



Survival, Identity, and the Politics of Performance: A Comparative Analysis of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, and *You Play Me, I Play You*

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Abstract

This article examines the formal and stylistic commonalities between Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972) and Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's *You Play Me, I Play You* (1986). Despite originating from different socio-political contexts, apartheid South Africa and 1980s Nigeria, respectively, both plays demonstrate remarkable similarities in their dramatic structure, use of metatheatrical devices, and thematic preoccupations with identity, survival, and institutional oppression. Through a comparative analysis grounded in postcolonial theory and performance studies, this article argues that both works employ what can be termed "theatre of survival", a dramaturgical approach where performance itself becomes a strategy for negotiating oppressive circumstances. The analysis reveals how both plays utilise minimalistic settings, direct audience address, multi-role playing, the transformative power of clothing and photography, and the motif of identity exchange to critique the dehumanising bureaucratic systems that render Black bodies as mere documents rather than human beings. Significantly, this article positions Mawugbe's work within the broader legacy of African drama, demonstrating how third-generation African playwrights drew inspiration from first- and second-generation dramatists like Fugard, adapting their formal innovations to address post-independence realities. Furthermore, the article connects these historical texts to contemporary global crises, digital surveillance, the migrant crisis, biometric identification, and algorithmic governance, revealing how these plays continue to speak urgently to readers navigating systems of control in the twenty-first century. The enduring relevance of both plays lies in their insistence that even under conditions of extreme constraint, human beings can assert dignity, create community, and resist erasure through performance itself.

Keywords

African drama; postcolonial theatre; comparative drama; identity; survival

1. Introduction

In an era of facial recognition technology, biometric databases, and increasingly fortified borders, two plays written decades ago have acquired startling new relevance. When a Syrian refugee assumes the identity of a dead man to cross into Europe, when a Ghanaian migrant in South Africa changes his name to secure employment, when an undocumented worker in the United States lives "as another man's ghost", they are unknowingly re-enacting the central drama of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, and *You Play Me, I Play You*.

Theatre has long served as a powerful medium for articulating the experiences of the marginalised and dispossessed. In postcolonial Africa, playwrights have consistently turned to dramatic forms that reflect not only the content of oppression but also the strategies of resistance that emerge within constrained circumstances. Two plays that exemplify this tendency, separated by fourteen years and distinct national contexts, are *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, the collaborative work of Athol Fugard with actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona, and Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's *You Play Me, I Play You*.

At first glance, these plays emerge from different historical moments: the former from the brutal final decades of apartheid South Africa, the latter from the economically volatile Nigeria of the 1980s, a period marked by austerity measures, military rule, and strained relations with neighbouring countries. However, a close reading reveals striking parallels in their dramatic architecture, their stylistic choices, and their thematic concerns. Both plays centre on two male protagonists sharing cramped living spaces, and both deploy extended monologues that break the fourth wall, both employ the device of mistaken or exchanged identity as a survival mechanism, and both conclude with photographic moments that freeze their protagonists in aspirational poses.

These commonalities are not merely coincidental. They reflect a broader pattern in African drama: the influence of first- and second-generation African playwrights on their successors. Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona pioneered a theatre of urgent testimony, minimalist, collaborative, and deeply rooted in the specific realities of Black South African life. Their work, alongside that of Wole Soyinka, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, established formal and thematic precedents that subsequent generations of African dramatists would adapt to their own contexts. Mawugbe's *You Play Me, I Play You* stands as a testament to this generational dialogue. The play's structure, its two-hander format, its blend of comedy and political critique, its use of direct address, and its preoccupation with documentation and identity bear the unmistakable imprint of Fugard's influence, translated into the Nigerian context of economic precarity and immigration enforcement.

This article systematically maps the formal and thematic commonalities between the two plays, arguing that they constitute a shared dramaturgical response to Black urban existence under oppressive state systems. In both apartheid South Africa and 1980s Nigeria, the passbook (or its equivalent) symbolises bureaucratic control, and the central dramatic question becomes: How does a man "be" himself when the state has reduced his identity to a document? Beyond their historical contexts, these plays speak directly to contemporary readers navigating digital identities, biometric surveillance, and precarious labour across the global South and its diasporas.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Postcolonial Theatre and the Politics of Representation

Postcolonial theatre criticism has long concerned itself with how playwrights from formerly colonised nations negotiate the relationship between Western dramatic forms and indigenous performance traditions. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins (1996) argue that postcolonial drama frequently employs "metatheatrical devices" to foreground the constructed nature of identity under colonial and neo-colonial regimes.

Contemporary scholars have extended this analysis to digital and transnational contexts. Sarah Hemmings (2021) argues that the "performance of identity" in postcolonial theatre prefigures the curated selves of social media, where migrants and diaspora communities must constantly negotiate between authentic self-presentation and the identities demanded by host countries. This framework allows us to read both plays not merely as historical documents but as precursors to contemporary identity politics in an age of surveillance capitalism.

2.2 The Passbook as Dramatic Symbol

The *dompas* (passbook) in South African drama has received substantial critical attention. Loren Kruger (1999) notes that the passbook functions as a "portable prison" in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, a document that simultaneously enables and constrains movement. Similarly, Biodun Jeyifo (1985) has analysed how Nigerian popular theatre engages with the material conditions of urban poverty. More recently, Achille Mbembe (2017) has theorised the "becoming-document" of the Black subject under contemporary regimes of biometric governance, arguing that the passbook of apartheid has evolved into the digital profile of the twenty-first century, equally inescapable, equally determining of life chances.

2.3 Performance and Performativity as Theoretical Framework

This analysis draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks. First, Judith Butler's (1990) concept of

performativity, the idea that identity is constituted through repeated performances rather than expressing some pre-existing essence, highlights how both plays treat names, documents, and photographs as sites where identity is produced rather than merely recorded. Butler's later work (2004) on precarity further illuminates the condition of both Sizwe and Kotey, whose very existence depends on successful performance before state authorities.

Second, Victor Turner's (1982) work on "social drama" and liminality provides tools for understanding how the cramped rooms in both plays function as liminal spaces where identities can be transformed. Contemporary performance studies scholar Diana Taylor (2016) extends this analysis of border spaces, arguing that checkpoints, immigration offices, and detention centres are contemporary sites of liminality where identities are performed, contested, and sometimes annihilated.

2.4 Generational Influence in African Drama

While comparative studies of African drama have often focused on canonical figures like Soyinka and Fugard (Wetmore, 2002), less attention has been paid to the lines of influence connecting first- and second-generation playwrights to their successors. This article addresses this gap by positioning Mawugbe's play within this genealogical framework. As Martin Banham (2004) notes, the generation of African dramatists who emerged in the 1980s and 1990s inherited formal strategies, particularly the two-hander format, the blending of vernacular and colonial languages, and the use of minimalist staging, from their predecessors, adapting them to address the specific challenges of post-independence disillusionment, economic crisis, and military rule. Mawugbe's debt to Fugard is particularly evident in *You Play Me, I Play You*, which appropriates the structural template of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* while infusing it with the linguistic and cultural specificities of Nigerian popular theatre. This generational dialogue underscores the pan-African resonances of both plays and their shared preoccupation with survival under conditions of scarcity.

3. Methodology

This study employs a comparative textual analysis methodology, examining both plays across the dimensions of dramatic structure, character configuration, staging requirements, and linguistic patterns. The analysis is organised around five key dimensions: (1) spatial configuration and the use of liminal spaces; (2) audience relationship and direct address; (3) multi-role playing and its dramatic effects; (4) identity transformation and the mechanisms by which characters change or exchange identities; and (5) symbolic objects, with particular attention to newspapers, photographs, and documents.

The analysis is interpretative, grounded in close reading of the play texts while remaining attentive to their performance dimensions and to how stage directions and dialogue imply specific relationships among actors, characters, and audiences. To establish contemporary relevance, each analytical section concludes with connections to twenty-first-century phenomena: digital surveillance, migrant identity fraud, the gig economy, and algorithmic governance.

Drawing on Gilbert and Tompkins's (1996) insight that postcolonial drama uses metatheatrical devices to foreground identity's constructed nature, this analysis examines how characters in both plays perform roles, Styles as photographer, Buntu as policeman, Kotey as customs officer, that expose the theatricality of state-imposed identities

4. Discussions

4.1 The Room as Liminal Space: From Township Shack to Migrant Hostel

Both plays are set in remarkably similar physical spaces: cramped, sparsely furnished rooms that serve as domestic spaces for their male protagonists. In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Styles's photographic studio is described as containing "a table and chair," "another table, or desk, with odds and ends," and a camera on a tripod. The space is neither fully domestic nor fully commercial; it is a threshold space where identities are manufactured. Similarly, Dele's room in Lagos contains "a rickety table, chair, a long bench and a student-bed with cardboard spread over the metal springs." Both spaces are characterised by improvisation and makeshift arrangements; in Lagos, cardboard substitutes for proper bedding, while photographic backdrops transform a bare room into any location Styles desires.

The theoretical concept of heterotopias, developed by French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984), describes spaces that exist outside normal spatial and temporal arrangements, places like cemeteries, prisons, ships, and, crucially for this analysis, migrant hostels and photography studios. Unlike utopias, which are unreal ideal spaces, heterotopias are real places that simultaneously reflect, contest, and invert the spaces surrounding them. They are

"counter-sites" where the normal rules of social order are suspended, making alternative arrangements possible.

These rooms function as what Foucault (1986) would term "heterotopias", spaces capable of juxtaposing multiple incompatible sites within themselves. In Styles's studio, a world map and a "City of the Future" backdrop can transform Robert Zwelinzima into a global executive; in Dele's room, the same space accommodates dreaming of a Bedford truck, rehearsing a poem for Ayishetu, and playing the game of "Checkpoint." The room's poverty enables its imaginative richness.

For millions of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons today, such liminal spaces are the literal condition of existence. Refugee camps, asylum seeker hostels, and the cramped shared accommodation of migrant labourers in the Gulf States, or the informal settlements on Johannesburg's periphery is a contemporary version of Styles's studio and Dele's room. The cardboard on Dele's bed echoes the cardboard shelters used by homeless populations in every global city. In an era where migration has reached unprecedented levels (over 100 million people forcibly displaced globally by 2022), the plays' depiction of makeshift domesticity speaks directly to contemporary readers who either inhabit such spaces or encounter them daily through media representations.

4.2 Direct Address and the Construction of Community

Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal (1931-2009), in his foundational work *Theatre of the Oppressed*, developed the concept of "rehearsal theatre" as a practice where spectators become "spect-actors" who actively rehearse actions rather than passively receiving finished narratives. For Boal, theatre becomes a training ground for real-world resistance, a space to practice responses to oppression before facing actual authorities.

Both plays extensively employ direct address to the audience, creating what Augusto Boal (1979) might recognise as a "rehearsal theatre" where spectators become witnesses to and participants in the characters' struggles. Styles opens *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* with an extended monologue that establishes an intimate, confiding relationship with the audience: "They're having it, boy! And I'm watching it... in the paper." This conversational tone, punctuated by laughter, asides, and shared jokes, positions the audience as friends rather than distant observers.

Boal's rehearsal theatre operates through several key mechanisms: the dismantling of the fourth wall between performers and spectators, the invitation to intervene and suggest alternative actions, and the understanding that theatrical rehearsal models political action. In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Styles's opening monologue does not merely inform the audience but invites them into a shared space of interpretation; his "No comment" after mentioning China in South West Africa relies on audience complicity. The spectators become witnesses who must read between the lines alongside Styles, rehearsing the critical consciousness necessary for survival under censorship. Similarly, when Buntu drills Sizwe in his new identity, the audience observes a rehearsal that doubles as a model for their own navigation of oppressive systems. The theatre becomes a laboratory where spectators learn to recognise, critique, and potentially resist the bureaucratic violence enacted through documents and checkpoints.

Similarly, Dele's opening monologue in *You Play Me, I Play You* finds him "talking to himself" while filling football pools, but this "self-communication" quickly extends to include the audience in his reasoning: "Let's see... Aston Villa versus Chester United... Aston Villa are in a better form." The grammatical informality ("more better") signals a speaker comfortable with colloquial language, inviting audience identification rather than distance.

This direct address serves multiple functions. It compensates for the plays' minimal casting by creating a virtual community in the theatre. It establishes the protagonists as storytellers who control the narrative frame. Most importantly, it enlists the audience as accomplices in the plays' political critiques. When Styles says "No comment" after hinting at China's involvement in South West Africa, the shared laugh confirms that we understand what cannot be spoken directly.

The direct address of these plays finds its contemporary analogue in the confessional modes of social media. TikTok videos, Instagram stories, and YouTube vlogs create similar illusions of intimacy, positioning viewers as confidantes to performers who narrate their daily struggles. Migrant content creators, in particular, use these platforms to document their navigation of border regimes, employment precarity, and cultural adjustment. The impulse remains the same: to transform isolation into community, to make private struggle into shared witness.

4.3 The Actor as Community in Multi-Role Playing

One of the most striking formal features shared by both plays is the practice of multi-role playing, where a small cast (two actors in each play) performs multiple characters. This device is not merely a practical response to limited resources but a deliberate artistic strategy with profound thematic implications.

In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, the two actors, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, in the original production, portray multiple characters through minimal changes in posture, voice, and attitude. Kani moves between Styles (the confiding photographer), Robert Zwelinzima (the anxious customer), and various white authority figures, including Mr “Baas” Bradley and the visiting Ford executive. Ntshona transitions from Sizwe Bansi (the desperate migrant) to Buntu (the streetwise friend) to the Old Man in the family photograph. Each transformation is achieved not through costume changes but through shifts in physical bearing and vocal quality.

Similarly, in *You Play Me, I Play You*, the two actors embody a multiplicity of roles. Dele is simultaneously the football pool enthusiast, the aspiring businessman, the trickster who betrays his friend, and, in the game sequences, the customs official and police officer. Kotey moves from the weary immigrant to the dreaming truck owner, from the poet-lover to the wanted criminal, and finally to the disguised policeman who confronts Dele. The play’s title itself, *You Play Me, I Play You*, foregrounds this exchange of roles as both game and survival strategy.

The effect of this multi-role playing is multifaceted. First, it creates a theatrical shorthand for community. With only two bodies on stage, the plays conjure entire worlds: the Ford factory with its hierarchy of bosses and workers, the extended family gathering for a photograph, the bustling streets of Lagos with their customs checkpoints and parties. The audience’s imagination is enlisted to populate the stage, making us active collaborators in the world-building.

Also, multi-role playing dramatises the fragmentation of identity under oppression. The same actor who moments ago was a dignified elder becomes a cowering supplicant; the same body that embodied a confident trickster now trembles before police authority. This rapid oscillation between roles mirrors the experience of those who must constantly recalibrate their self-presentation depending on whom they encounter: the pass officer, the employer, the landlord, the police. The actor’s body becomes a site of multiple, sometimes contradictory, identities, just as Sizwe’s body must accommodate both his own history and Robert’s documented existence.

Again, multi-role playing democratises the dramatic space. In the absence of elaborate sets or a large cast, the actors’ transformations become the primary spectacle. This focus on the actor’s craft foregrounds the human capacity for reinvention, a capacity that becomes, in both plays, a survival mechanism. If Sizwe can become Robert, if Kotey can become Only Begotenson, then identity is revealed as performative rather than essential, opening possibilities for resistance and agency.

Then, the technique creates powerful ironies when the same actor plays both oppressor and oppressed. When Kani shifts from Styles’s easy camaraderie to Bradley’s brutal Afrikaans commands, the audience experiences the proximity of violence and intimacy in the South African township. When Dele plays both the migrant and the customs official in the “Checkpoint” game, the boundary between victim and perpetrator blurs, suggesting how easily roles can be reversed under conditions of scarcity.

Ultimately, multi-role playing emerges as a deliberate artistic strategy that portrays community through theatrical shorthand, dramatises the fragmentation of identity under oppressive systems, and asserts the performative nature of selfhood as both a constraint and a means of agency.

4.4 The Game of Identity in *You Play Me, I Play You*

The most striking parallel between the two plays lies in their central dramatic action: the exchange or adoption of another man’s identity as a survival strategy. In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Sizwe faces deportation from Port Elizabeth because his passbook lacks the required stamp. His friend Buntu discovers the body of a dead man, Robert Zwelinzima, in an alley and proposes that Sizwe take Robert’s passbook and identity. The subsequent debate, “How do I get used to Robert? How do I live as another man’s ghost?” becomes the philosophical core of the play.

In *You Play Me, I Play You*, the identity exchange is initially proposed as a money-making scheme. Dele and Kotey discover a newspaper advertisement offering 30,000 Naira for information leading to the arrest of “Mr Only Begotenson,” a wanted criminal. Kotey, who bears a striking resemblance to the photograph, agrees to pose as the wanted man so that Dele can claim the reward, with the plan that the “arrest” will be staged and Kotey will later escape.

Both plays literalise the title of Mawugbe’s work: the characters play each other. But in both cases, this playing is not a mere game but an existential necessity. Buntu’s argument to Sizwe is brutally pragmatic: “What I’m saying is shit on our pride if we only bluff ourselves that we are men.” If the apartheid state has already reduced Sizwe to a ghost, “When the white man looks at you... What does he see? A man with dignity or a bloody passbook with an N.I. number?” then becoming Robert Zwelinzima merely exchanges one ghostly existence for another that offers better

prospects.

Identity exchange has become both easier and more dangerous in the digital age. Data breaches expose millions of identities to theft; dark web marketplaces sell passports and national identity numbers; deepfake technology enables the creation of convincing false identities. Yet for many, identity fraud remains a survival strategy. Undocumented migrants in the United States purchase fake Social Security numbers to work. Refugees assume the identities of dead strangers to escape conflict zones. In 2015, the image of Alan Kurdi's drowned body on a Turkish beach, a Syrian child who might have survived had his family possessed the right documents, became a global symbol of the lethal stakes of identity documentation.

Moreover, the digital identities we all now possess, algorithmic profiles compiled from our browsing history, purchasing patterns, and social media activity, are arguably more determining of our life chances than any physical document. These profiles determine our creditworthiness, our insurance rates, our employment prospects, even our political persuasion. Like Sizwe's passbook, these digital identities are both enabling and constraining; they allow us to participate in contemporary life while simultaneously reducing us to data points. The question "How do I live as another man's ghost?" has acquired new urgency in an era where our digital ghosts precede and often outlive us.

4.5 The Pedagogy of Survival from Rehearsal to Viral Tutorial

Both plays contain extended sequences where one character instructs the other in how to perform a new identity. These pedagogical moments function as embedded acting lessons, revealing the constructed nature of social identity while simultaneously teaching the audience about the arbitrary codes that govern Black existence. In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Buntu drills Sizwe in his new identity:

BUNTU: N-1-3-8-1-1-8-6-3. Burn that into your head, friend. You hear me? It's more important than your name. N.I. number... three...

MAN: Three.

BUNTU: Eight.

MAN: Eight.

This repetition transforms the absurd number into a kind of incantation, a magic spell that will enable survival. The scene then moves to a simulated police encounter, with Buntu playing the policeman and Sizwe required to respond correctly to "What's your name?" and "Book!" This rehearsal within the play mirrors the rehearsal that is the play itself; both actors and characters are learning to perform under pressure.

You Play Me, I Play You contains a parallel scene when Dele coaches Kotey on how to behave during the fake arrest. But the more developed pedagogical moment comes earlier, in the "Checkpoint" game. Dele explains the rules:

DELE: When I chant "ALL WEAPONS DOWN", we all drop whatever we are holding... Then, when I shout "CHECK POINT", we all run to meet at the point equidistant from both walls... I search you and you also search me to make sure none of us is carrying any food item.

KOTEY: Like they do at Badagry and Idiroko, Aflao and Elubo.

The game literalises the border crossing that Kotey, as a Ghanaian in Nigeria, must navigate daily. But in transforming bureaucratic harassment into play, Dele and Kotey assert a measure of control over their circumstances. They can play at being customs officials because the real customs officials play with their lives.

The "rehearsal" that Buntu conducts with Sizwe is now conducted globally, through digital networks that connect the precariat across borders. YouTube tutorials instruct undocumented immigrants on how to interact with immigration officers. WhatsApp groups share real-time information about police checkpoints. Nevertheless, this democratisation of survival knowledge has its limits. Algorithms detect and suppress content related to border evasion. Platforms delete accounts of migrants who share too much information. The game of "you play me, I play you" has become infinitely more complex, played out between migrants and algorithms, refugees and drones, undocumented workers and biometric databases.

4.6 Photographs and Documents

Both plays culminate in photographic moments that freeze their protagonists in aspirational poses. In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, the final image is Sizwe, now Robert, posing for the photograph that will accompany his new identity. Styles directs him: "Hold it, Robert. Hold it just like that. Just one more. Now smile, Robert... Smile... Smile..." The camera flash coincides with a blackout, leaving us with the image of a man smiling despite everything.

This photograph is deeply ambiguous. On one hand, it represents survival. Sizwe has found a way to remain in

Port Elizabeth, to send money to his wife, to promise “Christmas, I come home.” On the other hand, the photograph is a lie. It shows “Robert Zwelinzima, Chief Messenger at Feltex, sitting in his office with the world behind him,” when in fact Robert is dead, and Sizwe is an unemployed labourer. The photograph perpetuates the very system of documentation that created Sizwe’s crisis in the first place.

You Play Me, I Play You ends with a different kind of frozen image, but one that similarly involves a transformation of identity. Kotey, having escaped the fake policemen, returns disguised as a policeman to confront the remorseful Dele. When Dele offers him the fifteen Naira reward money, Kotey removes his goggles and reveals himself: “You play me... I play you.” The final image is of the two friends reunited, the game concluded.

The photograph has been superseded by biometric data, fingerprints, iris scans, facial recognition templates, DNA profiles. These are not merely images but machine-readable codes that can authenticate identity across borders and databases. For migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, biometric registration is the contemporary equivalent of Styles’s photograph: a moment that freezes them in the state’s gaze, that transforms them from human beings into data points. Yet biometrics also offer possibilities for resistance. Activists have developed techniques for evading facial recognition, makeup that confuses algorithms, and clothing that disrupts thermal imaging. Migrants have deliberately damaged their fingerprints to avoid deportation. The game of identity has become a technological arms race between the surveilled and the surveillers.

Moreover, as discussed in Section 4.5, the aspirational photograph has become ubiquitous through social media, Instagram profiles, LinkedIn headshots, and dating app photos, all of which echo Styles’s studio portraits. The question ‘How do I live as another man’s ghost?’ now applies to anyone maintaining digital personas that diverge from offline reality.

4.7 The Ghost and the Trickster As Algorithmic Afterlives

Both plays centrally feature figures who might be termed “ghosts”, dead men whose identities continue to circulate among the living. Robert Zwelinzima’s corpse is discovered in an alley, urinated upon by Buntu, then stripped of its passbook so that Sizwe can live. Buntu offers a kind of blessing: “If there are ghosts, he is smiling tonight. He is here, with us, and he’s saying: ‘Good luck, Sizwe! I hope it works.’” The dead man becomes a collaborator in the living man’s survival.

In *You Play Me, I Play You*, the ghost is potential rather than actual. “Only Begotenson” may or may not exist; we never learn whether the newspaper advertisement is genuine. But his photograph circulates, and Kotey’s resemblance to it sets the plot in motion. Like Robert Zwelinzima, this absent presence enables transformation. Kotey can become someone else because someone else’s image already exists in the public sphere.

Alongside these ghosts, both plays feature trickster figures who enable or orchestrate the identity transformations. Buntu in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* is streetwise, pragmatic, and unburdened by sentimentality. His name suggests both “bounty” and “bantu”; he is a man of the people who knows how the system works and is willing to bend it. Dele in *You Play Me, I Play You* plays a similar role; he is the one who spots the newspaper advertisement, who conceives the plan, and who acquires the suits for the party. Both characters are marked by their ability to move between worlds, to translate the oppressive codes of the powerful into survival strategies for the powerless.

In the digital age, ghosts have become algorithmic. Dead people’s social media profiles continue to generate birthday reminders and suggested connections. Their data persists in corporate servers; their digital footprints are never entirely erased. For migrants and refugees, the ghosts of the dead, whose identities can be purchased on the black market, continue to enable survival. The “Only Begotenson” of the world remain perpetually available, their unused identities circulating through informal economies.

The trickster figure has also evolved. Today’s tricksters are hackers who breach government databases to delete deportation orders, activists who teach migrants how to game the asylum system, and lawyers who exploit legal loopholes. They are the Buntus and Deles of the digital age, translating the opaque codes of state power into actionable knowledge for the vulnerable. Yet they are also the algorithms themselves, the predictive systems that determine credit scores, the machine learning models that flag “suspicious” immigration applications, the automated decision-making that increasingly governs life chances without human oversight.

4.8 The Politics of Laughter

Despite their grim subject matter, deportation, poverty, and state violence, both plays are remarkably funny. Styles’s account of the Ford factory cleanup, his battle with the cockroaches, and the family photograph session all generate

sustained laughter. Similarly, Dele and Kotey's banter, their dreaming about the Bedford truck, and their "Checkpoint" game produce genuine comedy.

This laughter is political. It asserts that even under conditions of extreme constraint, joy remains possible. It creates community among those who share the joke, and the joke is often at the expense of the powerful. When Styles mimics Mr. "Baas" Bradley's Afrikaans accent, when Dele mocks NEPA ("Never Expect Power Always"), the audience laughs not just at the humour but at the shared recognition of absurdity. Laughter becomes a form of resistance, a refusal to be reduced entirely to suffering.

The politics of laughter has found its most potent contemporary expression in internet memes. Migrant communities create and share memes that mock border guards, satirise immigration policies, and celebrate survival against the odds. During the COVID-19 pandemic, memes about lockdowns, vaccine passports, and travel restrictions circulated globally, creating a shared language of resistance across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Memes, like the jokes in these plays, perform crucial political work. They make the absurdity of power visible. They create solidarity among the marginalised. They transform private suffering into collective laughter.

4.9 The Newspaper as Symbol

Both *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, and *You Play Me, I Play You* deploy newspapers as recurring stage properties that carry profound symbolic weight. In each play, the newspaper functions simultaneously as a source of information, a marker of aspiration, a document of state power, and a prop in the performance of identity.

Sizwe Bansi is Dead opens with Styles reading a newspaper, his commentary revealing the medium's dual nature as both window and wall. He "watches" events affecting his community through a medium controlled by the system that oppresses him, excluded from direct experience while consuming its mediated representation. The newspaper headlines trace a geography of power that excludes him, American politics, industrial expansion, and international relations, each a reminder of his marginalisation. Yet Styles refuses passive consumption, asserting critical distance through asides, laughter, and pointed silences.

Later, when Styles recounts his Ford factory experience, the newspaper reappears as a symbol of empty promises: "The talk ended in the bloody newspaper. Never in the pay-packet." Here, the newspaper becomes a tombstone for dead promises, a repository of words that never translate into material change. Styles's relationship with the newspaper prefigures contemporary information consumption in an age of algorithmic curation. Just as Styles must read between the lines of the apartheid-era journalism, today's news consumers navigate filter bubbles, fake news, and algorithmically amplified polarisation.

In *You Play Me, I Play You*, the newspaper serves a more immediately transformative function. Dele's reading establishes the paper as a site of shared humour and political commentary. The playful acronym "NEPA: Never Expect Power Always" transforms bureaucratic failure into an inside joke, creating solidarity between Nigerian Dele and Ghanaian Kotey. Classified advertisements offer glimpses of aspirational lives, farms for sale, jobs advertised, that remain permanently out of reach, paralleling the photographs in Styles's studio that present versions of reality simultaneously accessible and inaccessible.

The most significant newspaper moment comes with the discovery of the reward advertisement. Kotey's uncanny resemblance to the wanted man's photograph transforms the newspaper from a passive information source into an active agent, imposing upon him an identity he did not choose. The newspaper becomes a warrant, a wanted poster, a document of surveillance. This moment finds its contemporary analogue in the digital circulation of criminal mugshots, algorithmic flagging of "persons of interest," and viral spread of surveillance images. In an era of facial recognition databases and predictive policing, the experience of being interpellated, claimed, named, and fixed by a system that mistakes you for someone else has become increasingly common, particularly for Black and Brown bodies that algorithms disproportionately misidentify.

Both plays also use newspapers as props in identity performance. When Styles offers Robert a newspaper for his photograph, Robert admits he cannot read. Styles responds cynically: "That is not important, my friend. You think all those monkeys carrying newspapers can read? They look at the pictures." Here, the newspaper functions as an accessory for performing middle-class respectability, like the pipe or walking stick, signifying literacy and sophistication regardless of actual ability. This moment reveals a crucial insight: the entire apparatus of literacy and information is itself a performance. The man carrying an unread newspaper parallels Sizwe carrying Robert's passbook. Both perform borrowed identities using props supplied by systems that define personhood through documentation rather than lived experience.

The newspaper as a status symbol has evolved into the smartphone as an essential contemporary accessory. Yet Styles's irony persists: how many scroll through news feeds genuinely engage with content rather than performing engagement? How many carry devices whose algorithms they cannot comprehend, whose data extraction they cannot escape? The smartphone is the contemporary newspaper, simultaneously window and wall, tool and trap, connection and surveillance.

Across both plays, the newspaper reveals a profound contradiction. It is a source of information that systematically omits what its protagonists most need: a record of state power that sometimes exposes the state's weaknesses, a collection of hopes that remain forever out of reach, a ghostly medium connecting the living to the dead, and a tool used in the performance of identities that cannot be fully embodied. This contradictory nature makes the newspaper an ideal symbol for the condition of the plays' protagonists. Like the newspaper, Sizwe/Robert is both himself and someone else, both present and absent, both documented and erased. Like the newspaper, Kotey is both innocent and accused, both himself and Only Begotenson, both visible and invisible.

The contradictions of the newspaper have intensified in the digital age. Social media platforms are simultaneously spaces of connection and isolation, empowerment and surveillance, community and exploitation. Algorithms offer information tailored to our interests while trapping us in echo chambers. Digital identities promise self-expression while delivering us to data brokers. We are, like Sizwe and Kotey, caught in systems we did not design, performing selves we did not choose, hoping our performances will be convincing enough to let us survive. The newspaper in these plays is not merely a prop but a teacher. It teaches us to read critically, to laugh at power, to recognise the gap between representation and reality, to find community in shared interpretation. These lessons remain urgently relevant for contemporary readers navigating their own media landscapes, their own systems of documentation, their own performances of identity in a world that increasingly demands we be someone other than ourselves.

5. Conclusions

Sizwe Bansi is Dead, and *You Play Me, I Play You* emerge from different national contexts and respond to different specific oppressions, the pass laws of apartheid South Africa versus the immigration enforcement in 1980s Nigeria. Yet their formal and stylistic commonalities reveal deeper continuities in the experience of Black urban existence under postcolonial states. Both plays understand identity as performance, documentation as control, and survival as requiring constant negotiation with systems designed to exclude.

These commonalities are not coincidental but genealogical. Mawugbe's play stands in conscious dialogue with the tradition established by Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona, a tradition of urgent, minimalist, politically engaged theatre that places the actor's body and the audience's imagination at its centre. This generational transmission of dramatic forms and strategies across African national contexts testifies to the pan-African resonance of the themes these plays explore. The two-hander format, the blend of comedy and critique, the use of direct address, the preoccupation with documentation and identity, these become a shared vocabulary for articulating the experience of life under regimes that reduce human beings to papers, numbers, and files.

The plays share what might be termed a "dramaturgy of scarcity"; they make aesthetic virtue of material limitation. With minimal casts, simple sets, and limited props, they create worlds of remarkable richness. The cramped rooms become universes; the two actors become communities; the few objects, a camera, a newspaper, a loaf of bread, become symbols of entire systems of meaning. As demonstrated in Section 4.3, multi-role playing transforms the practical limitation of a small cast into a profound exploration of identity's fragmented, performative nature.

Most importantly, both plays affirm the dignity of those who must play roles not of their choosing. Sizwe Bansi becomes Robert Zwelinzima not because he has forgotten who he is, but because he remembers his wife and children. Kotey plays the wanted criminal, not because he is deceitful, but because he is hungry. In both cases, the plays insist that survival is not betrayal, that the ghost who lends his identity to the living enables a kind of resurrection. This affirmation extends beyond the characters to the theatrical form itself. In a world that denies their full humanity, these characters perform themselves into being. Theatre becomes the space where they can rehearse identities, experiment with selves, and imagine futures denied them by the passbook, the wanted poster, the biometric database.

For contemporary readers, these plays offer three enduring lessons. First, they remind us that the technologies of identification we now take for granted, biometric passports, digital profiles, and algorithmic surveillance, are not neutral tools but instruments of power. The passbook of apartheid has evolved, not disappeared. Understanding this continuity is essential for any meaningful critique of contemporary surveillance regimes. The plays teach us to read our own documentation with the same critical eye that Styles brings to his newspaper, to recognise the ways our

digital selves are shaped by forces beyond our control.

Again, they demonstrate that resistance is possible even under conditions of extreme constraint. The games, jokes, and performances that enable Sizwe and Kotey to survive are not trivial; they are the raw materials of dignity, the building blocks of community, the foundations of hope. In an age of algorithmic isolation, the plays remind us that collective laughter, shared storytelling, and mutual instruction remain vital forms of resistance. The “Checkpoint” game that Dele teaches Kotey, the rehearsal that Buntu conducts with Sizwe, these are not merely diversions but survival strategies, passed from friend to friend, generation to generation.

Also, they insist on the primacy of human connection over bureaucratic abstraction. Sizwe’s photograph reaches toward his wife in King William’s Town. Kotey and Dele reconcile despite betrayal. In an age where our data profiles may matter more to institutions than our lived experience, these moments of human warmth remind us what is at stake in the struggle for recognition. The plays insist that we are more than our documents, more than our digital traces, more than the identities assigned to us by systems of control.

The plays do not promise liberation, the pass laws remain, the immigration officers continue their raids, and the algorithms continue to sort and classify. But they insist that even within constraints, human beings can create meaning, community, and joy. This insistence, embodied in the plays’ shared forms and styles, constitutes their enduring political and artistic significance for readers navigating the twenty-first century’s own systems of control. As new generations of African playwrights continue to adapt and transform the strategies pioneered by Fugard, Kani, Ntshona, and their contemporaries, they inherit not only formal techniques but a deeper conviction: that theatre, in its poorest, most minimal manifestations, remains a space where the human can be affirmed against all odds. In this conviction, the ghosts of Robert Zwelinzima and Only Begotenson continue to speak, their borrowed identities enabling new lives, new stories, new resistances.

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