Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the creation of Athol Fugard's plays not as performances or as texts, but as material objects: it explores how the social conditions of textual production and circulation have affected their interpretation. It charts the transformation of ‘Fugard’ into an increasingly valuable piece of literary property, on which different meanings have been inscribed.

From the 1970s, Oxford University Press became Fugard's preferred British publisher. It was the main publisher to exploit its legal advantage and seek British territorial rights for Fugard's texts and, by 1983, OUP had 12 of Fugard's major plays in publication. These have proved to be of enduring financial value for the Press, and are still in print. They have been included in and out of various series, packaged both individually and in collections, in paperback and hardback. They have been prescribed for school and university syllabuses worldwide, and have been published by OUP in London, Oxford, New York, Nairobi and Cape Town. While existing Fugard scholarship centres on the plays either as performance or as text, this is the first study of Fugard's publishing history, which focuses on seven of Fugard's plays published by OUP during the period 1968 to 1974.

A ‘universal’ or political dramatist?

The major question that OUP editors grappled with was how to interpret and promote Fugard. Was he a political, anti-apartheid dramatist or a writer of ‘universal’ truths? Was his work specific to South Africa or did it have a resonance beyond that country? In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Fugard was writing in the context of increasingly entrenched state repression and violence in South Africa. Following a state of emergency after Sharpeville and a crackdown on political opposition, resistance to apartheid was suppressed. The Terrorism Act of 1967 authorised the imprisonment of suspects...
without trial, and oppositional organisations were banned in 1968. The Black Homeland Citizenship Act of 1970 changed the status of black people in South Africa so that they became citizens of the Bantustans, rather than citizens of South Africa, resulting in enforced resettlement during the 1970s and the uprooting of almost one-third of a million black South Africans. Fugard’s published diary *Notebooks* charts his response to political events as they unfolded in Port Elizabeth in this period, and describes the local scene of devastation in July 1973 following evictions in nearby Salisbury Park under the Group Areas Act. He deliberates at length on the role and responsibility of the writer in ‘the troubled state of South Africa’, formulating the opposition between art and politics as a ‘tightrope between poetry and propaganda’, and declaring that ‘my life’s work [was] possibly just to witness as truthfully as I could, the nameless and destitute (desperate) of this one little corner of the world’.

Fugard scholarship has queried whether he should be regarded as a political writer or whether his writing transcends immediate politics. Stephen Gray wrote in 1982 of the ‘universalism’ of Fugard, suggesting, ‘It is a kind of critical injustice … to deal with Fugard’s plays exclusively in terms of the political issues they dramatise,’ while Russell Vandenbroucke’s *Truths the Hand Can Touch* (1985) focuses on how his works addressed the ‘universal condition’. Dennis Walder in 1984 argued that Fugard’s plays were undeniably about the ‘inhuman facts of apartheid’ and that such interpretations of him as ‘universal’ were simply attempts to make the writer institutionally acceptable: ‘Fugard’s plays are political. … The South African reviewers and critics who make up the overwhelming majority of contributors to *Athol Fugard* have to pretend that this is not so.’ By contrast, Hilary Seymour, in 1980, regarded *Sizwe Bansi* as far from politically radical, contending that its ‘image of the self-made man pulling himself up by his boot straps is a key concept in the mythology and ideological superstructure of industrial capitalist societies’. Since the end of apartheid, critics have repeatedly argued that Fugard’s plays transcend their specific political context. For example, André Brink’s examination of *Sizwe Bansi* in 1993 reflects on ways in which Fugard ‘aimed at transcending the “merely” sociopolitical’. Likewise, Albert Wertheim (2000) insisted that while Fugard’s plays have been milestones and signposts of apartheid’s devastating progress, its demise, and the future that is unfolding in its wake, the issues he addresses ‘extend well beyond the borders of his homeland’. Harry Garuba (2001) positions *The Island* within the “writing back” dimension of postcolonial discourse, in which ‘issues of colonialism, of race and color, of political disenfranchisement and tyranny come to the fore’; and Walder (2003) argues that *The Island* ‘transcends the immediate circumstances of its making’ although he goes on to qualify this: ‘But that is not the same as saying that it is “transcendent”, much less universal.’

This chapter charts the ways in which the publisher addressed and resolved this tension between Fugard as a political playwright and Fugard