


BOOK REVIEW

## Performing the Struggle Against Apartheid

### *Opposing Apartheid on Stage: King Kong the Musical*

By Tyler Fleming. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2020.  
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Tyler Fleming's book provides an account of the first production of 'King Kong' — a musical theatre production based on the life of the boxer Ezekiel Dlamini — in 1959. This musical rankled the apartheid state partly because it affirmed the aspirations of a Black urban class against an official state narrative which preferred a Black rural population. As a story of Black urban life that crossed over for mainstream white audiences, and became part of the canon and lore of South African theatre and popular music, the play stands as a landmark in South African cultural history. Fleming's well-researched study considers the ways in which the multiracial production confronted petty apartheid legislation. The author offers an abundance of empirical detail on the play's production, its human and sociopolitical context, and furthers our understanding of African participation in cultural trends — in this case, musical theatre — by invoking Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' to argue for a multiplicity of perspectives on cultural production. Yet Fleming's narrative exegesis remains firmly within the discipline of social history, at the expense of accounting for broader theoretical implications of the work.

Chapter One considers the story of the character whose life is fictionally depicted in the play — the middling South African boxer Ezekiel Dlamini, whose fortunes and mishaps featured in local news and who died tragically by suicide in 1957. Dlamini's story inspired a group known as the Union of South African Artists, which had been established earlier in the 1950s to support emerging Black creatives and advocate for better working conditions. Chapter Two picks up their story, tracing — from news and other sources — ways in which the leaders and members of the Union of South African Artists developed the play. It also includes fascinating detail about the organization's work, such as efforts to secure royalties for Solomon Linda's evergreen tune 'Mbube' (1939), popularised by the Weavers as 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight' (1951). The union suffered a blow in 1954, when its founder and patron, the British cleric, Father Trevor Huddleston, was recalled to England. Yet Huddleston's massive popularity in South Africa also ensured that his farewell event raised enough revenues for the union to acquire premises at the famous Dorkay House in downtown Johannesburg. Chapter Three considers King Kong's popular reception in the media and, in the process, reads the production for the germs of shared nationhood and the potential for multiracialism in South Africa during the first decade of apartheid rule.

This is the story that Fleming sketches in broad strokes, intercut with closely observed empirical examples. Ultimately, he argues that King Kong was critical for how it performed the potential for multiracial and more harmonious futures. As other studies have argued, perhaps, Black popular music, theatre, and cinema promised the possibility of a 'better' life (in the material sense) in

early apartheid South Africa. We might say that King Kong in this sense rode on the cumulative impact of both cinema and jazz, placing the production into a longer genealogy made vivid in the work of scholars of colonial popular culture since Veit Erlman.<sup>1</sup>

Fleming is to be credited for bringing the story beyond South Africa, through a very careful analysis of the play's fortunes in both Britain and, via publicity and exile, the United States of America. Fleming considers the play's encounter with the British entertainment industry via what Fleming calls its 'lacklustre' 1961 UK Tour (121). Many of the artists associated with King Kong — such as Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Gigi Mrwebi, Joe Mogotsi and the other members of the Manhattan Brothers, and Todd Matshikiza — stayed overseas, entering into an uneasy exile. Fleming's narrative offers background information about the strategies different artists deployed to gain footholds in the commercial entertainment industry in Britain and elsewhere, as well as the lived experience of exile for the cast. He offers sobering accounts of artists' experiences as Black foreigners in the United Kingdom and, in Chapter Six, of Hugh Masekela's experiences in the United States as well. Success was the exception, which only a handful, such as Makeba, Masekela, and Letta Mbulu, managed to achieve, upon arriving in the USA amidst renewed interest in Africa. The book's final chapter discusses a 1979 remake and considers the play's legacies through a discussion of the popular and critical rejections of changes the producers made in casting and creative decisions about the music. Fleming uses this production to argue that the 1959 production already had a legacy — in building on the massive influence of American popular music and cinema to produce a sympathetic story of Black urban life with a startling newness and general appeal — which the 1979 production brought into sharp relief.<sup>2</sup>

This book will be of interest to fans of South African popular culture, as well as scholars of African cultural history. While readers will find rich accounts of the politics of the time read through the progress of the production and its characters, I wondered about those connections Fleming makes less clearly, especially to the scholarship on performance, popular theatre, and media whose influence on both the book and the play he acknowledges at the outset.<sup>3</sup> Fleming implies connections with the world of jazz and cinema but does not thread this work throughout in detail enough to make the study more wide-ranging. Admittedly, Fleming's sole focus on the play may not allow much room for this kind of inquiry, but as a reader I was looking for a threaded connection to themes these authors have brought into the conversation about the worldliness of South African popular culture. Given recent scholarship on the impacts of the cinema on the work of the prior generation of South African intellectuals such as Sol Plaatje — who pioneered cinema as a form of popular education — perhaps that is another book.<sup>4</sup>

That said, referring to other scholarship could have allowed Fleming to connect the literature on sonic life to that on theatrical performance. In discussing the cinema of the 1950s, the scholars Lindiwe Dovey and Angela Impey argue that South African film studies and film studies in general

<sup>1</sup>V. Erlmann, *Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination: South Africa and the West* (New York, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>In 2017 the now defunct Fugard Theatre in Cape Town created a new production of the musical King Kong, produced this time by Eric Abrahams. On its YouTube page, the Fugard Theatre announced, 'After nearly 60 years, the week has arrived... KING KONG welcomes its first audience again on 25 July!': The Fugard Theatre, 'King Kong South Africa – A Reflection', 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JOYA2Cn-4>.

<sup>3</sup>See T. Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (Oxford, 2014); V. Erlmann, *Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination*; L. Allen, 'Commerce, politics, and musical hybridity: vocalizing urban Black South African identity during the 1950s', *Ethnomusicology*, 47:2 (2003), 228–49.

<sup>4</sup>See C. M. Erb, *Tracking King Kong: A Hollywood Icon in World Culture* (Detroit, 2009). It is suggestive that the King Kong film's creator Merian C. Coopers was steeped in the imperial theatre of the nineteenth century — e.g. he had become fascinated with gorillas through explorer accounts of Equatorial Africa. Also J. Maingard, 'Projecting modernity: Sol Plaatje's touring cinema exhibition in 1920s South Africa', in D. Treveri Gennari, D. Hipkins, and C. O'Rawe (eds.), *Rural Cinema Exhibition and Audiences in a Global Context* (Cham, 2018), 187–202.

have suffered from a lack of attention both to spectatorship and to the aural/oral dimensions of the medium.<sup>5</sup> The relationship between theatre and cinema is implicit in Fleming's work, but not explored in material terms. For those authors, the subversive pleasure of films such as 'African Jim' were hidden in its soundscape. Might King Kong have offered an analogously subversive soundscape? Dovey and Impey argue that the cinema has been 'a site of transgressive pleasure in which isolated "moments"' are created through the surplus experience of an event.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps their conclusions are relevant to 'King Kong' and to wider, yet underexplored cultural spaces in early apartheid South Africa.

This critique aside, it is important to note that the story of the play itself is quite dramatic on its own. Fleming's book offers frank accounts of many of the controversies surrounding the possibly well-meaning but undoubtedly paternalistic attitude of the producers towards their Black colleagues — a view he summarises at one point as: 'seeking to harness the "natural" talent of African players with European technique and discipline' (94). There are fascinating connections, for example in the role of Adam Glaser who worked at the Empire Exhibition and who had previously worked with the controversial folklorist Hugh Tracey, a figure who is currently subject to much reflective scrutiny from a new generation of scholars thinking about epistemic stubbornness of race and paternalism in African cultural production.<sup>7</sup> Whereas other scholars with a more restitutive approach might amplify the contributions of intellectuals and artists such as the composer Todd Matshikiza rather than seek to position the reader neutrally, Fleming remains objective.

In various places, the book suggests that the King Kong musical's success can be read as an indicator of multiracial futures in Black South Africa. There are other stories that might have been told, of course, including a more differentiated account of Black meaning-making and aesthetics, that Fleming does not explore. Yet there is much to be said for the book's dogged focus on the King Kong production and its context: Fleming provides detail not seen in such a way about culture, about the creating of art under apartheid, and about the historical context in which artists work and through which we must make sense of their work. That is itself a significant accomplishment.

<sup>5</sup>L. Dovey and A. Impey, 'African Jim: sound, politics, and pleasure in early "Black" South African cinema', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 22:1 (2010), 57–73.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example: G. Felber, 'Tracing tribe: Hugh Tracey and the cultural politics of retribalisation', *SAMUS: South African Music Studies*, 30–1:1 (2010), 31–43; L. Gimenez Amoros, *Tracing the Mbira Sound Archive in Zimbabwe* (London, 2018).