

Apartheid

"[South Africa's] present policies are anti-Christian, inhuman, and—suicidal. It has deliberately thrown away chance after chance. Those who love that country of immense potential pray that it may come to its senses while there is still time."

—Rt. Rev. Joost de Blank,
former Archbishop of Cape Town (1964)

Though *Valley Song* takes place in the present, knowledge of South Africa's past practices and policies is important to understand the play. Apartheid came from the early Dutch settlers of South Africa. They believed in "baasskop," translated as "bosshead," which meant white domination. But what the whites desired was an increased degree of separation of races, so in 1948 apartheid (separation) became the government's official policy as well as philosophy.

Before 1994, of the many divisions in South Africa, race was the most important, followed by language differences within a racial group. The government determined that there were four racial groups: white, Bantu, Coloured and Asian.

1. The "whites" refer to the European immigrants, originally Dutch, French, German and English for the most part. With a population of 4.5 million, the whites, until 1994, held the economic and political power in South Africa. The descendants of Dutch, French and German Huguenot settlers called themselves Afrikaners and their language is Afrikaans, a sort of simplified Dutch.

2. The word "Bantu" has a precise anthropological meaning referring to a large group of people speaking related languages, but the word refers to the black population, numbering about 23 million. Under apartheid, blacks made a living by working a white man's farm, toiling in the mines, or doing menial work in the cities while they lived outside in the townships.

3. The "Coloured" people, numbering about 2.8 million, are descendants of the indigenous Hottentots, of slaves imported from Southeast Asia and Madagascar, and of whites—an embarrassing fact in a country where racial purity was an ideology. Coloureds have historically aligned themselves with the whites, though they have not enjoyed full privileges. As the blacks sought their rights, many Coloured joined in their struggle.

4. The Asian population of about 800,000 is descended from Indians brought to the country as indentured laborers. Because of a trade agreement, however, Japanese were considered honorary whites.

Throughout history, the white Afrikaners have been united against a perceived enemy—first the English "liberalism" and then the black "communism." They looked to each other for support and security; as a result, they turned inward and became isolated because of their obsession with ethnic purity. Thus, they were defensive about world opinion and saw their mission as God's will.

The bedrock of apartheid began with the Immorality Act of 1927. The mixing of races was forbidden; one could be forgiven for almost anything but diluting the pure racial strain. In 1948, the concept of apartheid was elevated to a systematic governmental policy. Certain statutes were passed that affected all races, but especially the blacks. Among them was the Group Areas Act, which declared certain areas for use by a particular race. In the vast majority of cases, the whites remained secure in their homes while everyone else was uprooted. Finally, blacks could only live in townships if they were working in the nearby city.

In 1952, the Pass Laws went into effect. All blacks, age 16 and over, were required to carry a reference book, nicknamed a "dom-pass." It contained an individual's identity number, employment history, permission to be at particular sites and information on taxes paid. An employer had to sign the book monthly and no black could leave one job for another without a discharge signature. The Pass Laws allowed the police to stop any black at any time and the result was often disastrous. Black resistance in South Africa was often synonymous with opposition to Pass Laws.

In addition, other security laws crippled the opposition. The Suppression of Communism Act (1950) was used to outlaw the African National Congress (ANC). The Riotous Assemblies Act (1956), the Unlawful Organization Act (1960), the Terrorism Act (1967) and the Internal Security Act (1976) were

used by the government to control persons it thought would promote hostility between races.

South Africa provides both the setting and raw materials for most of Fugard's writing. His early plays focused on township life; later plays touch upon the effects of particular apartheid laws. Only in his last three plays, including *Valley Song*, does Fugard look to the future with some hope. ■

"Life can only be understood backward; but it must be lived forward."

—Soren Kierkegaard, philosopher



A black South African displays the hated passbook.