’s almost done he comes back to find his creation desecrated for the second time. In a fit of rage Thunas is forced to find a solution that goes against everything he stands for... “*Even death fails to humble us, what have we become?*” He says at one point. *Avalon* is a tale

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

that is deeply rooted in a cultural sensibility traumatized by a tragic history, it explores universal themes such as loss, the interplay of intimacy and truth, and most importantly, the attempt to find peace in a place where it once was but doesn't exist anymore.

Appendix B
Second Synopsis

Kwasuka sukela...

It is a timidly foggy Thursday morning (around 6 am) when we meet a disheveled and troubled looking Sabantu Zwane (32) getting off the Tshiawelo train station. Sabantu marches with an anguished determination into Avalon, and as the first wisps of dust from the graveyard dress his already despairing brown penny loafers, he raises his head only to be yowled into submission by the thousands of graves that gawk at him with desolate eyes. It is evident that Sabantu hasn't been here for a brief eternity. Although overwhelmed by how vast Avalon is, Sabantu prepares to face the discordant yet forgotten dirges that await him. In his right hand he holds a shriveled up piece of paper with the number to his grandmother's grave (I824), and in his other hand he holds a plastic bag containing snuff, a small calabash and a two litre bottle full of home made traditional beer.

Sabantu wonders aimlessly around this colossal cradle of death for some time until he comes across a destitute hunchback by the name of Thunas who happens to be mending his mother's grave. He learns that Thunas knows the cemetery very well and asks for Thunas' help in locating his grandmother's tomb. Although Thunas is initially hostile towards him, he eventually concedes when Sabantu promises to contribute a bit of money to help Thunas complete the work that's left on his mother's tomb. Sabantu shows Thunas the grave number and as they embark on a mission to find the grave, Sabantu confesses to Thunas that his mother is dying at home from a disease that the doctors have struggled to diagnose let alone heal. His last hope to restore his mother's health,

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

according to the advise from a well-known *inyanga*²³, is to fulfill a particular ritual at his grandmother's gravesite before the sunset. The ritual involves digging a small hole at the foot of the grave and burying *umuthi*²⁴ in it. After covering *umuthi* with some soil, the traditional beer is to be poured over the grave as if to feed his *hungry* grandmother. The snuff is also to be scattered over the grave and the container left at the head of the grave. These gifts are to appease Zwane's grandmother whom hasn't been visited in a while, and whom has neglected to protect them as a result of this. Sabantu is meant to ask her to remove the curse from his mother and subsequently protect the family.

Throughout Sabantu's quest to find the grave, Thunas exposes him to the world of this cemetery. He relates stories of miscellaneous characters that lie deep within this very ground. Thunas seems to be carrying their anguish even though they are supposedly meant to be resting. Thunas himself is an enigma to his society and has since found solace from the dead. Many have said that he has been cursed because one evening he was seen walking into the cemetery and a few hours later he came back wounded and staggering into the streets of Tshiawelo with a Kelso's hunchback and blood all over his torso. Urban legend says that he fought with a territorial monkey that didn't like him prowling the cemetery at night. This monkey, only seen by Thunas, is said to be clinging on his shoulder hence the hunchback, and proof of this is seen in the sporadic conversations he has to himself (often times looking over his shoulder).

What was meant to be a short exercise involving showing Sabantu the grave, ends up being a mammoth task as the two struggle to find the grave. The reason for this, at least according to Thunas' theory, is that Sabantu's grandmother refuses to be found. She

²³ An *inyanga* is a traditional healer.

²⁴ Traditional herbal medicine exclusively dispensed by a traditional healer referred to *inyanga*.

is upset that she has been neglected. Another theory is that whoever laid the curse on the family has created barriers in them ever finding peace. Hours go by and tensions skyrocket since the ritual is to be performed before sunset. As the Sun is about to lay its head before the birthing Night, a despairing and anguished Sabantu confesses to Thunas that he doesn't have a cent to his name and that he had lied to him about helping him finish the work on his mother's grave. An enraged Thunas curses him and a huge fight ensues. As they stumble about both in fist and words, they land on Ma Zwane's grave. Sabantu looks up to the sky only to find that the Night has prevailed and the Sun has died a tragic death. In a demented frenzy Sabantu rushes to perform the ritual yet Hope is left frowning.

Avalon is a story about finding hope where hope has ceased to exist. It speaks to a society that has, in its desperation and thirst for life, sought after this very life even in death. We want Sabantu to succeed because even just the promise of a semblance of hope is enough to keep us going. *Avalon* is also a tale that is deeply rooted in a cultural sensibility traumatized by a tragic history. It explores universal themes such as loss, the interplay of intimacy and truth, and survival in its humblest form.

Appendix C
Third Synopsis

Kwasuka sukela...

There was a hunchback by the name of Sabantu Xolelisizwe Zwane. In fact, he wasn't always a hunchback. He was a BEE partner to a strategic management-consulting firm called *Sonqoba Management Consulting & Consulting* (SMCC). A company that was initially a hundred per cent white owned until the so called peoples' government took over the country in 1994 and gave way to a select African bourgeoisie. Sabantu had everything a young black man could wish for and more. He was what his contemporaries in the township would refer to as, "tenderepreneur aka a black man who had arrived!"

But things changed when his mother became ill with a disease that was neither curable nor diagnosable for that matter. This inauspicious episode continued to gain momentum while Sabantu worked tirelessly to secure a billion rand deal. Sabantu was now burdened with trying to maintain his worth in the company while struggling to seek help for his ailing mother. He managed to find the best doctors that money could buy yet none of them were of any use. His mother's situation exacerbated to a point where despair could willfully stare the Zwane household right in the face without any remorse. When it had come abundantly clear to everyone that western medicine had failed, Sabantu was forced to turn to that which he had denied for the longest time – *amadlozi*²⁵. Sabantu was advised by his mother's neighbor to go visit a well-known *inyanga* by the name of bab' uNyoni. Bab' uNyoni was well-known for helping people in cases such as this. Even though Sabantu's wealth and stature in the community had led him to refute the existence

²⁵ The ancestors.

of the ancestors, he had no choice but to pay a visit to Bab' uNyoni. While in consultation with Sabantu, Bab' uNyoni discovered that Sabantu's ancestors had turned their backs on him and his mother ever since Sabantu's grandmother Ma Zwane passed away a few years ago. The ancestors had done this because Sabantu had so blatantly rejected the existence of the ancestors and all his family's traditional customs. This rejection had in turn left them both vulnerable and susceptible to the wicked ways of those that did not wish them good. Bab' uNyoni advised Sabantu to start preparations for a thanksgiving/appeasing ceremony for the ancestors at his mother's house. This ceremony would involve inviting his uncles over and organizing two goats to be slaughtered. *Umqombothi*²⁶ would need to be prepared for the uncles to consume throughout the day. In addition to this, bab' uNyoni advised Sabantu to visit his grandmother's grave while the preparations for this ceremony were underway. He would need to take with him a two litre bottle of some of the *umqombothi* and a container of snuff. Bab' uNyoni also gave Sabantu *umuthi*²⁷ to bathe with at home before visiting the grave. This *umuthi* would be accompanied with some other *umuthi* to which he would be required to bury at the foot of the grave. After burying the *muthi* he would then take a scoop of this soil back home to give to his ailing mother to drink. Bab' uNyoni maintained that Sabantu do all of this before sunset. The traditional beer would be scattered over the grave to feed his hungry grandmother and the snuff would be left at the head of the grave so as to appease Sabantu's grandmother to restore life into the Zwane household. Sabantu would have to leave the grave with nothing except the soil. Sabantu was also instructed to leave his fancy car at home, and travel to the cemetery by train.

²⁶ Refer to footnote 13 for definition.

²⁷ Traditional medicine only unearthed by those that have the calling i.e. *izinyanga*.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

According to bab' uNyoni, Sabantu was too disconnected from his people and the ancestors were upset by this. After the meeting with bab' uNyoni, Sabantu headed home to start preparations for the thanksgiving ceremony. Since money wasn't an issue for him, he bought the goats and the food, and made sure that everyone who needed to be there was there. He then prepared himself to embark on the train ride to Avalon cemetery the next morning. Of course he was not pleased about using the train but had no choice since the ancestors had instructed him to do this.

The next morning, Sabantu took a congested train to Tshiwelo Station and arrived there with the plastic bag containing his grandmother's gifts clutched tightly to his chest. He was dressed in such a way that came across as if he had made a conscious attempt to look as if he was an ordinary person. As Sabantu walked into the cemetery he took a deep breath as if to prepare himself for the mammoth journey ahead. Little did he know that this day would change his life forever. As the initial wisps of dust dressed his high priced shoes that he hadn't worn in a while, Sabantu was taken aback by the sea of graves that yowling at him. His heart began to beat faster and faster as he took out a piece of paper from the left pocket of his blazer. This paper contained the number to Ma Zwane's grave - 1824. Sabantu headed straight to the cemetery office by the main gate to seek assistance but found nobody there. From thenceforth he started wondering around aimlessly looking for the grave. Every step he took became more excruciating than the next as he began to realize how vast Avalon really is. After what seemed like a brief eternity he noticed someone in the distance. He approached this person and every step he took towards this person felt as if he was moving further and further away from him. When he got to a few metres away from this person he bowed his head to take a deep

breath. As he raised his head he found this mystical individual now on a horse galloping in the distance. Sabantu was confused by what he saw. The man on the horse waved his hand and gestured to him to come closer. Sabantu ran towards him and although the man seemed to be standing still, in Sabantu's eyes he was moving further and further. By the time Sabantu got to him he was dripping with sweat and out of breath. The horse had disappeared and Sabantu found himself standing in front of a hunchback called Thunas. Thunas called out, "I824! Martha Ntombizethu Zwane, born 3 March 1932 died 23 August 2000". Sabantu looked at the piece of paper he had in his hand in utter shock. Thunas began to talk over his shoulder as if getting instructions from an invisible creature. He then uttered, "let's go!" A desperate Sabantu followed him trustingly although with a lot of questions lurking in his mind.

They soon arrived at an unfinished grave carved by hand with the inscription *Zombili Harriet Mtshali, Lala Ngoxolo, Born -* . Sabantu told Thunas that this wasn't his grandmother's grave then Thunas said that he was well aware of this. Thunas then made a proposition to Sabantu; in order for him to help him find Ma Zwane's grave, Sabantu would have to help him too by exhuming his mother's coffin so that he can put her favourite bracelet around her wrist. Thunas said that she had always wished to be buried with it but it was stolen before she died. He tells Sabantu that he had only just recovered this bracelet. Sabantu found this completely insane however; he didn't have a choice since this was the only man who could help him navigate his way around the sea of death. The two men shook hands and began to embark on a journey that would ultimately change the rest of their lives.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

As the two men walked around the cemetery looking for Ma Zwane's grave they come across several incidences that disrupted the peace usually synonymous to graveyards. These included two small time thieves stealing a tombstone and later a group of gangsters drag racing. However, what was even more disturbing, particularly for Sabantu, were several apparitions that appeared before them. First, appeared a dead *umthakathi*²⁸ by the name of Dlangamandla who apparently cursed Thunas a while ago by placing the invisible monkey on his back. Dlangamandla warned Thunas to focus on his mother and leave Sabantu alone. Next was the ghost of Malum' uBoy who plays a beautiful trumpet duet with Thunas. Malum' uBoy also advised Thunas to take care of himself and return to his mother.

As they continued to walk Thunas realized that they had been roaming around aimlessly in circles for the past couple of hours. He accused Sabantu of having done something to his grandmother making her hide herself from him. This didn't sit well with Sabantu and he in turn accused Thunas of trying to sabotage his quest. As they exchanged words the sky roared violently and Ma Zwane's voice was heard. She repeated the Fanonian mantra, "each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it!" over and over again. Ma Zwane instructed Sabantu to go forth and lead his nation but Sabantu was too ignorant and arrogant to understand this request. Ma Zwane disappeared and as Sabantu walked despairingly across the grave Thunas began to sense that Sabantu was not what he had presented himself to be. He then tackled him over an open grave and demanded the truth from Sabantu. Sabantu began to confess that he was never prepared to help him exhume his mother's grave. Thunas began to insult Sabantu about

²⁸ A notorious concoctor of remedies used to cause harm to others.

how weak he was. Sabantu struggled to listen to this any further and decided to attack Thunas. The two men got into a fist fight to the death. At the height of the fight Sabantu realized that they were fighting on Ma Zwane's grave. He tried to perform the ritual hastily but was already too late because the sun had set. As he lamented hopelessly on his grandmother's grave they heard Ma Zwane's voice again. Ma Zwane urged Sabantu to go out and save his people by bringing back their land. Sabantu didn't concede to this request. As a result Ma Zwane cursed Sabantu by making him wrestle with the invisible monkey that had deformed Thunas. Sabantu then ended up with the cursed hunchback. Thunas was subsequently relieved of this burden and was instructed to go out and serve his people by bringing back their land!

The End

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Appendix D
Pictures of Avalon Cemetery





Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Avalon

A new South African township play

by

The Hon. Lunga John Radebe

Dramatis Personae

All the characters are played by one actor.

Sabantubonke Xolelisizwe Zwane (32) – A young black man struck with the charm of new BEE²⁹ (Black Economic Empowerment) money. This previously disadvantaged, township born now nouveau riche individual uses the façade of money to shield his fears.

Auntie Buyi (59) – Sabantu’s aunt

Uthulile “Thunas” Mtshali (53) – A destitute hunchback who carries an invisible monkey on his back and the stench of death with every stride he takes.

And miscellaneous characters around the cemetery, namely:

Mavusana (21) – Tombstone thief

Sgora (22) – Tombstone thief

Dlangamandla (83) – A deceased witchdoctor who cursed Thunas

²⁹ Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) is a programme launched by the South African government to redress the inequalities of Apartheid by giving previously disadvantaged groups (Black Africans, Coloureds, Indians and some Chinese) of South African citizens economic privileges previously not available to them. It includes measures such as Employment Preference, skills development, ownership, management, socioeconomic development, and preferential procurement (Department of Trade and Industry). However, as idealistic as the concept of BEE may sound, it has raised much contention since it has mainly benefitted a select few.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Production Notes

Setting:

The play is set in the South Western Townships (Soweto) at Avalon cemetery; one of the largest graveyards in South Africa. Avalon cemetery is situated right on the cusp of a township called Tshiawelo and the N12 highway. Soweto is an integral part of South Africa's rich political history as it was impelled by the eviction of Black South Africans by white city and state authorities. Avalon cemetery serves as a cradle of death for most people emerging from the townships although not exclusively. It gives (un)rest to more than three hundred thousand of many a fallen children, men and women from this tragic yet beautiful enigma called life. The action also takes place in Sabantu's mother's house at Sebokeng³⁰ – a township in Vereeniging.

Time:

*On one desperate Thursday...
From the early morning when the Sun was about to raise its head. To midday when the Sun believed it was going to shine forever. To when it finally gave into the relentless birthing of Night.*

³⁰ Sebokeng means "gathering place" in Sesotho. This township was established by the apartheid government in 1965.

Dialogue:

An ellipsis (...) represents a character's thought process or run on thought. It can also mean that someone who we don't hear is speaking while a character listens e.g. a character listening to someone on the other side of a telephone conversation.

A hyphen (-) indicates the point in which a character's dialogue is abruptly cut off either by the character him/herself or another character, or even an event during a scene.

(/) means the next speaker begins speaking during another speaker's dialogue.

Stage directions:

Whenever a character's name is in inverted commas e.g. "*Sabantu*", it means that the character is represented by a shadow of light and not by the actor.

Prologue

*A hauntingly barren light fills a portion of the stage where Ma Zwane's grave is sited. Hovering over the grave is Sabantu - a now destitute hunchback with a large frame who carries the weight of the world on his deformity. He plays **Lament for bakaZwane** in D major on a silver Bach Stradivarius trumpet over Ma Zwane's grave. As the ballad reaches the fourth bar he stops playing and turns to face Thunas' ancestors (the audience).*

Sabantu: I told you to leave me alone! Kanti anizwa yini? (Don't you listen?) What do you want from me? Huh? I asked you a question, damnit!

He clicks his tongue in irritation then paces towards the audience as if to attack them. He stops. Shakes his head. And chuckles.

Sabantu: You think you know me, ne? Yes, you do. You think I'm the *great* Thunas Mtshali (*Pause*) You really do! (*Laughs*). Thunas? Me? (*Stops laughing*) I am not Thunas. Nor will I ever be. I am Sabantu Xolelisizwe Zwane. So leave me alone! Thunas is gone! He stole my being and left me with - *this*! So deal with it... Like me...

Sabantu turns his hunchback to the audience and resumes the B part of Lament for bakaZwane as the...

...Lights gently fade out.

As the Morning Passes the Wee Hours

Lights come up and we find a younger and abled Sabantu Zwane carrying a blazer over his arm while reading an e-mail on his Smartphone. He sighs as he concludes reading the e-mail. He attempts to make a call but then decides to hang up before getting an answer.

Note: Sabantu's shoulder is tense throughout the play.

Sabantu: *(To audience)* Today is not a good day. It feels like one of those dreams you wish you could wake up from and never ever have again. I was woken up at 3am by the shrill voice of my Auntie Buyi yelling,

Auntie Buyi: Sabantu, Sabantu! Vuka. Bamba! (Wake up. Take this!)

Sabantu: She then shoved some snuff and a half full mug of *umqombothi* in my hands, practically dragging me outside to the freezing cold.

Auntie Buyi: Sniff this, swash that *umqombothi* in your mouth, spit it out and talk. Tell your ancestors everything. Ask them to lift this God forsaken curse from our family so both you and your mother get better. Do you hear me? *(Beat)* I'm talking to you, Sabantu?

Sabantu: Yes Auntie! But do I really have to sniff this thing? *(Sighs)*. *(To audience)* See, the thing about me is, I don't believe in all of this cultural mumbo jumbo but my mother is dying and it turns out that I am also not well. I have taken her to the best physicians but none have been able to help her. As for me, I have an inexplicably painful shoulder and suffer from these never ending nightmares. The shoulder I can deal with but the nightmares... I can't even remember the last time I had a decent night's rest-

Sabantu is interrupted by his vibrating phone.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Sabantu: Hold on! *(Into phone)* Sabantu speakin- Piet, yes it was me that called, I'm sorr...I know it's 4.30 in the morning- but this is the only time I can call- *(Beat)* Hello? Piet, are you there?...Look, I just read your e-mail. Like I said yesterd/ let me finish, this deal is as important to me as everyone else at SMCC. I wouldn't have done all the work on this tender if I didn't think so but I simply cannot make the meeting this morning...Hold on, hold-

Covers mouthpiece and responds to Aunte Buyi's call.

Sabantu: Auntie? I already gave ubab' omncane money to buy the sheep last night. If it's not enough take my credit card - it's on top of the fridge. *(Into phone)* Piet, this is not a good time- *(To Auntie)* Okay auntie, tell mama I'm coming ke, eish! *(Into phone)* You know that my mother has been sick man. It's beyond me, I have to go to the cemetery, it is my culture... You won't understand it, even I don't get it! I don't exactly have a choice here... Why would I have a conference call on my Smartphone at the bloody cemetery? Ask Stefan to handle it. Piet, everything will be fine *(Lowers his voice)* Plus I've got my guy Dumisani Ngcobo on the inside. Yes he will come through for us. Trust me on this; our company is going to get the tender to build that mall...C'mon, don't tell me that you're still worried about those people that live there. Bokgoseng is just a small community. Once we start building the mall we will move them elsewhere. Just focus on all the money we're going to make on this... *(To Auntie)* Yebo auntie, ngithengiyeza! (I said I'm coming!) *(Into phone)* I really need to go man-and er Klopper, I cannot be reached today...I'm serious Piet!

Sabantu hangs up the phone.

Sabantu: Remember when I said that this day is like a bad dream, well, it is. Today I'm supposed to be cracking one of the biggest deals of my career but I can't. An *inyanga* (traditional healer) by the name of Bab' uNyoni instructed me to visit Avalon cemetery to find my grandmother's grave. Upon finding it I'm supposed to burn *impepho* (incense) by the grave head, scatter snuff and *umqombothi* all over it, then dig some herbs into the grave. Then I am to ask my grandmother Ma Zwane - to lift the curse off my family. Apparently this will save my mother's life and I guess mine from eternal damnation. Ha! I know right, it sounds ridiculous. Bab' uNyoni claims that if I do not find the grave before sunset I will never return - *ooooo!* Seriously, what am I supposed to do with that? He claims that is my fault that my family is in all this mess. I have supposedly "turned my back" to my ancestors. *(Beat)* How? What does that even mean? All I am is a hardworking businessman for chrissake! I swear if it wasn't for my mother I wouldn't bother myself with all of this nons- But she wants me to do it... *(Looks at his watch)* Oh Ma, I have to go.

Sabantu walks into a different room (demarcated by light). The light in this room is very dim as if a dark cloud hovers over it. As Sabantu enters a veil of melancholy covers his face.

Sabantu: *(Clears his throat)* Ma.

Sabantu approaches his mother³¹ and kneels down next to her. At the head of the bed lies a yellow Shoprite bag with some contents in it.

Sabantu: How are you feeling this morning?

Sabantu brings his head closer to her.

³¹ Since Sabantu's mother is very ill, she must be represented by an ambiguous shadow of light that looks like either a single mattress or a grave.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Sabantu: I see that uAuntie Buyi helped you into your new night dress. Do you like it?...Well, it looks good on you. Turquoise has always been a good colour on you...

(Chuckles) Ha! You want her to yell at me again?

A laugh only synonymous to mother and son is shared.

Sabantu: Uthanda ukudlala ngami wena! (You like playing jokes on me!)... I'm about to leave for Avalon. Ma, none of this makes any sense...I'm sorry.

Sabantu takes the yellow plastic bag and looks inside it.

Sabantu: Did Auntie put everything inside here? I don't want to get there to find that there's no snuff³² or impepho³³...Okay, everything looks like it's in order... *(Glances at his watch)* It's time, gunning for the 5 o' clock train... Yes ma, I'll remember to call out her name. There shouldn't be a need though. I know that I will find it.

Sabantu leans over to kiss her on the forehead.

Sabantu: I love you mama.

He gets up and as he's about to exit turns to look at her with the deepest pain lounging in his eyes. Sabantu's moment is disrupted by his cellphone ringing. He takes a look at it but decides to ignore it.

Lights fade to black

³² Snuff is a smokeless tobacco made from ground or pulverised tobacco leaves. It is insufflated (inhaled) or "snuffed" into the nasal cavity (into each nostril), delivering a swift 'hit' of nicotine. Snuff is also used as an offering to the ancestors. It is popular amongst elderly black women in South Africa.

³³ Traditional incense used to facilitate communication to the ancestors.

Morning

A displaced looking Sabantu is inside a crowded train. It is so congested that he is barely standing. His one hand is latched on a straphanger while he clutches the yellow plastic bag to his chest with the other.

Sabantu: *(To audience)* I hate the train. I can't believe I left my car for this!

It is exactly the way I had imagined it. Exactly! Not an inkling of oxygen, no space, and er, *(counting)* one, two, three, fo-four grown man pressed up against me. *(To one of the men)* Excuse me, can you please move your hand from my... Can you, asseblief?

(Please?)

Silence as the train treads along.

Sabantu: *(To audience)* I must say though that it is surprisingly quiet for a Metrorail train. The only irritating noise is that of the wheels clashing against the rails. But, at least we're moving. Getting closer to Tshiawelo station. The sooner this day is over the better.

Sabantu frowns.

Sabantu: *(To himself)* No, no, no. Don't start yapping now—

Sabantu turns his head to look around.

Sabantu: *(To audience)* Did you...? I swear I... Why am I hearing voices if everyone's mouths are shut...?

The murmurs crescendo then accentuate into conversations.

Mrendeni: He ndaa! (Greetings!)

Abram: Bari mini? ((How are you?))

Sabantu startles. He continues looking around.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Mrendeni: Athi ambi! He mtanga, when you died, why did your family choose to bury you in Dobsonville cemetery? Avalon is where it is happening.

Abram: Ja, but there's no space in Avalon. You darkies are dying too much!

Sabantu turns to look around. He is shocked.

Sabantu: Shut up! Shut up!

Challenging the people in the train.

Sabantu: Don't look at me like that. I'm not crazy!

The train comes to a halt.

Voice from Loud Speaker: *Tshiawelo Station! Tshiawelo Station! Next stop Kliptown!*

Kliptown, next station!

The doors open and Sabantu exits the train. While stretching his shoulder he's interrupted by his cellphone ringing.

Sabantu: Damn it! *(He answers)* Hi, Piet I thought you underst-...Huh? Who is this?... Oh, Stefan! Hey, Stefan. Listen man, I spoke to Piet earlier-...but if he already told you that I can't make it, why are you calling me?...Of course I was serious. I'm at the cemetery as we speak. I just got off the train... Why are you making me repeat myself like this, I'm not coming. Now, can I just do what I came here to do here? I will call you as soon as I get back home... Thank you! And Stefan...I cannot be reached here.

He hangs up then takes out a piece of paper from his pockets to read. He enters the cemetery. He looks over at the cemetery and is immediately overwhelmed by the sea of graves yowling at him.

Sabantu: My God! So many graves...

He grabs hold of his chest struggling to breathe.

Sabantu: What's going on? Why can't I breathe? Something isn't right...*(To audience)*
There's not enough air in this cemetery. Why do all these dead people have so much
breath in them. It's too much, I can't... *(Panic attack intensifies)*. My chest ...? *(Calming*
himself) Think about Ma, Sabantu! Think about Ma, think about...

He slowly recovers.

Everything's going to be okay mama. It already is. You are going to get better. I'm here
now. I'm going to do this thing.

Contrary to these words of optimism, a forsaken light emerges suggesting a
hopeless morning. Sabantu's fear is palpable. He takes a few bold steps into the
cemetery. He looks up to take in the noise of the graves then resumes walking. His eyes
meet the Avalon office by the main gate.

Sabantu: There's the cemetery office, good.

Sabantu approaches the office. It is locked.

Sabantu: *(Calling out)* Nqo! Nqo! *(Knock! Knock!)* Hello! Is anybody here? I'm looking
for a grave! Nqo! Nqo! Eish! *(Reflectively)*

He looks through the office windows but no one is there.

Sabantu: *(Sighs)* Maybe if I start on the east side of the fence then go all the way around.
Then maybe cut through- *(Spots someone)* Finally, someone! Excuse me! Excuse me, sir!
Can I ask you - excuse me? I'm talking to you, *(to audience)* kanti akezwa emadlebeni
lomuntu? *(Do his ears not function?)*... Sorry baba, hello? I need some help? What's
your problem? I'm not crazy. Voestek! *(Piss off!)* Eish. *(To audience)* Why is everyone
looking at me as if I'm crazy today?

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Sabantu begins paces around the perimeters of the graveyard. Every step seems more laborious than the last. In a short while he stops and places the yellow plastic bag on the ground to take a break. A very bright light strikes his face. He takes a glimpse at his wristwatch.

Sabantu: Jesus it's seven o' clock already. An hour has gone by already? *(Sighs)* Ah! *(Shoulder twitches)* What the... *(To audience)* ... No, it is too early to despair; I have the whole day ahead of me. Yes, I do. And maybe gogo's grave is closer than I think?

Sabantu takes out the piece of paper from his pocket again and looks at it dubiously.

Sabantu: *(To audience)* Before I left the house Ma advised me, well, more like gave me strict instructions me to call out gogo's name should I get lost and ask her to reveal herself. She said that Avalon is known to be protective of her graves... that's crazy, right?

Sabantu picks up the plastic bag from the ground and starts walking. He changes direction and walks into a path of graves. To avoid embarrassment, he checks to see if no one is in sight.

Sabantu: Gogo- Ma Zwane, yimina uSabantu, ziveze bo! (Ma Zwane, it's me Sabantu, show yourself) I...we need you, please show yourself. I beg you Ma Zwane.

Sabantu inspects each grave as he walks past.

Sabantu: PR1222, PR1224...These are Ps moes? *(Sighs)* Where are you, Ma Zwane? Ziveze tu? (Please show yourself?)

Sabantu spots something in the distance.

Sabantu: See that car? Yea, yea by the fence...I think it's an old Chevrolet!

He paces a bit to get a better view.

Sabantu: Looks like there are three people just a across from it. Yes, yes, yes! Maybe they can help.

Sabantu runs as fast as his legs can carry him towards the people. As he gets closer...

Sabantu: No, no, no. Don't go! Wait! Wait! Please? Hey! Hello! *(Despondently)* Don't go... Fuck! *(To audience)* Can you fucking believe it! They took off! They stood up got inside that excuse of a car and took off. Who still drives those pieces of shit cars anyway? Damnit!

He stops running and decides to recuperate by a nearby grave

Sabantu: *(Reading a tombstone)* "Phumlani Vincent Gumede, born 19 March 1999, died 5 June 2009." You were too young to go my friend. Hope you don't mind me sitting here. *(He sits on the foot of the grave)* I wonder how many funerals that giant aloe tree has seen... And that small hill by the station overlooking the cemetery. See it? It's hard to fathom how it can withstand so much death?

Sabantu takes out a handkerchief from his blazer and wipes his face. Noticing the dirt on his handkerchief.

Sabantu: Jesus! *(Sighs)* So where to from here, Phumlani Gumede? Any ideas? C'mon, you've been here for some time. Help a brother out? *(Chuckles)* "Where to from here, Sabantu? *(To audience)* Maybe I should go back to the office? Nah, it's too far. I should preserve my energy. *(Takes a glimpse at his watch)* C'mon Ma Zwane, show yourself or give me a sign at least. *(Spots something in the distance)* What the- *(To audience)* What

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

is that? Do you see that? *(Stands up to take a better look)* A horse - is that a man on a horse? Who rides a horse in the cem- Maybe he can help.

Sabantu runs towards this mysterious figure. However, it appears that the figure vanishes everytime he gets closer to it. This up and down happens for a while. After running in circles for what seems like a brief eternity he falls down on his knees struggling to catch his breath.

Sabantu: *(Coughing)* Damnit!

As Sabantu recovers...

Sabantu: *(To audience)* Wait a minute, this can't be... It's impossible. I'm right where I started. Huh? There's Phumlani Gumede's grave and, and the aloe tree –

Sabantu raises his head to encounter the mysterious man standing right in front.
Who is this? I have never seen anyone like this before. He stands tall even though disfigured and hauntingly arched. He's grotesque, raggedy with a large frame. He bears an overbearing hunchback as if carrying an invisible imp on his back. Yet although deformed, he possesses a kind of dignity that supersedes even that of the many great businessmen I have come across in my lifetime. I'm afraid to look into eyes - they scare me. But I will not show him that I'm afraid. I'm a respectable businessman for chrissake. Ah, bloody shoulder!

Sabantu's shoulder starts to ache, he tries to resist the pain but finally succumbs to it. He bends down in an attempt to alleviate the pain and when he comes up again he finds Thunas talking over his shoulder.

Thunas: “Zime kanye izinkomo zokhokho, futhi zizothokoza” (Our great grandmothers' cows are together and will be joyous).

Turns to Sabantu

Thunas: “Grave number I824, Martha Ntombizethu Zwane, born 3 March 1932, died on 23 August 2000.” Time is of the essence, mfan’ ami (my boy). Your grandmother is hungry for that *umqombothi*³⁴ you carry, and your mother’s wilting life is at the mercy of the raging sun... What are you waiting for, Zwane? Mas’hambe! (Let’s go!)

Sabantu reads from the piece of paper he was looking at earlier in disbelief.

Thunas, with great conviction turns towards the sun and begins walking with a great purpose.

Sabantu: “Grave number I824, Martha Ntombizethu Zwane...” How could...what is going on? Even I do not know all of this information by heart. Who is this man? A part of me wants to ask him but I’m, well, it all seems irrelevant at this point. Could this man be an angel that was kicked out of the dilapidated back rooms of heaven to come help me on my quest? Is my grandmother reaching out to me somehow? The gates of my mind are flooded with questions right now but I’m afraid to imagine the answers. Everything is happening so fast-

Sabantu looks up to find Thunas well on is way.

Sabantu: Wait for me!

Although carrying what seems like a tremendous burden on his back, Thunas strides with great haste. Sabantu runs to catch up with Thunas but struggles to keep up

³⁴ *Umqombothi* is South African traditional beer made from corn, maize malt, sorghum malt, yeast and water.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

with him. **Journey Home**³⁵ plays in the background. Thunas finally stops at a grave cradling a silver trumpet that awaits him.

Thunas: “Zizimisele ukuthokoza izinkomo zokhokho” (Our great-grandmothers’ cattle are prepared to be joyous).

Sabantu: (*To audience*) Haha! I can’t believe it! I found it. Thank you gogo! (*Looks at his watch*) Looks like I might still be able to catch the meeting, at least halfway. Not bad right?

Sabantu approaches Thunas already preparing to take out umqombothi. He looks down on the grave.

Sabantu: You did good baba. I’m going to make it up to you. Big time! (*Beat*) Wait a minute, this is not my grandmother’s grave? The headstone reads, “Zombili Harriet Mtshali.” This is MN2134? My grandmother’s grave is I824! Martha Zwane. I thought you knew this? Wait, why are you kneeling? (*To audience*) What’s going on here?

Thunas, now on his knees, kisses the foot of the grave. He takes a beaded bracelet from his pocket.

Thunas: Nayi, ngiyitholile! Ziyothokoza manje izinkomo zokhokho. (Here it is, I found it! Our great grandmothers will be joyful now).

Turns to Sabantu.

Thunas: I need your help as much as you need mine.

Thunas shows Sabantu the beaded bracelet.

Thunas: You need to help me put this on my mother’s wrist. She has been coming to me in a dream for many many moons seeking this very bracelet. It was stolen from her and

³⁵ From Feya Faku’s 2003 album - **Tacit**

now she wants it back *(To grave)* I need to give her the rest she's been longing for. I will help you find your grandmother's place of rest for these graves are like the lines on my palm. But you have to help me dig up my mother's coffin.

Sabantu: *(To audience)* Did he just ask me to exhume his m...? Are my ears deceiving right now? *(Pause)* Seriously? *(To Thunas)* Mr... Yes, er, I... I will do it. But first you have to help me find Ma Zwane's grave before the sun sets. Once we are done with my ritual, I will help you. *(To audience)* I just agreed to exhuming a corpse. Of a woman I do not even know nogal! This day just gets better. To top it off, he gave me the stupid beads to hold on to – “for reassurance!”

Thunas: Alright then, lets go. The graves beginning with the letter “T” are on the other side of the cemetery - by the train station. Looks like you walked all the way here and left your grandmother exactly where the train dropped you off.

Thunas picks up the trumpet from the grave and gets up. He blows a phrase as if communicating something to his ancestors.

Thunas: *(Over his shoulder)* “Bekezelani ke zinkomo zoMa, intokozo inimele ngasemfuleni” (Patience to you my mother's cattle, true joy awaits you by the river).

Journey Home continues playing in the background as the two travel across the gravescape. As they tread along the music abruptly stops. Thunas cautions Sabantu to stop.

Thunas: Get down! *(Loud whisper)* Get down now, tombstone thieves!

Thunas hides behind a tombstone and gestures to Sabantu to do the same.

Thunas: Hey wena!

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Mavusana: Likuphi ithuna ke Sgora? (Where is that tombstone?)... I can't believe that you brought us here at this time, and you don't even know where the fucking tombstone is? Hhay' maan! That's why we do jobs like this at night. If you didn't oversleep we'd be long gone by now. Khona manje Muhammed wants his order today, eish!

Sgora: Shut up and let me think

The two thieves quietly search for the tombstone in question.

Sgora: (*Excited*) Nazo! (Here it is!) Happy now? Now let's get this thing outta here before somebody sees us. I don't want to have to hurt someone like last time... And don't fuck up. The small chip you made on that purple headstone cost us 400 bucks.

Mavusana: Eintlek, what's your problem? Uyamense? (Are you menstruating?)

Sgora: Voetsek! (Piss off!) Let's make sure to pull out the marker with the grave number. We can make a little something from it at the scrapyard! Scroof had a whole bunch of these markers last week. The bastard! That's why he was acting like bhut' madlisa³⁶, buying everyone beers!

Mavusana: Ja ne, Avalon will set you up like that!

They start knocking down the head stone.

Sgora: I think it's ready. Let's pull. (*Struggling*) Are you sure you're pulling?

Mavusana: PULL!

Both: Argggghhhh!

They finally manage to pull it out.

Mavusana: Damnit!! Lets get this thing in the van and get out of here before someone sees us.

³⁶ Township colloquialism referring to someone who has come across a bit of money. This character usually flaunts and spends it carelessly on everyone in sight.

The thieves exit. Sabantu and Thunas get up.

Sabantu: Idiots! *(Dusting himself off)* I bought this blazer in Paris you know. Who steals tombstones and grave markers? I mean how much can you really make from used headstones. *(To Thunas)* Does this happen all the time, vele? *(Silence)*

They resume walking.

Sabantu: I mean, isn't there security here, or something? Oh shit, shit, shit! What if, what if my grandmother's tombstone has been stolen too? Then what? How am I to find it if there's no number? Damn it! Do you think we'll find it? *(To audience)* He's stopped talking to me for some reason. It's true what they say, "when a man is strange, a man is strange!" Maybe, it's the tombstone thieves that got to him. Right?

As they walk Sabantu is startled by something. He stops. Thunas continues to walk ahead of him.

Sabantu: Did you feel that?

Sabantu attempts to catch up to Thunas but stops again.

Sabantu: Hhay' man! Ubani loyo? *(Who's that?)*. *(To audience)* There's something that doesn't feel right. Something in the air almost. I feel as if we were being followed, not by a person but by some-thing, a spirit or something. It's hard to describe it. Maybe my mind is playing tricks on me again. I guess that's what you get for roaming around a cemetery.

As Sabantu attempts to catch up to Thunas, he feels something holding him back.

Sabantu: *(Panicking)* Who's there? Hey! *(Calling out to Thunas)* Hey, siza bo! Bab' u...? Hey... *(To Audience)* It just hit me, I don't know what his name is. *(To Thunas)* Hey! Help, h...

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

For a moment Sabantu freezes with both eyes and mouth wide open as if seeing a ghost.

Sabantu: What the hell is going on? *(To audience)* Why is the sky turning purple? Who...who is this that stands over an empty grave with the stench of death in his hollow stare. Did he just climb out of the grave? He looks like he has died many times over. Even so, his hair is like wool and his feet like brass. Just like the man described in the Book of Revelations.

Sabantu turns abruptly.

Sabantu: The hunchback, why is he approaching him with God's wrath. Is he about to attack a dead man?

Dlangamandla: *(To Thunas)* Is that how you greet an old friend, Thunas Mtshali? You need to calm down. Trust me when I say, I cannot die more than I already have. I heard your loud monkey friend on your back as you walked past so I thought I should come out and say "sawubona" (hello). So, sawubona Thunas *(Silence)*. What have you gotten yourself into now Thunas? Your ancestors are worried about you. They don't understand why you bother yourself with this fool you're with instead of fulfilling your own mission? That is your problem Thunas, you are too much of a saint. You cannot save every fool that comes here seeking answers from the dead, you know?

Thunas: Ngiyekele Dlangamandla? *(Leave me alone Dlangamandla?)* You've done enough damage? Your cursed monkey already lives on my back. What more do you want? *(Yells over his shoulder)* "Thula! Zizophinda zijabule izinkomo!" *(Keep quiet! The cows will soon be joyful again!)*

Dlangamandla: Don't be so dramatic Mtshali. I'm only here to deliver a message. You can take it or continue playing hide and seek with your new friend and of course, your monkey (*Guffaws*) Till we meet again!

Thunas turns to Sabantu.

Thunas: (*Broken*) Let's go!

Sabantu: (*To Thunas*) "Lets go!" What d'you mean let's go? What the f- what was that? I'm not going anywhere with you until you tell me- hey, where are you going?

Thunas resumes pacing again.

Sabantu: (*To audience*) He's walking away from me, can you be- (*To Thunas*) Bab' uMtshali? Wait for me, please!

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Into Day

Sabantu trails behind Thunas.

Sabantu: Bab' uMtshali? (*Silence*) Bab' uMtshali can we please take a break? We've been searching for (*Looking at his watch*) close to two hours since we last stopped

Thunas is silent.

Sabantu: That er, dead guy back there. Was er, was that a...who was that guy? (*Silence*) He said a lot of things. Strange things...You don't really have a monkey on your back? (*To audience*) How long is he going to keep ignoring me like this? For chrissake we've been walking around Deadville for hours, the least he can do is say, "let's take a break?"

Thunas stops.

Sabantu: (*To audience*) Thank God, he stopped. Bab' uThunas?

Thunas: You will find your grandmother's grave on the other side by the train station. My work here is done.

Thunas walks away.

Sabantu: Wait, wait, what do you mean- you can't do this? I need your help? I'll make it worth your while. I promise. How much do you want? Name your price! I don't have my cheque book on me but we can arrange something. Here's my business card! (*Taking out a business card*)

Thunas continues walking.

Sabantu: What about your mother...the bracelet, and stuff. C'mon baba ngiyak'cela? (Please baba, I beg you?) Look, maybe I...how's about we start afresh. You know, like from the beginning. Like what people normally do the first time they meet. I realize that perhaps I was a bit forward, I'm sorry.

Thunas continues walking.

My name is Sabantu Xolelisizwe Zwane. I'm a partner and business strategist to a strategic management and construction company called SMCC. I was born in Sebokeng and raised by my grandmother Martha Ntombizethu Zwane together with my mother Maria Zwane. I have never known my father and his name was never mentioned in the house. My grandmother, as you already know, although I don't know how, passed away in August of 2000, and my mother ... well, it is she that brings me here today! She is very ill. She may possibly die at any moment. Coming here is my only hope. I do not know what else to do. I don't want to lose her.

Thunas addresses the audience for the very first time.

Thunas: *(To audience)* I feel like this is the first time I hear this boy speak. Everything else he's said is like - a silent fart in a violent storm... I'm a man of my word so I will continue to help him. *(To Sabantu)* Zwane, let's go!

Sabantu: *(To audience)* That's it? After pouring out my heart like that that's all he has to say? "Let's go!" I mean he could've at least told me why he's having a feud with a dead guy. *(Noticing Thunas leaving)* Bab' uThunas wait, please?

Sabantu's Smartphone rings.

Sabantu: For chrissake Klopper, what part of "I cannot be reached" don't you understand? Yes, but- What, what did you say?... We got it? We got the mall! *(Shouts)* We got the mall! Woohooo!... Yea baby, haha! What did I tell you? Huh? ... What did I/ Don't "ja, ja, ja" me! You owe me big time. When I get back I expect a bottle of Johnny Blue on my desk... Uh-uh! Look man, I can't talk right now, I'll ring you later, yea? Cheers! *(In pain)* Argh! Damn shoulder!

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

He looks to find Thunas a stone throwing distance away. He runs to catch up with him.

Thunas: *(To Sabantu)* You need to walk faster Zwane, the sun is becoming impatient and my mother awaits me.

Thunas realizes that something's amiss.

Thunas: Hhayi bo!

He paces about confused. He looks up to the small hill ahead of them. He blows his horn as if communicating something with a power unbeknownst to us. He anticipates a response but none is forthcoming.

Thunas: How's this even possible?

Sabantu: *(To Thunas)* What is it? Bab' uThunas? C'mon say something man? *(To audience)* Something is wrong? Why has he got this confused look on his face. He looks like someone has played a nasty trick on him.

Thunas: What did you do to her? Why is she hiding from you? Answer me, damnit! We've been walking around the same place for hours! We are exactly where we started! Why is she hiding from you? Zwane? *(Yells)* Khuluma? *(Speak)* You've wasted enough of my time boy. What aren't you telling me?

Sabantu: *(To audience)* This doesn't make any sense. There stands the big aloe tree, and and the small hill ahead of us? I don't under-? How could we not see that we've been walking around the same place for 6 hours? How could we allow time to fool us like this? Unless... Wait a minute, he sabotaged me! How could I be so stupid so as to follow a crazy hunchback in a cemetery? *(To Thunas)* What kind of a sick joke are you trying to pull here, Thunas? You said that these graves are "like the lines on your palm." Those

were your exact words! My grandmother is dead, why would she be hiding from me?
Since when do dead people hide themselves? What kind of fool do you think I am? Huh?

Sabantu: *(To audience)* I can't believe I trusted him.

Thunas stands up without saying a word and walks away.

Sabantu: Whoa, whoa, where do you think you're going? I am not finished with you?
Why are you doing this to me? D'you know who I am?

Thunas continues to walk.

Sabantu: *(To Thunas)* I'm talking to you! Hey, sifumbu! (hunchback!)

Thunas stops then turns to move slowly towards Sabantu. Sabantu is afraid, he moves in the opposite direction.

Sabantu: *(To audience)* Oh no, he's not going to kill me, is he? What have I done?

Thunas: You're right, I don't know who you are. Enlighten me?

Thunas yells at the monkey on his back.

Thunas: Zithukuthele manje izinkomo zokhokho! (Our great grandmother's cattle are now enraged!)

Thunas paces up to Sabantu and grabs hold of him by the neck with one hand. Sabantu struggles to remove Thunas' grip from his neck. Suddenly, as if pinched by something in the ether, Thunas startles and lets go of Sabantu. Both men look at the sky above them.

Thunas: What was that? *(Addresses the monkey)* Zifunani manje? (What are they looking for?) *(To audience)* Akusiyizo? (It's not them?) What do you mean it's not them?

A scared Thunas seeks shelter anticipating something catastrophic to happen.

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Thunas: What's going on? What have you done, Zwane? Why do you keep on upsetting the gods? Huh?

The sky yowls once more. Thunas and Sabantu lie flat on the ground both covering their ears. Silence. All we hear are heavy breaths from both men. In a short while Sabantu rises as if being summoned.

Sabantu: Gogo? Gogo! Nguwe lowo? (Gogo, is that you?) Gogo? *(To audience)* D'you hear that? *(Smiles)* It is you, isn't it?... Gogo, why do you speak like that? Please show yourself?... Hhay' man, who is this? Gogo if this is really you prove it... Reveal your grave. Help me to help your daughter... Who is this? Why have you stolen my grandma's voice? Ziveze gogo, ngiyak'cela? (Show yourself please?) Ma is very sick, she needs you. I beg you, the sun is threatening to leave, I have to find your grave... Stop saying that I don't know what you mean?

As if struck by a painful blow on his shoulder Sabantu screams in agony and falls to the ground.

Lights fade to black

Into Evening

A dim light emerges indicative of a drooping day. A despairing Sabantu addresses the audience. His Parisian blazer lies on the ground while the plastic bag hangs loosely on his index finger.

Sabantu: There's a hopelessness that's different to any other kind of hopelessness. The kind of hopelessness that creeps up on you when you least expect it. It feels like a tight knot in your spine then it cripples you from the knees down urging your feet to forsake your body. This hopelessness starts with an overwhelming sensation, like a gush of wind on your back. You stiffen because you think that the next step you take will kill you. Although the Sun is still peeping over the wilting horizon I have stopped walking because of this feeling. When Gogo...spoke to me she told me that the *umqombothi* I carry is not enough to feed my people. She told me that the mission I am to fulfill soars beyond Avalon cemetery to the land of Bokgoseng...But how can I possibly convey this to my business partners? I feel more empty than that unoccupied grave that stares at me. And Thunas? Well, I lied to him. Told him that Gogo said we're close by and that we should keep on going...Here he comes.

Thunas, now a few graves away from Sabantu.

Thunas: *(Excitedly)* We are almost there, young blood. I know we are. You can't stop now, let's go, the sun is about to lay its head *(Noticing Sabantu's frown)* Manje? *(And now?)* What's wrong? *(Pause)* Ever since uMa Zwane revealed herself to you, ubuso bakho butshekile *(You face is distorted)*... What are you not telling me?... What did she say to you?

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Sabantu: *(To Thunas)* I want to go home now. I don't want to continue with this search. I have failed.

Suddenly Sabantu struggles to breathe again.

Sabantu: *(To audience)* The dead souls that surround me want their air back. They entrusted me with it but I have failed them. I can't even save my own mother. *(Looks up to Thunas)* Bab' uMtshali please do not hurt me, I, er- shit. Baba, thing is, I... you and I have been going around in circles. And I feel as if I have wasted enough of your time... What's the point of continuing with this journey because the sun, the sun, is almost... Look, I will pay you accordingly for your time. Name your price? I can arrange a bank transfer or-

Sabantu takes a few steps back as if anticipating to be attacked.

How much do you want? R50,000...100,000... Okay how's about half a million! I just got awarded a tender to build a mall. I'm, I'm rich! *(False bravado)* Hey! Do you know who I am? If you hurt me, my, my people will come and-

Thunas punches Sabantu and he falls to the ground. Thunas walks away.

Sabantu: Why are you walking away? Is that all you've got, huh? Sifumbu! Come back here! Come finish what you've started! *(Beat)* Thought as much. Coward!

As Sabantu struggles to get up he stumbles upon Ma Zwanes grave. A trumpet rests on top of it.

Sabantu: Huh? Ma Zwane? Gogo? It's you?

A frenzied Sabantu gets up to quickly get the yellow bag. He takes out the snuff and scatters it on the head of the grave. He attempts to light up impepho but it refuses to spark. He then takes out umqombothi and pours it all over the grave.

Sabantu: Gogo? Gogo, yimina umzukulu wakho! (it is me your grandson!), mina uSabantu Xolelisizwe Zwane! I know that I have failed you but please, you have to save my mother. She is dying, ngiyak'cela!

Sabantu stops pouring the umqombothi when he realizes that it is dark.

Sabantu: The sun is gone. Night is born.

As if struck again on the shoulder Sabantu yells in agony. He starts wrestling as if there's an invisible creature on his back. Every toss and turn seems to deform his back more and more. Sabantu eventually falls to the ground carrying the mark of the cursed monkey. He screams in agony. He looks up to find Thunas walking towards the gate.

Sabantu: Thunas? Thunas! Come back here! Don't leave me. I don't want your monkey. Please?

Lights fade to black...

Avalon: a dramaturgical casebook

Epilogue

*A hauntingly barren light emerges where Ma Zwane's grave is sited. Sabantu hovers over the grave. He now carries the weight of the world on his newfound deformity. He plays **Lament for bakaZwane** in D major. As the ballad reaches the fourth bar he stops playing and turns to face Thunas' ancestors (the audience).*

Sabantu: I told you to leave me alone! Kanti anizwa yini? (Don't you listen?) What do you want from me?

Sabantu continues playing...

...as the lights fade to black

THE END

Okungapheli kuyahlola!