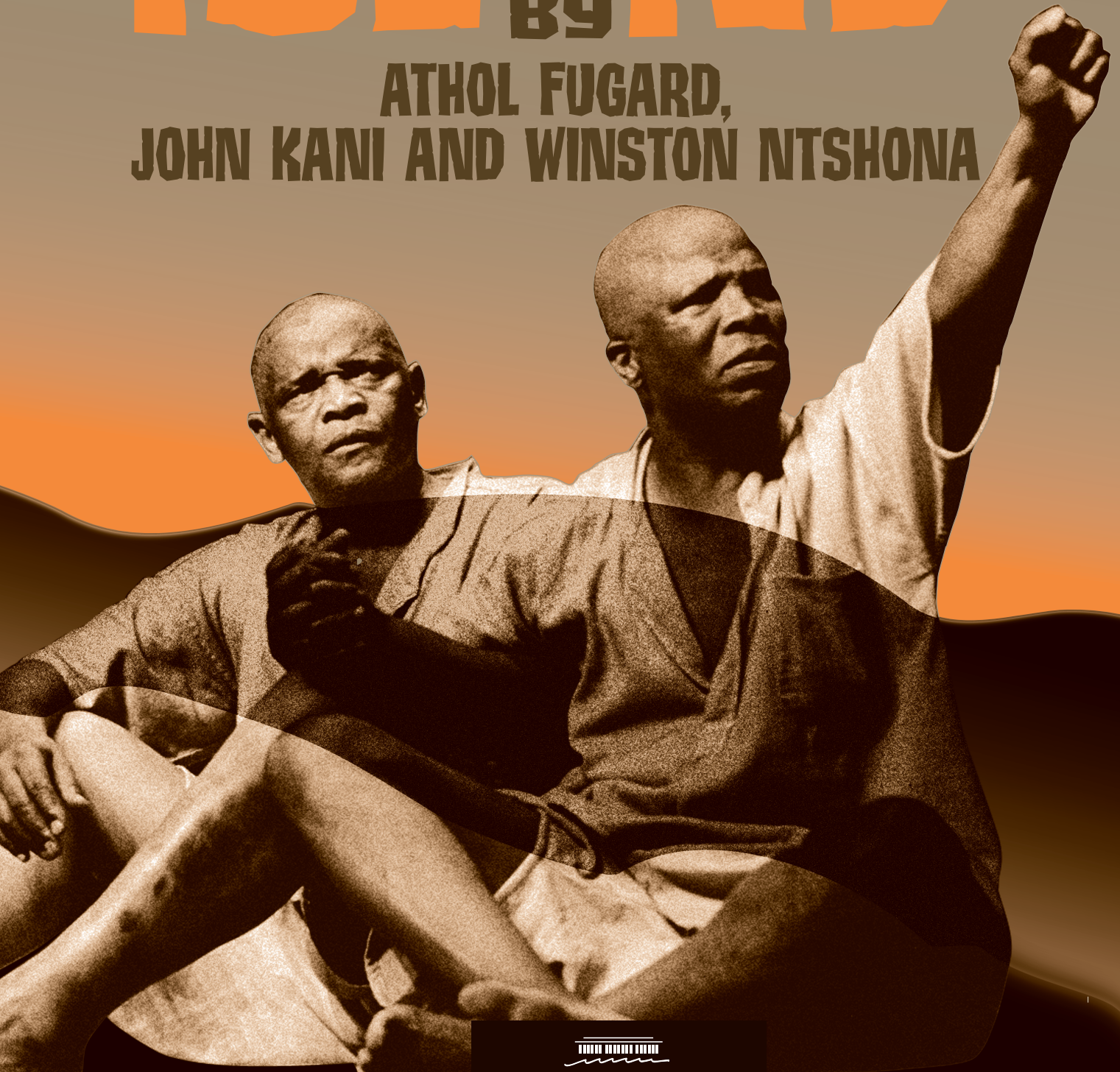


S P O T L I G H T O N T H E A T E R N O T E S
PRODUCED BY THE PERFORMANCE PLUS™ PROGRAM, KENNEDY CENTER EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

THE ISLAND BY

ATHOL FUGARD,
JOHN KANI AND WINSTON NTSHONA



The Kennedy Center

THE ISLAND: EVERLASTING PRISON

Brothers and Sisters of the Land! I go now on my last journey. I must leave the light of day forever, for the Island, strange and cold, to be lost between life and death. So, to my grave, my everlasting prison, condemned alive to solitary death.

Gods of our Fathers! My Land! My Home! Times waits no longer. I go now to my living death, because I honored those things to which honor belongs.

-Winston, *The Island*

T

he set of *The Island*, as described in South African playwright Athol Fugard's notebook, is "a rigid crowded square when the warder is present; an explosion into inner space when he

leaves and they are alone." They are John and Winston, two prisoners on the Robben Island prison camp, rehearsing a performance of *Antigone*. The warder, a presence never physically seen, but felt, is Hodoshe.

Upon its 1973 premiere in the Space Theater in Cape Town, the play was given the Afrikaans title of *Die Hodoshe Span*, or "Hodoshe's Work Team." A direct reference to the very real Robben Island, the infamous prison where Nelson Mandela was held for 23 years, would have been unacceptable to the South African government at that time. "Hodoshe" is a Xhosa word, which means "carrion fly." It is the name the prisoners gave to a particularly brutal guard, and a word which well represents the parasitic apartheid regime.

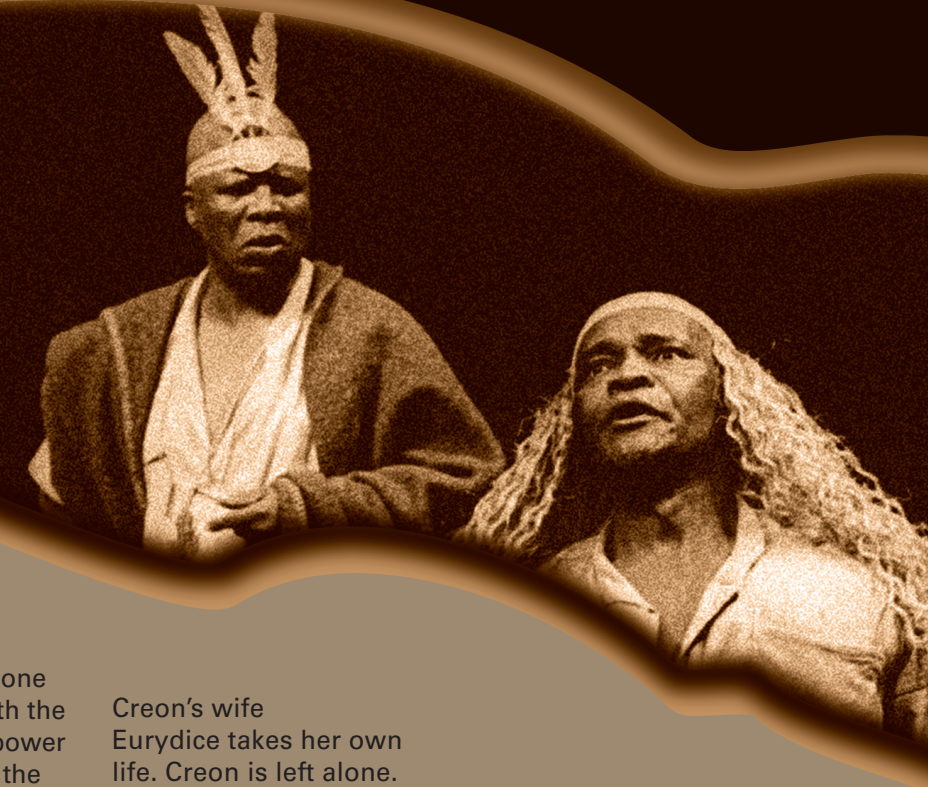
The Island was devised by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona. The play is based both on the improvisations on information received about conditions at Robben Island prison and also on the true story of prisoners enacting Sophocles' *Antigone* as a vehicle of self-expression and act of protest. Following

the play's creation and presentation in Cape Town in 1973, the men were invited to stage *The Island* in London. In order to obtain travel visas from the apartheid-bound government, John and Winston were forced to pose as Fugard's chauffeur and gardener, despite the fact that Fugard had neither a car nor a garden. *The Island* opened in London in 1974 and quickly moved to Broadway, where John and Winston were jointly awarded the Tony Award for Best Actor.

The Island was originally staged in the charged political atmosphere of an apartheid-era South Africa. The current revival points to *The Island's* greatness as a dramatic work. While the work is entrenched in a particular time, it reflects a universal reality, the experience of violent oppression of one group by another. In 1973, the unique political defiance of staging the work created economic and diplomatic pressure to end apartheid. Now it stands to remind us of an all-too-recent history and the danger of remaining silent and uncritical of an oppressive state.

A *ntigone* is drama's first and, perhaps, greatest conscientious objector. Part of the reason *The Island* succeeds as a drama outside of one particular time and place has a great deal to do with the play within the play, *Antigone*. The metaphorical power and cultural pervasiveness of *Antigone* argues for the constant relevance of human rights and can be viewed as veiled criticism of an abusive government and unworthy state.

The actual plot of *Antigone* is more complicated than the abbreviated version, featuring solely the characters of Creon and Antigone, enacted within *The Island*. The original play opens with King Creon's declaration of Polynices as a traitor, who will not be buried, but his sister Antigone defied the order. She is caught and sentenced by Creon to be buried alive – even though she is betrothed to Creon's son Haemon. After the blind prophet Tiresias proves that the gods are on Antigone's side, Creon changes his mind, but it is too late. He goes first to bury Polynices, but Antigone has already hanged herself. When Creon arrives at the tomb, Haemon attacks him and then kills himself. When the news of their deaths are reported,



Creon's wife Eurydice takes her own life. Creon is left alone.

Creon represents the State and nomos (law) and Antigone represents the will of the gods and physis (nature). The chorus shifts between calls to light and dark, attempting to illuminate and discern the truth. Creon is, at first, deemed correct, but as the play pro-

ANTIGONE AND THE ISLAND

ceeds and Antigone defiantly denies Creon, the chorus begins to under-

stand that the gods are, in fact, on Antigone's side. The confrontation between the state and the gods - supporting, ultimately, acts of defiance for the rights of humans - is the essence of not only Sophocles' work and time, but that of Kani, Ntshona, and Fugard.

Oppression by law is, in the end, overcome by the human spirit. Kani, Ntshona, and Fugard have called upon the Greek drama not just for metaphor, but for its power and connection to the act of catharsis – a release indicating hope and revelation out of dramatic order.

THE SERPENT PLAYERS

Donald Woods, who was arrested and driven into exile from South Africa for his anti-apartheid journalism, described the contributions of Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona as follows:

"One day, if a historic assessment is made of the most effective opponents of the apartheid system in South Africa, two remarkable actors will be well to the forefront of the heroes at that era. John Kani and Winston Ntshona, through their art and passion as well as the great courage it took to do what they did in that time, broke new ground politically as well as artistically in defiance of the most vicious of all the apartheid regime's Security Police – those of the East Cape.

"These were the Security Police who killed Steve Biko and many others who dared stand up against the system, and, being from the Port Elizabeth area of the Eastern Cape, Kani and Ntshona worked right under the observation of the worst of these brutal functionaries. Their friendship and collaboration with South Africa's greatest playwright Athol Fugard, at a time when all three were young and fearless, openly defied everything the apartheid state stood for, friendship between blacks and whites being the very antithesis of the whole notion of apartheid, and it also began the long association which produced a succession of wonderful plays that formed South Africa's greatest body of dramatic work for the stage."

The Island, one of the three Fugard/Kani/Ntshona *Statement* plays, is considered the greatest work of this artistic and political collaboration. The three were united in its creation through the Serpent Players, a group Fugard was approached to advise and was entirely comprised of black actors and playwrights, including Kani and Ntshona. They would meet, rehearse, and perform in a pit that formerly had housed snakes for public viewing. The performers were often arrested. Because "artist" was not an acceptable employment category for Kani and Ntshona under South African law, they rehearsed after regular working hours. As the reputation of the group grew and performances were increasingly requested, it became necessary for Kani, a Ford employee at the time, and Ntshona, a factory lab assistant, to leave their income-producing jobs in order to continue as actors. For the players to become full-time actors, their passbooks (identification cards) read that they were Fugard's domestic servants.

The dangers they took to create art and defy a vile politic cannot be underestimated, and their story continues to be told through stages around the world – so that history might not repeat itself in South Africa nor anywhere else.

ATHOL FUGARD

Athol Fugard has been working in the theater as a playwright, director, and actor since the mid-1950s in South Africa, England, and the United States. His plays include *No-Good Friday*, *Non-Gogo*, *The Blood Knot*, *People Are Living There*, *Hello and Goodbye*, *Boesman and Lena*, *The Coat*, *Dimetos*, *Statements After An Arrest Under The Immorality Act*, *Orestes*, *The Island*, *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, *The Drummer*, *A Lesson from Aloes*, *Master Harold'...and the Boys*, *The Road to Mecca*, *A Place with the Pigs*, *My Children! My Africa!*, *Playland*, *Valley Song*, and *The Captain's Tiger*.

He has been seen on the stage in South Africa and London, in the U.S. on and off-Broadway, and in regional theater. His film credits include *The Road to Mecca*, *Gandhi*, *The Killing Fields*, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, *Marigolds in August*, *Boesman and Lena*, and *The Guest*. He has written two books, the novel *Tsotsi*, and the autobiographical *Cousins*.

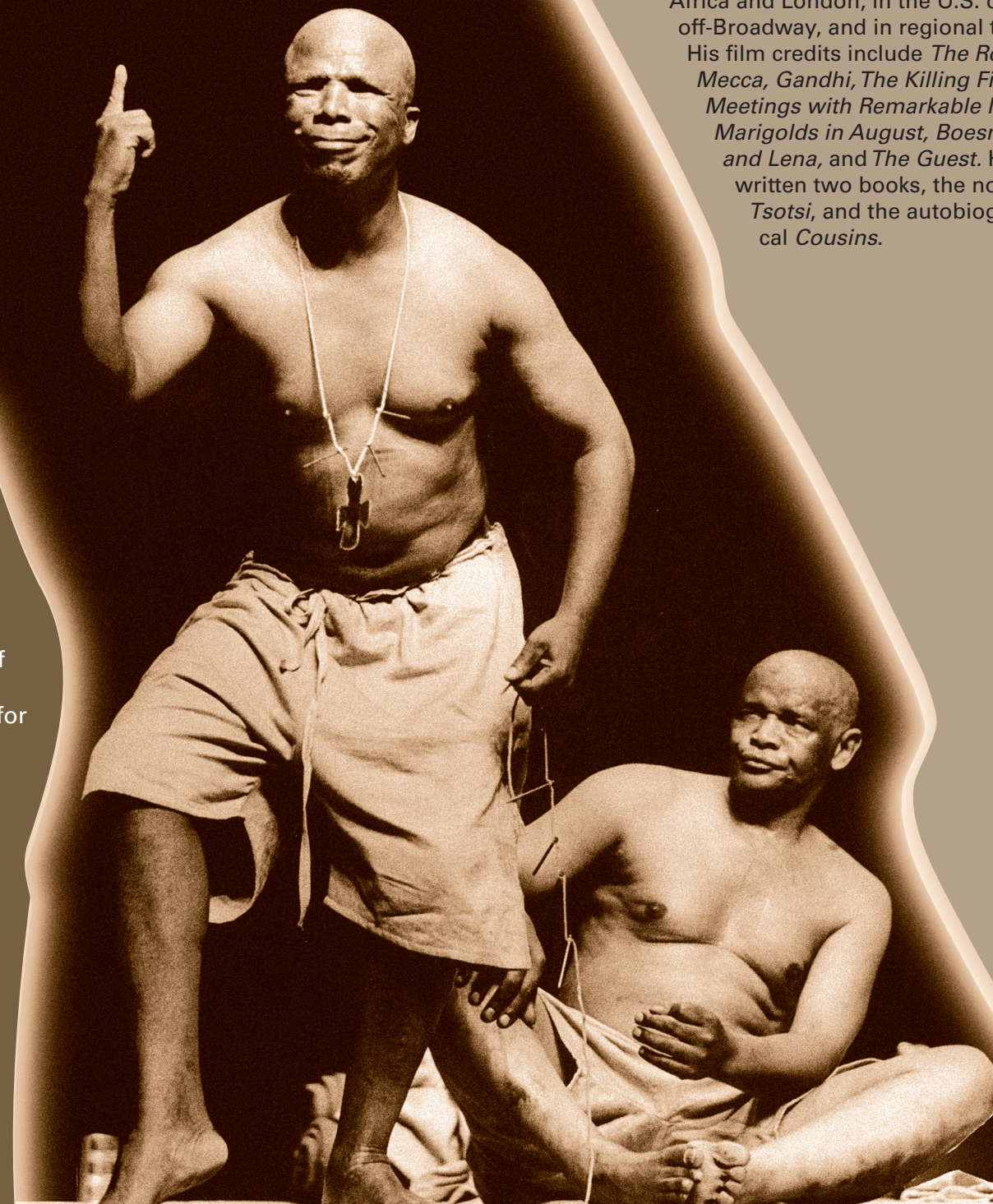
JOHN KANI

John Kani is an actor, director, and playwright. His appearances at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg include *My Children! My Africa!* (for which he won an AA Life Vita Award in 1990 for his role as Mr. M), *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, and *The Island*, both of which he also co-wrote with Athol Fugard and Winston Ntshona; for *The Island*, he was awarded a Tony for Best Actor (1974/5). Previously at The Royal National Theatre in London, he performed in *Master Harold'...and the Boys*, and *My Children! My Africa!* for which he received an Olivier nomination.

He recently received the Avante Hall of Fame award from the South African Film, Television and Advertising Industry. At the Market Theatre, he has directed *Goree* and *Blues Africa Café* by Matsamela Manaka, *Kagoos* by Kessie Govender, and *The Meeting* by Jeff Stetson. He is the recipient of a Merit Award from the National African Federated Chamber of Commerce for his contribution to the advancement of culture in South Africa and the Rotary Club's Paul Harris Fellowship Award. In 1995, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Philosophy from the University of Westville, Durban, and in 1998, an Honorary Doctorate from Rhodes University in Grahamstown. He is Executive Trustee of the Market Theatre, the Founder and Director of the Market Theatre Laboratory, and Chairman of the National Arts Council of South Africa. On January 23, John Kani received the Hiroshima Foundation for Peace and Culture Award for the Year 2000.

WINSTON NTSHONA

Winston Ntshona formed the Serpent Players with Athol Fugard and John Kani. He has appeared in over 20 productions including, in South Africa, *Phaedra* at the Civic Theatre, Johannesburg, and *The Island*, *Kagoos*, and *The Death of Bessie Smith* at The Market Theatre, Johannesburg. Elsewhere, he appeared in *Waiting for Godot* on UK and U.S. tours, and *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* on tour in South Africa, the UK, and the U.S. His TV appearances include *The Island*, *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, and *The Children and I*. Film credits include *The Wild Geese*, *Ashanti*, *Marigolds in August*, *Dogs of War*, *Gandhi*, *The Stick*, *Dry White Season*, *Perfume of the Cyclone*, *The Air Up There*, *The Power of One*, *Tarzan and Jane*, *The Store Keeper*, and *I Dreamed of Africa*. He has also devised, with Athol Fugard and John Kani, *The Island* and *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*. He is the recipient of an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Port Elizabeth, South Africa.



APARTNESS: A HISTORY OF RACIAL SEGREGATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Apartheid means “apartness” in Afrikaans. The Afrikaner-dominated National Party of South Africa won general elections in 1948, and subsequently enacted apartheid policies – policies calling for separation between whites and nonwhites, between Africans and other nonwhites, between one African ethnic group and all other African ethnic groups, and between rural and urban Africans. The majority of Africans, presently two-thirds of the total South African population, were restricted to rural reservations (also called *bantustans* and, eventually, homelands). The apartheid regime attempted to force children, women, and the aged and disabled to live on these reservations, while males were used for labor in urban areas and white-controlled mines. All nonwhites were classified into categories based on appearance, social acceptance, and descent. The Department of Home Affairs (a government bureau) was responsible for the classification. All blacks were required to carry passbooks containing fingerprints, photo, and information on access to non-black areas. Opposition and resistance were great, and leaders such as Nelson Mandela of the African National Congress and Steven Biko of the South African Students Organization rose to great prominence in their efforts to attain a nonracial democracy.

What follows is a chronologically arranged history of important events in apartheid’s creation, opposition, and eventual repeal.

1931-34

South Africa gains independence from Great Britain after the passage of the Statute of Westminster by the British Parliament in December 1931 and its acceptance by South Africa in June 1934. From the formation of the independent country, the white minority controls the government and moves to limit the powers of non-whites and create special designated areas, or homelands, for them to live.

May 26, 1948

The conservative Afrikaner-dominated National Party wins parliamentary elections and gains control of the South African government. The party, under new Premier Dr. Daniel F. Malan, begins taking steps toward implementing apartheid, the national policy of racial separation.

1950

Group Areas Act is enacted. It segregates communities and relegates the African population to a minor percentage of the nation’s land. Population Registrations Act is enacted. It requires all South Africans to register their race with the government.

1952 - 53

Enactment of pass laws which require Africans to carry passbooks so that the government can regulate their travel through the country. Separate Amenities Act establishes separate public facilities for whites and non-whites.

JUNE 26, 1955

The African National Congress and other opposition groups adopt the Freedom Charter, calling for equal political rights for all races.

MARCH 21 – APRIL 5, 1960

Police kill 69 unarmed protesters in Sharpeville. The government bans all opposition groups, many of which began underground, armed struggles for African and mixed-race liberation.

May 31, 1961

South Africa becomes a republic. The decision to break from the Commonwealth is prompted by Asian and African Commonwealth member states’ denunciation of South Africa’s apartheid policies, which it refuses to alter.

NOVEMBER 12, 1963

UN General Assembly President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria suspends South Africa from participating in the remainder of assembly sessions for that year. The following day South Africa recalls its UN ambassador and freezes its \$1 million annual contribution to the organization.

JUNE 12, 1964

Nelson Mandela, an African National Congress (ANC) leader, is convicted of sabotage and trying to overthrow the government. He is sentenced to life in prison.

JUNE 16, 1976

A student protest in the African township of Soweto against mandatory education in Afrikaans spreads. The government, in an effort to suppress the civil unrest, kills 575 people over eight months. The Broadway production and movie *Sarafina!* later tells the story of this protest.

SEPTEMBER 12, 1977

Steven Biko, one of the most influential African student leaders in South Africa, is reported to have died from a hunger strike while in police detention.

JUNE 12, 1986

A national state of emergency is imposed. The decree gives virtually unlimited powers to the security forces and imposes restrictions on the press.

July 1, 1986

Laws requiring Africans to carry passbooks for identification are repealed.

SEPTEMBER 29, 1986

U.S. Congress overrides President Ronald Reagan’s veto and imposes strict economic sanctions against South Africa.

1989

Reformist F.W. de Klerk of the National Party is elected president. He announces plans to scrap the Separate Amenities Act, and it is subsequently repealed.

FEBRUARY 2, 1990

De Klerk lifts restrictions on 33 opposition groups, most of which had been banned for their anti-apartheid activities. ANC leader Nelson Mandela is released after 27 years in prison.”

JANUARY 9, 1991

African students enter previously all-white public schools.

1991

The Lands Acts, the Group Areas Act, and the Population Registration Act are repealed.

SEPTEMBER 4, 1991

De Klerk outlines his government’s proposals for a new constitution that will provide suffrage to the African majority for the first time.

DECEMBER 20-21, 1991

Delegations from 19 political groups meet in Johannesburg for talks aimed at ending white-minority rule in South Africa. Seventeen sign a declaration pledging them to work toward a nonracial democracy.

MARCH 17, 1992

South African whites, voting in record numbers, overwhelmingly endorse de Klerk’s reform policies in a referendum on whether to negotiate an end to white-minority rule through talks with the African majority.

FEBRUARY 12, 1993

The government and the ANC agree on a transitional “government of national unity” in which both parties will be partners.

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1993

A multiracial council that would help oversee the election preparations is formed. UN lifts most remaining economic sanctions against South Africa.

NOVEMBER 18-23, 1993

Twenty-one of South Africa’s African and white political parties approve a majority-rule constitution that provides fundamental rights to Africans. The document calls for the election of a coalition government that would remain in office for five years after the elections, and for the dissolution of the country’s 10 African self-governing homelands. The U.S. repeals sanctions against South Africa.

JANUARY 29-FEBRUARY 2, 1994

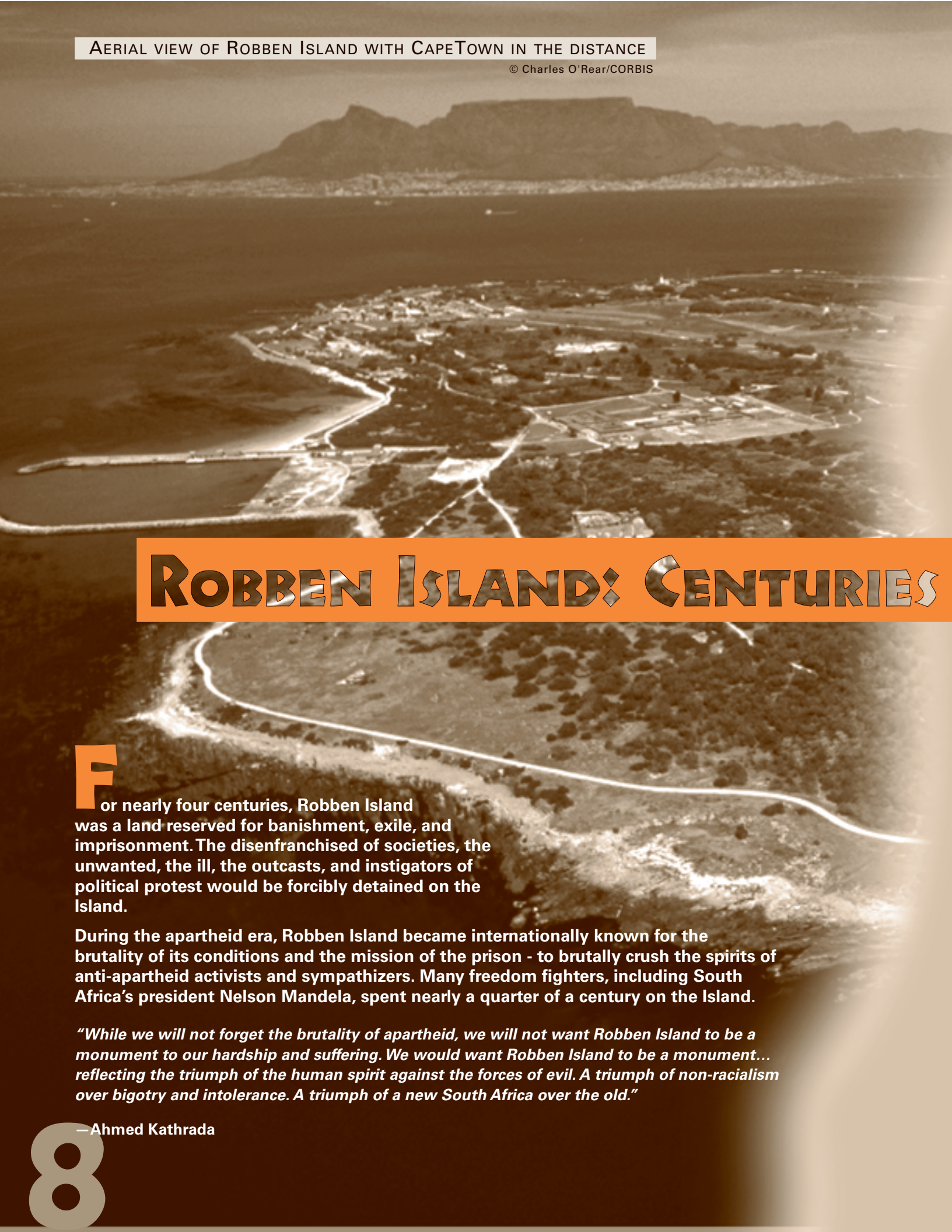
Mandela and de Klerk officially launch their respective election campaigns. Mandela presents the ANC’s campaign manifesto detailing the group’s economic-reform proposals.

APRIL 26-29, 1994

The country’s first universal suffrage elections are held, and Africans are given their first opportunity to vote.

May 2, 1994

Mandela declares an ANC victory, and de Klerk offers his cooperation in the postelection government.



ROBBEN ISLAND: CENTURIES OF SUFFERING

For nearly four centuries, Robben Island was a land reserved for banishment, exile, and imprisonment. The disenfranchised of societies, the unwanted, the ill, the outcasts, and instigators of political protest would be forcibly detained on the Island.

During the apartheid era, Robben Island became internationally known for the brutality of its conditions and the mission of the prison - to brutally crush the spirits of anti-apartheid activists and sympathizers. Many freedom fighters, including South Africa's president Nelson Mandela, spent nearly a quarter of a century on the Island.

"While we will not forget the brutality of apartheid, we will not want Robben Island to be a monument to our hardship and suffering. We would want Robben Island to be a monument... reflecting the triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil. A triumph of non-racialism over bigotry and intolerance. A triumph of a new South Africa over the old."

—Ahmed Kathrada

COLONIALISM BEGINS: 1488-1699

The history of habitation on Robben Island extends back to the late fifteenth century when Bartolomeu Dias anchored his ship in Table Bay and discovered the Island. Portuguese sailors, as well as British and Dutch colonialists, used the Island as an outpost and prison for many years during the most aggressive period of exploration and pronounced imperialist agendas. In 1591, the Island became a prison for the native people of the Khoikhoi tribe, who were often tricked into trading their cows and land for nothing in return. The Khoikhoi, who had inhabited Southern Africa for thousands of years, retaliated against their poor treatment, but were forcibly sent to the Island by colonialists equipped with guns.

The Island also became a post office and important refreshment station for sailors traveling between Europe and South Asia. Unfortunately, the provision of foodstuffs from the Island quickly depleted the natural resources and wildlife originally present - including fresh meats, produce and seals, penguins and tortoises, which were all hunted nearly out of existence.

ISLAND OF THE IMPOVERISHED: THE 1800s

In the late 1700s, British warships overtook Dutch territories, including that of Robben Island, which they also deemed as land suitable only for prisoners and social outcasts. Criminals of all types were sent to the Island, including deserters, murderers, thieves, and political prisoners. The political prisoners at this time were composed almost entirely of the Xhosa people, who were waged in a number of violent conflicts with the British government.

A legendary Xhosa prophet, Makana, led attacks against the British in the Frontier Wars of 1818-1819. He, however, did not have the power to beat the British and surrendered, attempting to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the battle. He and 30 others were taken to the Island and attempted to escape but did not survive.

As time continued, the Island progressively became a hospital and was populated primarily by the mentally ill, lepers, and impoverished people. During the 1800s, the homeless, prostitutes with sexually transmitted diseases, alcoholics, the elderly, and sick were classified as lunatics. They lived under the same harsh conditions as prisoners and received no treatment for their illnesses. They were chained, beaten, and expected to care for one another.

For a while, the patients were made to share barracks with prisoners, but they were eventually separated out. Black patients were kept in an old sheep facility, white patients in a building called the asylum, and lepers in an old chicken shed.

In 1892, the lepers organized a protest against the harsh conditions. British troops were sent to quell the rebellion, and eventually, conditions were improved slightly - allowing for letters to be received and sent, visitors, and the repair of some old buildings.

A POLITICAL PRISON: THE 1900s

In the early 1900s, the ill of the Island were sent to mainland hospitals. Shortly before the start of WWII, the defense force of the government took control of the Island for military purposes. They built secure roads, modern homes, and power stations and an improved system for water supply on the Island. The military's occupation lasted until 1961, when the Island again was transformed into a prison.

Over the decades of South Africa's apartheid era, Robben Island prisons were filled with the courageous African men of the anti-apartheid movement. Some of the most well-known inmates included the leaders of the African National Congress and signers of the Freedom Charter, Walter Sisulu, and Nelson Mandela among countless others. The words for which they were imprisoned read as follows:

We the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white...

The people shall govern!

All national groups shall have equal rights!

The people shall share in the nation's wealth!

The land shall be shared among those who work it!

All shall be equal before the law!

All shall enjoy human rights!

The doors of learning and culture shall be opened!

There shall be houses, security, and comfort!

There shall be peace and friendship!

THE FREEDOM CHARTER

ROBBEN ISLAND: THE DARK YEARS

AN EXCERPT FROM A LONG WALK TO FREEDOM
BY NELSON MANDELA

The following excerpt recounts Mandela's imprisonment, along with six other political prisoners who were taken together to Robben Island.

We landed on a military airstrip on one end of the island. It was a grim, overcast day, and when I stepped out of the plane, the cold winter wind whipped through our thin prison uniforms. We were met by guards with automatic weapons; the atmosphere was tense but quiet, unlike the boisterous reception I had received on my arrival on the island two years before.

We were driven to the old jail, an isolated stone building, where we were ordered to strip while standing outside. One of the ritual indignities of prison life is that when you are transferred from one prison to another, the first thing that happens is that you change from the garb of the old prison to that of the new. When we were undressed, we were thrown the plain khaki uniforms of Robben Island.

Apartheid's regulations extended even to clothing. All of us, except Kathy, received short trousers, an insubstantial jersey, and a canvas jacket. Kathy, the one Indian among us, was given long trousers. Normally Africans would receive sandals made from car tires, but in this instance we were given shoes. Kathy, alone, received socks. Short trousers for Africans were meant to remind us that we were "boys." I put on the short trousers that day, but I vowed that I would not put up with them for long.

The warders pointed with their guns where they wanted us to go, and barked their orders in simple one-word commands: "Move!" "Silence!" "Halt!" They did not threaten us in the swaggering way that I recalled from my previous stay, and betrayed no emotion.



We were immediately joined by a number of prisoners who had been held in the general section of the prison, a squat brick building not far from Section B. The general prison, known as sections F and G, contained about a thousand mostly common-law prisoners, and a handful of those men were put with us in Section B. We were isolated from the general prisoners for two reasons: we were considered risky from a security perspective, but even more dangerous from a political standpoint. The authorities were concerned we might "infect" the other prisoners with our political views.



Robben Island had changed since I had been there for a fortnight's stay in 1962. In 1962, there were few prisoners; the place seemed more like an experiment than a full-fledged prison. Two years later, Robben Island was without question the harshest, most iron-fisted outpost in the South African penal system. It was a hardship station not only for the prisoners but for the prison staff. Gone were the Coloured warders who had supplied cigarettes and sympathy. The warders were white and overwhelmingly Afrikaans-speaking, and they demanded a master-servant relationship. They ordered us to call them "baas," which we refused. The racial divide on Robben Island was absolute: There were no black warders, and no white prisoners.

Moving from one prison to another always requires a period of adjustment. But journeying to Robben Island was like going to another country. Its isolation made it not simply another prison, but a world of its own, far removed from the one we had come from. The high spirits with which we left Pretoria had been snuffed out by its stern atmosphere; we were face to face with the realization that our life would be unredeemably grim. In Pretoria, we felt connected to our supporters and our families; on the island, we felt cut off, and indeed we were. We had the consolation of being with each other, but that was the only consolation. My dismay was quickly replaced by a sense that a new and different fight had begun.

QUIZ

POLITICAL DRAMA

Politics and drama mix. Sometimes, artistic work is used to fuel and reflect upon the politics of a nation. At its best, the work transcends that moment and points to a more hopeful future for all of us, regardless of birthplace and identity, or maybe just gives voice to our pain. The following artists, plays, and creations have contributed both to a revolutionary movement and a powerful aesthetic.

1. This playwright and leader of the Velvet Revolution, imprisoned during the years of Communist control, eventually became the president of the Czech Republic.
2. Created the Theater of the Oppressed.
3. This woman headed the Federal Theatre Project, part of Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, which funded the creation of many socially-focused theatrical works, including a pro-union production of *The Cradle Will Rock*.
4. This musical, currently being revived off-Broadway, follows the rise of the Nazi Regime, contrasting its fascism with the freedoms of the Kit Kat Club.
5. This play by Irish writer Brendan Behan centers on a player in the Catholic-Protestant violence of Northern Ireland.
6. This dancer-choreographer created the highly political work *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*.
7. This Nigerian playwright won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and was frequently arrested and detained for his intellectual and political views, which he documented in his work *The Man Died*, written in 1979.
8. Name one of the NEA 4, the group of artists who challenged the National Endowment for the Arts' request that all artistic work which received funding be "decent."
9. This German theatrical reformer used drama as a social and ideological forum to convey many leftist causes. He often worked with composer Kurt Weill.
10. The name of Voltaire's play, which features a character criticizing everything from marriage to the military. Later given a musical score by Leonard Bernstein.

NELSON MANDELA REVISITS HIS OLD CELL ON ROBBEN ISLAND

LOUISE J. GUBB/IMAGE WORKS/TimePix

QUIZ ANSWERS:

1. Vaclav Havel
2. Augusto Boal
3. Hallie Flanagan
4. *Cabaret*
5. *The Hostage*
6. Bill T. Jones
7. Wole Soyinka
8. Karen Finley, Tim Miller,
John Fleck or Holly Hughes
9. Bertolt Brecht
10. *Candide*

SUGGESTED READINGS:

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