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"ART IS LIFE AND LIFE IS ART"

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN KANI AND WINSTON NTSHONA OF
THE SERPENT PLAYERS FROM SOUTH AFRICA*

MODERATOR: Ladies and Gentlemen, here is John Kani and Winston Ntshona sitting next to me from Port Elizabeth, South Africa. They've been on the road since 1972. They have appeared in London, other parts of England, and more recently they played in New York, and now Los Angeles. Later they will be going to Washington, D.C. I'm very glad that they did agree to come out with us today, and meet with everyone. Basically what we're going to do is have a very free-form discussion with John and Winston. People can ask questions, or make comments and if you have questions about the plays they are currently doing, they will be glad to entertain those. Now the stage is open to anyone who has comments or questions for both John and Winston.

AFRICAN ACTIVIST ASSOCIATION/UFHAMU: One of the questions that sort of comes to my mind, (although I haven't seen the plays yet) is, as a group of Africans from South Africa, do you feel that you are legitimizing the South African government because you are out doing these plays? Are you accused of doing this? What I'm saying is why are you out doing the play? Why did they let you come out?

WINSTON: We are just a group of artists with a love for theater. And we have every right to open the doors to anyone who wants to take a look at our play and our work.

AAA/UFHAMU: You see this as a work of art. You don't see it as a political play?

WINSTON: No, I don't know what you call a political play. But maybe I'll say more on our work. We believe in art. We also believe in life. We believe that art is life and conversely, life is art. And no sensible man can divorce one from the other. That's it. Other attributes are merely labels.

JOHN: --It's a very interesting question especially now that you've actually raised it. During the late 50's or early 60's to 1964 we have heard about the guerrillas and the brave stories that they've gone to train and to come back and liberate the people. It is now 1975; they left us where they left us and they haven't been back, nor are they threatening to come back. It's very beautiful that when you do somehow get a chance to get out of the country to continue the work

*This interview was jointly conducted by the African Activist Association and Ufhamu. It took the form of an open discussion before a full house of other Africanists.

JOHN(cont): you believe in, the first question you are asked is, "How did you leave the country?" It is a very beautiful question. It is a pity you have not seen the play; there is very little we could do to refer to it relative to what you ask.

AAA/UFAHAMU: --I saw "The Island" Thursday night and I saw a fantastic performance. You, as actors are very superior in the roles. But there was something that was bothering me and that was in terms of content. Like you guys were really the product to sell, to maintain the performance and to keep people interested in watching you. But when we go deeper into the content, it didn't really add up into understanding the two characters and their backgrounds. We went to watch and we discussed in relation to the two characters. If they were political prisoners, what was their background? There wasn't too much attention to the affection that the people had after being in prison in one place, so I kind of thought content-wise the play didn't live up to what it could have done. What is your reaction to this?

WINSTON: Everybody goes to the theater, the movies, and you see them watch it, and you come out with your own personal views about it and you are entitled to that. How you interpret it is your own business.

AAA/UFAHAMU: --He's talking about your objective content of the play itself.

WINSTON: On that score both John, Athol and myself are satisfied with what we dish out. We are not responsible for somebody who sees it, watches it and is not satisfied.

AAA/UFAHAMU: --No, but its a question of content. You wrote the play in collaboration with Athol Fugard. You assume it's about Robben Island. He's talking about the actual content, the message of the play, whether political or what have you.

WINSTON: --That's it.

AAA/UFAHAMU: I think that if there is a book and 100,000 people read it they will not come up with 100,000 different views of what they want to make out of the book. The book has its meaning or theme which nobody can change. The play has its destiny, its clear. There's not many people being confused as to whether it is abstract. Two shaven-headed people was not the problem. It was tangible. Yet I'm not saying it should be political or this or that, I'm just saying content-wise do you think it lived up to where it could have lived? I'm not talking about the interpretation.

JOHN: You say content-wise, did it live up to what it could have been. Now you have the "could have," we have the other part.

AAA/UFAHAMU: The prison in South Africa, that's what you are presenting in this play.

JOHN: You are localizing it. We worked on it, and incidentally, you heard us collaborating with Athol. It was rather the reversal. He enlisted his contribution while we were working.

AAA/UFAHAMU: You are more responsible for the play?

JOHN: Yes! We selected an issue as artists and used ourselves to deal with certain issues that affect our lives in a special context, in our country. But also you must understand that this is a piece of work, with its own artists surviving under a very special condition. The work was devised to survive certain regulations and conditions and the work was devised to live in that situation. Somehow or the other, through certain accidents, the work got a chance to get out of the borders of South Africa. Now, we could not get rid of the truth of how the thing was devised and open it up because now we're in a free country where most of the things we imply, like in gestures, like in sweat, like in movement of the eyes and ears like the whole use of the body which is so relevant and has a language of its own at home, with the people the work is devised for.

We just said we'll take the chance, but we'll refuse to prostitute the work in trying to fit it into different societies we'll be going through. We will invite the people to come and see into our lives, the way it is. So, maybe that you failed to get more, or rather enough in what you call the content at home we did not have the problem because it came over the way we wanted it. I hope I'm trying to reach you. See, the societies have got many parallels, here in America and at home, a little bit in England because there are Black people there too. But you must understand we live in a different kind of regime where it is even... I do not want to get into that side of the politics of South Africa because I do not involve myself at this moment. I'm more interested in what I'm doing as an artist, but I take it that everybody has at least an idea of what it means to be a Black man in South Africa. And for us at least to have come up with two pieces of work that somehow when we did them, we were dealing with the truth. That is why Winston constantly says whatever you label it, its on your side, not ours.

AAA/UFAHAMU: In other words when Winston talks about art reflecting life, you as actors and artists of the theater, you do not see your art as different from how you lead your lives. I think that's where this question of content comes from. When someone says content, its not a question mark on the artistry. It's rather a question of whether you are satisfied that the content of what you are showing in

AAA/UFAHAMU (cont): fact does reflect your lives as artists living up to an ideal—your lives as artists living in reality. But we are getting some hints from what you are trying to explain...

WINSTON: --I'll try and answer him the way I did. Whether you talk in terms of the content or whether you view the work from the artistic point of view, the three of us, we view both the artistry and the content. These are the things that incorporate life as we see it through art. And then the three of us, in sweating it out, working it out, you know picking up situations, because I believe this is how I believe an artist should do, every sensible artist. Whenever one is involved in all he is doing, he is selecting from life, from his immediate surroundings, the themes that affect his life, because in the overall end of it all, what you're going to see on stage is never no ghosts, no apparitions; those are human beings talking about their lives, their immediate surroundings. And then the three of us were satisfied with the output and the input into the work. Now somebody coming along to see the show; sits there, watches, comes out, either satisfied or dissatisfied, period.

AAA/UFAHAMU: Could you give us brief summaries of the plays since many of us are going to see them shortly. And since they are not published plays we can't get hold of the scripts, otherwise what I generally do when I go to see a play is I read it first to get an idea of what it contains so I can grapple with it better on the stage-level. Is it possible for you to give us a kind of little run-down of the two plays?

JOHN: --You remind me of a very beautiful French ballet dancer, doing the "Dying Swan" in Paris; a very strenuous thing to do. And at the end of it, a young English journalist rushed to her back-stage and said, "Madame, could you please tell me in a few words what you wanted to say or communicate with us?" She said, "Young man, if I had had those few words, I would never have gone through those bone-bending exercises on that stage." We find it very difficult as artists to tell people in a few words what the plays are about. We leave it to the people rather to see the work. If they never see it that's very unfortunate on their part and on our side, but I don't believe we have the few words to tell you what it is about, not if we're going to do it every night.

AAA/UFAHAMU: --The problem is not one of either wanting to see the play or not wanting to see the play. The dance is a different medium from the theater. From what I have read about the plays in the *L.A. Times* you make use of a lot of theatrical devices, especially the mime, which means that part of your "words" is in mimes, not necessarily spoken. But all the same you have a scripted play from which you're acting and which is difficult for me to reach. In

AAA/UFAHAMU (cont): other words, if you had it here you would say "There it is, go and read it." Here it is is not like someone saying "tell me what the play is all about." I'm a director of the theater and I don't mind providing clues to a play's story. It doesn't prevent anybody coming to see the show. And in most productions too—you have bills where the synopsis of the play is given and people still come in to see the actors on stage. So we're not trying to pull you by the leg, you know...

WINSTON: All our work is about life at home as Blacks. Leave it.

AAA/UFAHAMU: John, I'm South African as you probably know. I think you're using a false analogy when you site a woman acting in "Dying Swan" and projecting her role on the stage and somebody asks her about that role after. You're taking it as an assumption that everybody knows about South Africa, which is false, and I don't have to tell you that you know that not everyone knows what South Africa is like. And of course you must have run across a lot of people who are extremely ignorant, supposedly educated Americans. So I think he's asking a sort of valid question. He's not asking what interpretation you can give to the play, but what is the story of the play. He doesn't know anything about what the play is about, he wants to know what's happening in the play so he can give his own interpretation. Probably if I saw the play myself I would not have to ask anybody because I lived in South Africa, but someone who is external, who is viewing a play from an external perspective, I think it is valid to ask for motifs.

WINSTON: --But look at it this way. You were saying it's a pity the work we do is not scripted. For your information it is scripted. We have it compiled into a book called *Statements*, featuring "The Island" and another play called *Statements*. Just in case somebody would love to grab the script; either prior or after seeing the shows, then the book has been put out by Oxford. Anyway the thing John is talking about is that you know we create these plays, we are artists, and we function and operate on the stage. That is our sole duty. But now to sit and talk is just as good as if we talked about all that situation. We would rather sweat it on stage for the benefit of people all over the country. We can choose to talk about the plays but we prefer to sweat it out on stage, believing that in whatever we're doing, we're getting across to whoever is sitting and watching.

AAA/UFAHAMU: Let me ask one thing - I kind of feel already there is the artist. Okay. And there is the masses. One thing I would like to tell you is that I admire your acting; there is amazing talent in the black world that hasn't had a chance to be exposed to the world. One thing we should not learn from Europe is to make artists from different human species, as if they are separate from the world,

AAA/UFAHAMU(cont): and saying "I'm an artist" is an excuse that from centuries to centuries the world gave. You know, I don't want to brag I'm an artist; I'm a human being, and you're my brother, I will not claim I feel your pain. I believe I'm your brother but I don't claim to feel your pain of how you live in South Africa as a Black person, I would not claim. But one thing I know is you're another human being, another Black human being, who is not just species of artists who is difficult to understand. We have to break that barrier automatically. Now what I want is, from the day you landed in America it has been a political landing whether you are aware of it or not. The press has received you as political artists. Two guys from South Africa. For South Africa it's a big political step, if you don't know. If a Black performer goes to South Africa, there is a political thing that you cannot disassociate from his art. Even the tennis player Arthur Ashe. He himself is aware of it. A lot of South Africans confronted him in South Africa and said, "Why did you come?" Our governments are using you for political reasons." And he discussed it. So we don't have to be defensive. We would like to know if you are at least aware of the political impact of your visit from the day you landed. From the theater press, from New York down to here, you've been the subject not to be separated from the political reality of South Africa.

WINSTON: Defensiveness has never been any kind of mechanism we use for survival. Hence from the very onset I put it clear--the very link that has kept us alive--the total belief that art is life. And I don't know how defensive I can be but I can make that statement. The words you have used; socialism, politics, economics, you might use them; those I would call labels, what we're talking about is art as we see it as life. Period.

AAA/UFAHAMU: --I'd like to jump in there because there's one thing really that I think you've been skirting. And I think it's the whole principle of art as life. It's almost like you are saying art is life that's lived in a dream; not life that is lived in reality. And reality includes what you call labels, *ie*, politics, economics, everything. To turn to my last question, I'm a Nigerian, I haven't lived in South Africa. Probably I'm as ignorant of South Africa as the American public is ignorant of what is happening in South Africa. But I hear stories. Also as a Black man, I have undergone colonialism myself, I know what it means by going through its yoke, how much more going through apartheid colonialism. So, the little thing you are doing here; people are saying "What does it mean?" and you are saying you don't want to talk about it. You know, if you insist on saying "Look at us on the stage and observe life itself", I think you would be guilty of some falsification because there is a separation between art and life. What you are doing is acting. Life is somewhere different. But I agree with the general umbrella "Art is life." You

AAA/UFAHAMU(cont): have even refused to give a synopsis of the plays so that at least people who are here will be enlightened. Not everybody can come to see the plays certainly. I mean, those who want to come and see them will come but others won't. For those who want to come and see—you have referred to Oxford University Press.

WINSTON: —Let's straighten this out. I realize this is my last chance for my side, to straighten it out, you know, there are so many words creeping in and yet still saying the same thing. May I repeat myself. We say art is life and conversely, life is art. That's it. And then what our show is about, what we do with our work; we view situations within the context of what gives within that society. In other words, what we are doing is talking about our immediate surroundings. I don't know if in doing that that can never be called reality. If we talk about things that affect our lives, would you call that reality? This is exactly what we do.

AAA/UFAHAMU: —I think one of the problems is the very fact that we are here in the United States. In other words you are dealing with a foreign audience which has either been chosen by yourselves or by your government whereas in an African country, for instance, the audience is a familiar one. So the question I want to raise is if the very audience that would be supporting you would be in Africa why did you people come here? What is the role of the artist; to get potential supporters...Why did you come to the U.S?

WINSTON: —You've said a lot of things, you've even touched on governments. To begin with, we've got nothing to do with governments, may I put that clear. No government, be it American government where we are at the moment; or the English government where we've been in the immediate past, or our government where we live and die. We operate within that society and our work is rooted and centered in that society. And like I said earlier, we'll always open our doors to whoever has an interest in our work. Now we did *Senseless Banzai is Dead* and we played for ten solid months within that society. In the course of the play, some theater group in London called The Royal Court poked their nose into our work, and saw the possibility of a work of the kind operating in London. So, they invited us. That's why we went there. And once in London and playing there for nine months, some group here in America, (not the man in the street, but people within theater, because that's our platform—with all our attitude, with all our ideology in terms of the whole thing called life, our whole doctrine about life) invited us here. And then coming over here we are kind of meeting up with people: all the categories—people calling themselves names like socialists, people calling themselves students in political science, those doing political theater. All these kinds of things. These are the labels people meet up with. Maybe that is why we end up with, you know, the crossroads in terms of what we're talking about here.

AAA/UFAMU: --Now, the role of the artist is not to sit in the ivory tower and look down on the masses of the people. Now, whether one likes to or not, as you have admitted, your arts and the content of the plays do not come from the air; they come from *your* experience. The very fact that you are artists from Africa, from South Africa particularly, coming to the West to play for Western Universities, theater houses and for the elites, in a way perpetuates the same sort of mysticism that exists. I mean, if one comes to the US and does not meet Black people for instance. If one does not go to African countries to meet the people on the streets, wherever, how effective will the artist be in trying to interpret art as life. I think this is really the conflict that is coming down. There are two kinds of artists; the one kind of artist who comes to the US, they admire him, they invite him to come to Hollywood and they give him a lot of money, so that he will do his thing or say his piece, then they invite him to Germany and all of the other places. The very people who are asked to support him never get a chance to listen.

COMMENT: I agree with the general trend of your statement. But I think it totally and completely overlooks the political situation in Africa, okay? First and foremost, practically none of the African countries would allow them to come to those African countries. You know that's a political statement; Kenya, Tanzania and all those other countries would not allow them to come there. So, basically, they cannot address the African population. And I don't believe the presupposition of your thesis that people never change. It is a real anarchist position. People do change; people are never so bad off that there is never a possibility of changing. So you can even address your enemies. Within that element of the enemy there are certain elements which one can hit. So you can't say that one should completely address Africans only. Ideally, I'd be very very happy if you were in Africa carrying this message, which I think is far more important than being here. But one cannot overlook certain political realities.

COMMENT: --Can I just make a comment about that; you see I am South African myself and these are my brothers. I take the whole context about the image that one projects. You can learn in America you really project a certain image wherever you are. As a Black person coming from South Africa you know the press will always exploit that and project an image of people from South Africa, artists, doing this or that. So art becomes a political issue, whether you like it or not. Now, the person behind the art, what does he project? Is it just a cold artist who says, "Well, I'm an artist", or "I'm a politician and art comes behind me?" So what we're discussing now is, what are Winston & John? Politically motivated artists? For them to say, our art is politically motivated. But they don't want to admit it. So, you are putting them in a corner to make them identify

COMMENT (cont): themselves. As a poet, and as a politician, I use my poetry to project my politics. And I'm not in a position to say that they should put themselves in such a position because they would be unfair to themselves. If they can project art without being politically aware or politically conscious, I feel that's a piece of genius.

JOHN: --It's a very beautiful remark you say. I do not believe that there is a Black man living in South Africa who is not politically aware of what is happening. I do not believe that there is a Black man on the face of this earth wherever he is, who is not in constant struggle for the liberation of his people, in one form or the other. I do not believe that there is a Black man in South Africa, whose sole efforts, be he a painter, an artist, a poet, a street cleaner, are not dedicated towards changing that country. And I do not know whether in this little room where we are, we have to stand up and make those heavy statements. I thought that was understood by the fact that we are Black.

AAA/UFAHAMU: Okay, let's return to the play, "The Island". I want to deal with it in terms of content. You take the two characters in prison, okay. Like you say art is life; life is art. Okay, good. I would prefer to say the artist tries humbly to re-create or to portray life. I don't think it's 50-50 phenomenon; it's an attempt. If it were 50-50, there would not be a problem in the world now. Now, content-wise, in the attempt in "The Island" there is no information about South Africa. It's like two human beings living in a capsule on the moon, separate from the world. This is my interpretation of the content. Not only was the middle class, the upper class of predominantly white-America sitting there being entertained, there is not even a small amount of informative educational process to that audience because it's the same whisky-drinking people who don't give a damn about South Africa, who support Gulf Oil and everything that works to suppress Blacks in South Africa. There they sit being entertained by two South Africans as if they are separate human beings from the moon, you know, this is what I'm interested in discussing.

WINSTON: --You believe that art has to be somewhat informative, and this is the whole basis of your big question in terms of what you saw in "The Island" because, apparently, I assume you didn't meet any political statements, in parenthesis, in "The Island." Now given that as the basis of your thinking, and you're seeing "The Island", you know I'm just sitting here listening to you talk, and then something dawned in my head. And then a situation; let us assume its here, let us assume America is a very racist kind of society; and then racist obviously you know is white domination

WINSTON (cont): and Black subservience. And let us also assume that you are walking down this street and somewhere around the corner you meet two Blacks, manacled and handcuffed; and then not very far from them you see two whites eating ice cream. Wouldn't that be a complete statement in terms of the situation here? And this is exactly what we're dealing with in "The Island." We just give a situation and we assume as much as everybody that gets to the theater, kind of says he's aware of what's happening to blacks in that society.

AAA/UFAHAMU: But that's your problem in this country, you know because for the most part people that see the play, a white audience, are not really aware of what's going on in South Africa. Some of the ones that are aware of what's going on in South Africa support it.

WINSTON: Maybe you missed out on the programs; there is a lot of information in those programs. You should pick them up, see that information and read it, then you'll understand.

AAA/UFAHAMU: Your presence in this country, becomes a political statement, whether you agree with it or not...

JOHN: --It's not a matter of liking it or not, it's just a fact.

AAA/UFAHAMU: It is. And it is now, in particular, because of what's happening in Africa--the liberation armies are just sweeping away old regimes in Mozambique and Angola. And there's now a lot of pressure on Rhodesia and on South Africa. So under those circumstances it becomes very crucial that we be careful in terms of what we do. Because whether we're artists or street sweepers it becomes a political statement itself. I think what people are trying to get out of this is that it is a political statement.

JOHN: The other thing that I would like all of us to be aware of is that it's fine, we are two South Africans and we are going back to South Africa, and we function in South Africa where our work is most relevant, and has a better purpose than entertaining these masses abroad. We are not dealing with a post-mortem situation. A Black man in South Africa, at the moment, with what is happening, finds it very difficult, whenever he gets a chance to get out of that country, to make statements that would jeopardize his wonderful functioning within that country. What you want us to do is to hoist the flag where the play was set and tell you why those prisoners are there, what they have done. When we called it "The Island", this we never even had the dream of wanting to get out of that country [South Africa]. We've been given many other chances before to come and study theater and do this; we have refused. We were never interested in this because we believe that our work is centered in that country. Now in South Africa for us to have called the play "Robben Island", you would have read in the *New York Times* one paragraph

JOHN(cont): of what had happened to us. And you would only march from UCLA down to the mayor's office and tomorrow you would be back in your nice comfortable seat and that's the end of it. And this is the way the outside world ever participates in the struggle in Africa.

AAA/UFAHAMU: I'm interested in knowing how you started functioning as a theater group in the first place, how you came to this point.

JOHN: --That's beautiful. You can say it started in 1961. Actually, it started in 1958. Generally, the way of life in South Africa is so clearly defined. We have come across a lot of ignorance even among people who have been to South Africa for visiting; some of them who have read volumes about that country and yet who don't know actually what's happening there. There has been a lot of activities among the Black people living in conditions equivalent to what is called ghettos here, although I would not say we live in ghettos in SA, because the present ghetto would not reflect the township in SA. The word slum, would reflect where we stay. People have constantly done things--song writers, painters, poets; people in all fields try to say something about their lives. But the government has constantly sealed off all those avenues, practically almost to make it impossible for these people to say one line that is not informed with some ambiguity that they can use to escape the law. This has informed our art in South Africa at the moment. Serpent Players was a group of men who just got together and decided to do something about their lives using the stage. They caught up in 1961 with this man Athol Fugard, a white man from Johannesburg, and asked him if he could work with them as he had the know-how theatrically--the tricks, how to use the stage, movements, everything. So we have worked with him since then, and this is how Serpent Players got together. But constantly we have done really almost anything we could lay our hands on in South Africa as we have no access to any libraries. So we have to smuggle whatever we do. We have constantly done from Brecht to Strindberg, Beckett, Shakespeare and other prolific writers, especially the contemporary ones. But we have also taken upon ourselves a special responsibility towards our situation. After every play we make that makes a statement about our lives, whoever was the key figure in making that, is taken away and he spends his 5 years or more on the Island, or he is hassled and intimidated. We live under such constant confrontation with the authorities. I wonder when we come here, we do a play and you get a full house; very few are Black. I just think that the audience has been selected. Like it's very difficult for us, as somebody said, we do not talk to the people--which is the people we should talk to. It's very difficult in theater, especially if you come to another country. The management, whoever is responsible, has their own role defined their own way, and theater has always been a white man's monopoly. And the economic situation in different countries has always made it somehow miraculously impossible for a certain section of the people to be able to go to the theater. It becomes a coincidence in America that the Blacks can't see theater because it's too expensive.

JOHN(cont): It's a coincidence because I believe this is a "free society".

So, whenever we come, we will play to an already set-up situation. We only marvel at being given a chance to be able to talk about issues that affect our people to some other society. We have no right or the power to choose that we do this because the people under whose auspices we are here do not, perhaps, have the drive that pushes us behind in our work. They see the piece of work as a money-making commodity. People are opportunists. They see the piece of work and they say that this is very important, that other people should know about it. But the result is like reading what happened in America during the early 60's when it was very fashionable to hate the Blacks. Thus Governor Wallace got his seat. But today times have changed. It's very fashionable again to like Blacks, and so Governor Wallace is getting lots of support. This is why, this time, the type of work we do seems to hinge on certain issues about South Africa that the outside world would like to be exposed to; not the government of course.

COMMENT: I think I'm understanding the plays more now. When we started talking there were barriers between us.

JOHN: If we had started talking about theater it would have led in to your question.

COMMENT: This philosophy of the theater explains in fact "The Island" more. There were barriers because "We're artists" appeared to be a slogan coming from nowhere.

JOHN: --You see you must understand; we've been through this thing for a very long time. Now people sit down and they see these two actors from South Africa and the first thing they see is a walking encyclopedia of South Africa's race politics. And they're not interested in us as actors, to share some experiences of the devices we use in theater, of the different theatrical methods we employ. And sometimes when you come to a campus like this where you've been introduced to artists--people who are called directors, professors in theatrics, directors of underground theater, and all those things, you marvel at this beautiful chance in your life where we are going to share some wonderful experiences which we could take home. You know what I'm talking about? Something new we can feed to our own people through these methods. But what do you come up against? The political conditions of South Africa. I find that we cannot run away from that; the fact that we are black; that's a heavy political statement itself. We're being arrested day in and day out just for being black. People have been calling themselves White for life and you've never questioned that. And today we're calling ourselves Black and that's a political

JOHN(cont): statement in South Africa. Now this is what I said - the fact that we are black is making the statement - we should not be talking about that now, we should share some other different experiences.

AAA/UFABAMU: I'd like to say that I think it was the bravest thing you did coming here. You showed immense courage. And your performance was superb. It was the best artistry that I have seen in America. And for anyone who knows South Africa, it was the most damning indictment. There is no one that knows anything about South Africa who should have been unaware that this was Robben Island. Now let me ask one question relating to the theater. How did you get the marvelous idea of *Antigone*? Because that selection of the role Creon and *Antigone*, to bring out the bitterness and the conflict was absolute genius. I don't know how anyone could read without feeling that this was truer than anything ever seen.

JOHN: In 1965, we did *Antigone*. That was the year I joined the group. On a Thursday (we were just about to open on a Saturday), one member of the group did not turn up at rehearsals and we waited. At ten o'clock we realized what had happened. The word came around that he had been picked up by the authorities, which was not the first time because they did the same thing in '64 when the group was doing *Woyzeck*. They took the guy who was doing the lead and he went to the Island. So once you disappear, the first thing we do, especially our mothers, is to phone the police station, phone the hospital and the mortuary. And if you're not in any of those places, then we know where you are. So we realized he had been picked up and he was sent to the Island immediately. I took over his part. We had letters from the other prisoners in the Island and they told stories that shocked. They told about this guy who was doing a one-man performance of *Antigone* for the prisoners at a concert. Now in '73, when we were devising "The Island", which started really out of what we call "bullshit" talk, when we sit around and don't feel like rehearsing. There is nothing to do; we just feel like talking, talking about the past, and we're playing on a blanket because Winston was wearing a navy blue trousers which would pick up the grass, so we spread the blanket on it. And in playing with Athol, we started halving the blanket, reducing the size. We were standing and trying to move around. It's an ordinary acting exercise that really everybody does, of using the space and the body, and even the silence itself to communicate. And finally we ended with only a space enough for our four feet to stand, and that reminded us of a very sacred place in SA - The Island. When I talk about post-mortem, I mean Nelson Mandela is on the Island while I'm talking to you know, serving life. There are others who are not Nelson Mandela whose names will never get a chance to demonstrate their anniversaries, who are on the island for life, just for being black. Now, it's a very sacred thing in our lives. We never even

JOHN(cont): talk about it. We knew we couldn't in working with this piece of work; we couldn't call it even "The Island" - it was called "The Island" when we reached England. We called it something else in South Africa. Now, out of working with this movement a lot of things happened. You come across the word "experimental theater" quite often to an extent that I lose the true meaning and the definition of what the experimental theater means. Not that we do the exact thing—we've all got so lost into the meaning, whatever this means—but we function in the same way we are now—sitting, talking and sharing experiences. And all we do at the end of it, is to select the most important things we did talk about, and ask different people to repeat whatever they said, and see whether we could not make or mould something out of them. And this is how "The Island" was born. And we constantly did "The Island," in fact, the last week of it was finished 14 miles from Robben Island. We wanted to be as near as possible.

The *Antigone* bit came when we reached an impasse in our work where it was very difficult to continue with it because we were very emotionally involved, very difficult sometimes for an actor. It's nice to do Hamlet as a black man, I don't know about white people. I wouldn't say it doesn't touch their lives. But for me to do Hamlet I would use my talent and acting abilities and past experiences, all the tools that an actor uses in portraying a particular character to do the job. But now, we are not going to talk about "The Island", that I know, today and tomorrow, it becomes very difficult to separate yourself from the emotional involvement, though you might claim that I'm able to stand outside and direct myself. So "The Island" came by chance and accident, out of the remembrance of one of us who now was doing the same thing in prison.

WINSTON: —Besides the mere effect that you have these people on "The Island" as political prisoners spells out the whole confrontation between the people and the state. And this is the whole statement, we're trying to get across, the *Antigone-Creon* theme.

AAA/UFAHANU: -Do you have any other employment apart from acting?

WINSTON: -We used to. The group we belonged to, the other people remaining within the group; everybody has a steady job during the day. In the evenings we meet for rehearsals, or for performances. We perform over the week-ends too. At the moment it's just John and myself who have given theater full attention with the idea that everybody will be drawn into our fold one by one, dropping their jobs. Then maybe, this is what we hope to do to end up with a big professional troupe.

AAA/UFAMU: Do you think you have a chance of forming a big Black professional theater group?

WINSTON: This is the whole idea behind the operation of the Serpent Players, like performing over the weekends. The idea was to use ourselves as guinea-pigs. I was fired from my job because of my constant involvement in theater. Then I was given a moment to choose between what they call this "thing" and the work I was doing. Obviously I am here, I choose this "thing". John and myself as guinea pigs are trying out to see if there were any possibilities in terms of functioning on the basis of what could be called professionalism. And it looks like it's working. And then as soon as we finish here, we would love to go back home and maybe draw the group one by one into our fold and continue working.

JOHN: What you must understand is that in SA the white establishment does not respect art as a whole, irrespective of color. It has no category in its constituency that is dedicated to art. Though there are, in provincial governments, certain offices which constantly subsidize money for theater for whites only. According to South African labor regulations that govern every Black man, you cannot be anything other than a laborer employed all the time. In other words, there is nothing like a professional, independent artist at home. In fact, if you are a poet for instance, your passbook must not carry it as your profession, your means of earning a living. That passbook has a section "B" in which you must disclose how you stay alive. You have to be employed. Now, it's very difficult because the whole South African society, where the market is and the white people work the money, they do not respect theater; they don't even care. They're too busy with the repression to have any time to look at theater. So we had to decide to drop the jobs and we found another way to cope with the passbook, to see whether we could just stay alive in theater, which is something very impossible in SA. Somehow or another, at the moment, we're at least still managing two meals a day, with the families. I would hope in the near future we could draw the whole crowd and make the dream, which is to establish the National Theater in SA.

COMMENT: I have so many things to say and I don't know if I can organize them precisely. But I was getting kind of angry at the beginning, as I think both of you were. Maybe I can start off by saying I think there are enough black martyrs in the US and the rest of the world. I don't know what more people could expect from you than what you gave at the performance. You know people, from the sounds of the accents around the room, come from a lot of different countries, a lot of different political situations. You take the spectrum of everybody on a different spot. We've all been to political rallies. A lot of people will contend that nothing less than

COMMENT(cont): armed revolution will suffice for whatever their cause is, then you get everyone all the way to the right and the left of that. I know some things about South Africa, although I don't profess to know exactly what's going on there. I don't have the feelings that I'm sure you have. But I didn't have any expectations when I went to see the play but I left it just breathless. I left it feeling that you presented life as it was there, with a lot of implications and things that you did rather than what you said that left me feeling like I know more about what's happening. I don't know how you got out of the country to do that kind of a play around the world and I still don't know. I can't imagine them letting you do it but nevertheless here you are. I don't feel the same as some people in this room that you need to hoist the flag and make political statements saying that or whatever, because I feel that you said it brilliantly.

JOHN: --This question of how we got out of the country and this subject matter of what we're talking about in the plays are highly explosive in South African terms. You don't know the passbook, for instance, you don't know what it means to us in SA. And you'd be surprised when I say, that in *Sizwe Bansi* we only dealt with two sections, A and B. There is C,D,E,F,G,H, 96 pages. And each one of them describes whether you are alive today or dead tomorrow. And each one of them missing is a hell of an offense. In America it would be like you stoned the White House, if one page is off. Perhaps, I'm not sure, I don't know; you're never sure how the South African government thinks and functions. Somebody says they lack logic, you can't say because they did this, they'll do that. They just do anything; I mean people operating in a tight corner, really you don't expect any system and order from them.

We just applied for the passports, then there were so many other things involved so we never ever concerned ourselves. We were shocked when the passports arrived. In fact, we already ruled it out, and to forget about it. During that time "The Island" was devised because we didn't care; we knew we would not get passports. But somehow we got passports. So we could not question the South African government, "How did you give us the passports?" We just grabbed them and saw this as a wonderful chance to come overseas and communicate with other brothers, other people, and tell the stories. Maybe there would be some relevance, some similarities. When we were in London, the Negro Ensemble Company was there, and I'm happy no one asked them why they did come to England. As you asked us, "Why did you come to America?", I'm very happy no one asked them, because, as I said, the struggle of the Black people might at the moment be localized in different spots on the earth, but the ultimate one is the international one, because on the face of the earth, we are in a constant struggle to regain our dignity. Sometimes even when these people, like Arthur Ashe, or any other Black diplomat or ordinary

JOHN(cont): singer, comes to SA the first and overall reaction is "Out! Because you're diluting the struggle." Nobody asks, "What is he talking about?" Perhaps he's taking a chance to try and communicate and to say something to us. Then we get nearer to him, but it has been very unfortunate that all of them that did come had nothing for us. It's a pity for instance that at the end of this run, we might also realize that there was nothing we got by going out.

COMMENT: Charles Diggs right now is celebrating in Lourenco Marques, the liberation of Mozambique. So the significance of him coming to our country and the implications are there. He's a man, a Black American who has identified himself with the whole of Africa. Now, you are talking about those others who are irrelevant as far as our struggle is concerned. Well, here we are, all of us, and you're saying something so significant in terms of what you can impart, whatever message you can give not just to the localized in the Los Angeles community but everywhere. The right wing press here is ready to exploit your presence here and my presence here and his presence here. So you've got to project a certain and firm image, take a firm stand and say, "This is what I stand for, as a Black person, as a human being, as a South African, as an African." One has got to be very careful not to be manipulated.

JOHN: Well, for instance, with the many things we've learned, like here, there are a lot of people who are functioning in this society in connection with our country. We get questions like "is there any underground movement in SA?" Now, how do you answer that kind of question and still expect the underground to be underground?

AAA/UFAHAMU: The more I hear you, the more I understand everything. The difference is cleared as far as I'm concerned. As far as being Black and being political is concerned--take the case of two Black Americans, Arthur Ashe and Bob Foster--Bob Foster would say to South African brothers asking him why he came there--All I need is money, I don't give a damn what happens to Africans in SA. Arthur Ashe says he wants to explain, he wants to get to know, he wants to learn more, he's politically conscious. Therefore I would not condemn him. The fact that he's aware of the political situation is important. So at all times, the struggle is not really to put you down or to be intellectual at UCLA asking certain questions. It's more of a discussion of are we aware of not just the fact our skin is black, but are we aware of the political consequences? And whenever we do, that is very important.

Another thing I was also interested in was, for example, among the Black artists of America there is a history of the clown, or a history of negative character. Now in some of your posters--I don't know if you think I'm reading into it -- you guys were presented as

AAA/UFAHAMU(cont): these stereotype plantation clowns, the negative image of Blacks throughout the centuries. And, are you at all critically concerned about that kind of image? And one other thing. Are you guys commercially exploited. How is the money handled? I'm sorry if I'm getting too personal.

WINSTON: That last question was very personal. (*Laughs from the Audience*)

JOHN: --I don't know really, the poster bit of it. When you're dealing with a piece of work and working on enemy grounds, you learn very well how people are not prepared to listen and sit down to anything that is going to disturb their subconscious, and your sole wish is to get to them, you have to use certain devices to get there. Knowing fully well that once you get there you deal with your own thing the way you know it. We really have very little to do with how they advertise the shows. Like somebody was saying to me, "The lighting effect on the stage is so treacherous that it makes your eyes blue. You know when you stand in spot no. 16 coming to action 17, I saw that your eyes looked blue". And that was the joke! So I'm trying to say that what they do with the posters is very difficult really in theater. We believe art should entertain, especially theater. But in entertaining it should also reflect the social purpose; the informing part of it. We would rather not do it if it does not do this. We do not make rules, we are not apostles. But we're just talking about the type of work we would involve ourselves in. I mean, also, the time is very crucial at this moment for Black artists all over the earth to be involving themselves in the near future when we have won our struggle, we will not do "There's a Girl in my Soup" or any such thing. But at the moment we feel we are rather committed to a special form which we must always take.

AAA/UFAHAMU: John, this clowning tradition, this clowning bit, which part of the tradition in South Africa do you draw on, what cultural background? Because you're from Port Elizabeth there's a large colored community there and a large African community, are you influenced by both?

WINSTON: --South Africa is a very cosmopolitan society. Everywhere you go you meet all the sections of the population, whether you're in Port Elizabeth, you meet whites, you meet Indians, you meet coloreds. So from birth, you know you live within that kind of atmosphere.

JOHN: What I like in your question is that constantly we come across this. When we were in England, after we had some beautiful reviews on our opening, the following day a certain guy, ex-white South African, who writes for the *Financial Times* did a review of our work. He opened it in such a beautiful way, rather disputing all the attributes of theatrical qualities and talent in Africa's actors, he started by saying "The African by nature is a good story-teller". You know for

JOHN(cont): Christ's sake, I'm no racist, I just love my people, in fact I believe being a racist is very healthy: you're talking about things you believe and love, not that you do not relate to other people, you do; but first and foremost you center your launching pad to yourself. But whenever we do anything, and do it to the Western standards, because these days everything has to conform to certain Western models, regulations and shelves—if it doesn't fit those it's not theater, now when we do things and break those rules and do them in such a way that they are accepted, and people marvel at how beautiful it is, there is always a tendency of someone wanting to attribute our success not to the art and all its qualities but to refer to your cultural ways of seeing things in the 15th century when you used to dance around the fires and tell stories, and how our history has been passed on from the grand old dad to his son and to his son and up to me. And they cannot accept the fact that people use different methods.

COMMENT: I'd like to comment on that. It is a very beautiful statement you have made. My impression as a theater person is that, in fact, what you consider to be a derogatory statement by these critics concerning your African heritage does not diminish your personal qualities as an actor. I think it is the greatest tribute that any white person can say to you. My impression of African theater is not the study of all the methods from Stanislavsky to Brecht and all the rest of contemporary European theatericians, but I'm thinking of theater that does as you say reflect the African image. And if it reflects life it must reflect African life. Africans have their own art, which I believe people like you can actually develop to such a standard that it will look different or surpass whatever forms of theatrical traditions you now wish to be part of. And if I may give some kind of advice to you, try to work more on the area of developing your own potentials as African artists first. You can still remain within the larger concept of the acting profession but you would have built up a tradition that can be accepted anywhere. Had the Chinese, Japanese or Indians abandoned their traditional acting techniques to imitate Western traditions the art of the theater would have been poorer for it.

AAA/UFHAMU: --Well the discussion of clown, is completely lost, I think the question...

JOHN: I think in any nation certainly there are people who are—we would not use the word *jester* nor the word *clown* because it does not actually give you the correct description of what the entertainer is in my culture. But there were people who were called "amakula" who would stand up in a gathering, select the old troubles of yesterday and make a laughingstock of them today in order to get rid of it from our lives. We laughed at ourselves.

AAA/UFANAMU: We're talking about the clown not whether it was the white man who started the clown, or the black man. We don't need to go into that. In terms of mask, makeup and the such, we could take it back through theater history. The discussion is not that; the discussion is more of taking the theater, it's a little tied to sociology, more into the social; like especially, in history, from the time the Black man made contact with the Europeans, repression on the basis of race started. There's a certain history of clown that is separate from theater clown. We're not talking about Shakespeare's clown, we're talking about an entirely different question. Clowning has its social history, especially since you guys are brought into America. It has, from the plantation days, a history. It can be traced down why certain slaves resorted into clowning. Because of survival. Now, in America where there is no need to resort into clowning (in fact, it has been said Blacks, all they can do is clowning, hence when Black actors now audition they refuse to audition for a movie if it means they have to clown like what I was told in the books or from my ancestors.) Now this is the confusion. I'm talking of you guys coming into another history, America, are you aware of this or how do you view it as different...

WINSTON: --I don't think we could spend time tracing this or that, I think it is rather irrelevant and a waste of time. I mean, here in this age and era if they can sit around and trace a lot of things in terms of art, they are wasting their time. Otherwise, in sitting down; people here in this society know, they all know how they came over here, everybody irrespective of color, creed, or what have you. They're wasting their time in claiming we were here and this is what happened. Just view life as it is now and then just proceed.

COMMENT: No, we can't do it without looking back.

WINSTON: --I know, its useless to claim whether the blacks did it, or the whites. I'm talking more in terms of the impact because of its negative values--clowning within Black society has its negative areas, it's destroying a lot of little Black children, growing up to be..

COMMENT: Okay, this question; there's a tradition of African clown which has developed socially within the context of Africa. But taking yourself to America, okay the interpretations that people will have of that, will be through the perspective of their own development of understanding of the clown in the social milieu of the clown. So for an artist who comes from Africa, it's hard for him to make those people break the junction between their history of understanding the clown and actual artistic work from Africa. I mean it's a problem, how do you break it? I think you're asking too much for the artist himself to be able to...

COMMENT: --I think this is a complete oversimplification of the American situation. To try and force the whole of society into some idea; because you can go off on the other end--the revolutionary hero--I mean, nobody wants to look at somebody being a Black superman 24 hours a day either. You know, toting and walking up and down the street with a gun, the great projection of the "new male image", so I'm saying that the reflection of life and how Black people view life in this country is very very diverse, very complex, and it's not forced into some dogmatic proposition that somebody had in terms of how you come to understand yourself because if it wasn't for the history of clowning in this country, then the break in the sixties and the re-definition of ourselves would have been completely unnecessary. I mean like the whole movement, the whole process of how people see themselves in society is much more complex than dogmatics want to make it.

COMMENT: --I have two points to make. One comes from the initial question and answer period. There are different kinds of artists and you have to decide wherever you go. I think it's good because you are okay, the kind of artist that relates to your own society. There are, I am sure, other artists in SA that do not. I'm kind of satisfied as to what you said--the feeling I got out of it. A new kind of play is being tried by you people where there is a lot of silence. In other words, in a country like SA, after you have spoken, it is not so much the words that say it as much as perhaps the silence. It looks like the trend in African plays, especially in areas where there is no freedom, seems to be that the actor must speak not more than a few words to be in communication with the people. When you do your plays, I get the feeling that when you communicate with two different kinds of groups that your art possibly communicates better with the group for which the play is intended. I'll give you an example; Black Americans in the ghetto and places like that use certain gestures, certain signs for communication. How far do you use these devices to communicate certain messages to your audiences?

WINSTON: I seem to understand your point which I assume is based on communication between our audiences all over the world. What we have done is to bring our work as intact as ever. But we know what our chances are of bringing it nearer to whatever society in which we are playing. It's like bringing it here, there are certain things that have to be explained. And you've got to be on guard, cast your eyes around, putting your ear on the ground, picking up certain subtleties in terms of the means and ways, the whole thing about the mechanisms in terms of living a life here. We do try to bring the play as near as possible to our audiences, and because our society is kind of cosmopolitan, there are a variety of these audiences. In our society there are those that speak English, Africans, and several African languages. That's why we go into those areas of communication employing gestures and signs and body language. But outside that society, whether or not we succeed, is, of course, for you to say...

MODERATOR: You succeeded beautifully. As I said earlier, I didn't have any expectations when I went to see the play but I left it breathless, with the feeling that you presented life as it was there, especially through the things that you did rather than what you said.

Well, ladies and gentlemen we seem to have run out of time. You may be surprised but it's true we have spent over two hours here. Thank you John, thank you Winston for your candour, caution and patience. We wish you both a safe return to South Africa and hope that you will succeed in creating the professional group of players that has been your aim these past years. Thank you so much and we will keep our ears open for news of your progress in fulfilling your social roles in South Africa.