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### Identity in Motion: *Woza Albert!*

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#### Abstract

This article aims at showing how Mtwa, Ngema, and Simon's play *Woza Albert* (1981) presents identity as performative, not fixed and static. I argue that the play helps deconstruct the idea that identity is given. As the contact with oppression generates different reactions and, therefore, different possibilities and multiple layers of identity, this play offers new alternatives for understanding Black identity rather than racialized categories of black and white. These alternatives are achieved through dramatic actions as well as through the existential transformational moments that take place throughout the performance. The play emphasizes the idea that there is a possibility for the Black identity to exist beyond racist categories through highlighting the importance of being human and achieving oneself. Therefore, the play profoundly presents socio-political and racial-existential dimensions that help concretize and universalize Black identity.

**Keywords:** *Woza Albert*, performativity, identity construction, Blackness, Apartheid

#### 1. Introduction and Review of Related Literature

In 1981, *Woza Albert!* came into being through a kind of collaboration between Blackness and whiteness. It is a workshop play devised by two black-skinned South African playwrights, actors, singers, and dancers Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema in collaboration with their white friend Barney Simon, the director of the Market Theater. The creative process of the play itself was a process of constructing a new identity beyond segregation and racist separation. Mtwa, Ngema, and Simon have reiterated in their introduction to the written version of the play that the idea behind this process was to collaborate with "Barney Simon, Artistic Director of the Market Theatre . . . because of his extensive experience in Black and non-racial theatre and because of the work that he had done in the creation of texts with actors" (2009, p. V). They wanted to defy the racist construction of identity based on skin color. In addition, it is noteworthy to highlight that *Woza Albert!*, through its anti-racist message, was able to transcend its locality toward its universality. It has been performed in several places around the world such as in Britain and the United States. Ron Jenkins has pointed out,

Woza Albert went on a successful world tour that launched the international careers of its creators, Percy Mrwa, Mbongeni Ngema, and Barney Simon. The original version of the play ran until 1985 and was revived in 1990 by Peter Brook's Paris-based company, which performed it around the world yet again. (2003, p. 253)

*Woza Albert!* incurred a critical response in London due to caricaturing the white authorities. It presented a counter response against stereotyping Blacks as savages through its comic depiction of the savagery of the whites. With its politically charged message, the play, along with other plays by Mtwa and Ngema, was able to stir its audience against the Apartheid system. It had a great influence on abrogating many racist laws implemented against South African blacks as what happened when it was performed in New York (Jenkins, 2003, p. 253). However, throughout its world reproductions, significant changes were made to the original production premiered at Market Theatre in 1981 in order to fit other contexts. For example, the play's cast was replaced by white actors in its 2010 adaptation by Robert Volker in *Woza Andreies?* that addressed the situation in South Africa's post-Apartheid era.

Regardless of how it was produced, *Woza Albert!* is a one-act play with twenty-six scenes and it is set in the South African city of Johannesburg. The two-actor play criticizes Apartheid in South Africa and, therefore, is generally considered a protest play. In the original production, the two-black-skinned actors, Percy and Mbongeni, performed multiple roles of both white and black characters. Throughout the performance, when an actor puts on a little clown-like, pink nose, he is transformed into a white character.

The performance begins as Percy and Mbongeni enter singing and playing the role of a jazz band in one of Johannesburg's streets. When the music ends, the actors play the role of the audience and applaud widely. Immediately, Percy puts on his pink nose and changes his role into a white cop. This white cop questions Mbongeni about his work pass, and it is revealed that Mbongeni has not been working for four years and he does not live in the specified place written on his pass. The situation ends as the two actors turn out to be black prisoners. The performance subsequently details the ill treatments of the discrimination policies applied against South African blacks in the marketplace, in terms of wages, and in regard to the restrictions imposed on their social and political freedom. To give the play multiple existential layers, the play draws on the Biblical story of Christ's Second Coming (named as Morena in the play) and dramatizes it in South Africa. Consequently, the scenes center around the idea of what happens if Christ's second coming takes place in South Africa and how blacks and white authorities would respond to such an event. Throughout several scenes, one of the actors plays the role of a white interviewer while the other one plays different roles of black people in streets such as a barber, a poor woman, and street meat vendor, to name but a few. They interview poor black people, asking them about their hopes and wishes regarding Morena's second coming.

When Morena (Christ) arrives in Johannesburg, he sides with South African blacks as they represent the oppressed. As a result, Morena is attacked and chased by the police as a charlatan and fraud, a false Christ. He is imprisoned for a while, but eventually freed. By the end of the play, Mbongeni goes to the cemetery and finds Morena there (Percy playing the role of Morena) and asks him to resurrect the martyrs of the anti-Apartheid movement. Both of them start shouting *Woza Albert!*, meaning "Rise, Albert!", naming several patriotic black heroes from history: Alber Luthuli, Robert Sobukwe, Bram Fischer, Lilian Ngoyi, Steve Biko, and Ruth first. The play ends as they both dance in ecstasy. Through its theatricality, *Woza Albert* shows the false assumptions upon which racialized identity is built. The play confirms that identity is performative and constructed

rather than given. Similarly, performances of *Woza Albert!* provide a new dimension of understanding Black identity. The play was created as a reaction against the separatist notion of Apartheid.

## 2. Discussion

*Woza Albert!* deconstructs several barriers that model identity construction. It shakes the audience through the characters' multiple existential transformations throughout the show. The actors only use a few props such as a pink nose, wooden plank, old ropes, and minimal ragged costumes to perform multiple roles by a single actor. They also depend on their body gestures, and their talents to criticize racism and to challenge human misery through laughter. In "South African Political Clowning: Laughter and Resistance to Apartheid," Ron Jenkins has argued, "The nation's sense of humor helps subvert the forces of oppression and nourish a nascent hunger for freedom. In the tumultuous political landscape of South African society, defiant laughter is the birth cry of democracy" (1998, p. 426). By having two black actors performing black and white roles, the play presents multiple possibilities of understanding identity.

The focus on the idea of identity formation and on the notion that identity is constructed is emphasized at the beginning of the play in a very aesthetic, creative way. The two actors are introduced to the audience in a highly symbolic way as they enter the stage without shirts. It reveals that their racialized identity is to be challenged. In addition to showing the poor situation of South African blacks, the play stresses the notion that the characters' suppressed identities under the Apartheid system become "naked" and "worn out" like the ragged clothes hung on the clothes rail at the back of the stage.

The two bare-chested black actors enter and sit on the tea-chest in the middle of the stage. The light dims and when the first notes of their jazz music are heard, the light comes up, bringing their half-naked black bodies into focus. This dramatic moment emphasizes how racism strips them off their identity as human beings. Their bodies become both a sign of the distorted racialized identity and as a sign of suffering. Ron Jenkins has pointed out,

*Woza Albert!* was created during a time when censorship laws in South Africa were tightly enforced. Black people had no opportunity to see their suffering portrayed realistically in films, television, or newspapers. The play's gritty comic realism fulfilled their hunger to see the hypocrisy of white authorities publicly unmasked. (2003, pp. 256-257)

At the beginning of the play, the audience sees that these characters are at ease; they sing, dance, and play. This idea is supported by the fact that the whole stage is lit by house lights. The spectators see Percy squat between Mbongeni's legs on the tea-chest, suggesting how simple and close they are to each other in their domestic sphere singing and dancing. Suggestively, they do not wait for the audience to applaud their music; they themselves change their role to be their own audience and applaud widely. The idea of applauding for their own performance indicates that the whole performance is about deconstructing the fixity of identity. Unlike the traditional theater that assigns certain roles to actors, these two actors change the theatrical habits and intend to change identity from being given and fixed to the idea of being performative and fluid. The actors play both spectators and the spectated, the observer and the observed, the subject and the object, which is therefore an invitation for the spectators to join them in their applause and the idea behind the whole performance. Furthermore, playing the role of the audience shortens the distance between the actors on the stage and the audience, making their performance a public stance.

To achieve the idea of identity in motion, the play shifts the actors' roles and identity smoothly and in a highly theatrical way. While Percy and Mbongeni are applauding, Percy hides behind the clothes rail and comes back with pink nose and police cap, transforming his identity both visually and somatically from a black musician into a white policeman. Significantly, the clothes rail does not conceal Percy's body when he goes behind it nor does the pink nose or the police cap. This is meant to expose the vanity and constructedness of the racialized signs to the audience as the spectators observe the actor's transformation process. Interestingly, Percy comes back while he is still applauding and celebrating with Mbongeni, which perplexes Mbongeni and makes him stop applauding. Percy's transformation that takes place under the audience's gaze and through their joint applause implies a critique against racism symbolized by the audience's gaze that identifies these "black" bodies as "black." This idea is emphasized by the kind of music that the actors played in the original production of the play—Hugh Masekela's music, which reminds the audience of the dominant racist policies of Apartheid. This specific kind of music links the domestic with the public, the inside with the outside. Jenkins argues that their song is satirical, "reminding people of the apartheid laws that forced Masekela to go into exile to find the freedom to play his music without harassment, and telling the story of black workers taken from their homes to work for slave wages in the gold mines of Johannesburg" (2003, p. 245). Percy shocks Mbongeni, as well as the audience who joins their applause, with his first question about Mbongeni's passbook: "Hey! Beautiful audience, hey? Beautiful musician, né? Okay, now let's see how beautiful his pass-book is! (*To appalled Mbongeni:*) Your pass!" (p. 1). Percy's question, as a white cop, changes Mbongeni's identity from a musician and friend into a stranger while both characters are still in the same place. Performed along with Masekela's music, the situation is transformed from being domestic to being public and universal, emphasized by Percy's, the white cop, address to the audience by "Beautiful audience." Racism deforms their relationship and their identities by such dehumanizing regulations as that of the passbook. In "The Politics of Black Identity in Slave Ship and Woza Albert," Francis Ngaboh-Smart (1999) argues,

Through a piece of paper the identity of blacks is packed by the system; they become faceless and anonymous, and hardly exist as human beings. It is against this anonymity, this perverted reality, the play enacts its rancour when, for example, it allows Mbongeni to shout angrily: 'We are not pieces of paper, man! We are men.' (p. 178)

In addition, Percy's transformation into a white cop also shocks the audience as it makes them question how far racism and Apartheid have broadened the gap between human beings. As the audience presumably joins Percy and Mbongeni in applauding, the audience also experiences the estrangement that Mbongeni experiences when Percy asks Mbongeni about his passbook. They are able to recognize that the very small mask, the red nose and cap, that Percy uses grants him the false right to restrict his fellow man's existence in Johannesburg. Tacitly, Percy reminds the audience that they are watching a play and they are watching actors: "You work here? If you worked here your passbook would be written 'Market Theatre, Johannesburg. But look, it is written 'Kentucky Southern Fried'" (p. 3). Consequently, this gives the audience the opportunity to recognize the false assumptions woven around the racialized identity and white supremacy as they recognize that the white cop himself is an actor performing whiteness and blackness. The situation makes the audience see how identity is performative rather than fixed. In a very short time, Percy and Mbongeni have turned into a master and a slave; the same persons who have just been singing and playing a while ago.

The process of questioning Mbongeni about his work history and his place of living makes Mbongeni degrade from being a human being to a vagrant to a kaffir to a baboon: “This is vagrancy. You’re unemployed. . . . Back to the bush with the baboons. That’s where you belong” (p. 5). On the other hand, the questioning makes Percy raise rank to a white policeman. Each time Percy asks Mbongeni a question, Mbongeni chooses a new higher title to address Percy. It starts with my boss, lieutenant, captain, colonel, and ends with a president: “I work here my Captain. . . . No my Colonel, I am a guitarist, I’ve been playing music for five years, my boss” (p. 4). This moment shows how huge the gap between these two fellows becomes just in a very short time. Moreover, it reveals how racism widens the distances between these two characters by establishing false measures and signifiers. Exchanging such racist terminologies between Mbongeni and Percy reveals how fluid such terminologies are and how they are void of any ontological essence. The racist lexicon that the white cop uses to describe Mbongeni is associated with the racist policy that restricts people’s freedom and the mobility of identity. The freedom of moving is called vagrancy by the racist white cop and the person should be put in prison and sent back to live with baboons as the white cop tells Mbongeni. The white cop addresses the audience, “Do you know about Section 29? That is a nice little law specially made for loafers like him. And I’ve got a nice little place waiting for him in Modder-B Prison” (p. 1). The white cop’s address to the audience conveys the play’s universal collective message. It intends to generate a world consciousness against oppression and racism. Ron Jenkins explains, “A large part of black struggle for political power in South Africa waged in the arena of international public opinion, and popular comedies like *Woza Alber!* have played a role in exposing the injustices of the apartheid system to the outside world” (2003, p. 256). Furthermore, the actors make the white audiences aware of their status as oppressors and witness their follies on stage. That is, the audience becomes “the very symbol of apartheid that the characters are condemning” (Ojo-Ade, 1996, p. 73).

Through multiple transformational processes, every situation and every scene in the play push the characters’ identities forward, emphasizing the idea of identity in motion through various theatrical techniques. In the same way, after exchanging racist terminology, the scene shifts Percy and Mbongeni’s identities to prisoners. In a perverted environment, life becomes a prison where they are the prisoners and guards at the same time. For example, Mbongeni performs the role of the guard giving orders, “Modder-B Prison . . . Prisoners – line up! Body Inspection” (p. 5). It is the body, as a racialized sign, over which racism practices its power and it is the skin color that black-skinned people are confined in. The audience sees that Mbongeni’s character is fluidly transformed from a vagrant, to a baboon, and then to a prisoner. These are the natural places for blacks in the racist world. The white cop tells Mbongeni, “Back to the bush with the baboon. That is where you belong!” (p. 5). The scene ends as the white cop chases Mbongeni behind the clothes rail. The clothes rail serves as a transparent screen behind which the actors hide and through which Percy and Mbongeni transform their identities.

By the end of the fourth scene, Mbongeni and Percy quarrel about the taste of food while in prison. As Mbongeni pushes Percy to the ground, Percy shouts and his scream is turned into a siren and, in turn, the siren “transforms into train sounds,” (p. 10) which makes the transition to scene five. In this scene, we see both Mbongeni and Percy sitting on the box as if they were on a train. Linking the scenes in such a way leaves the audience blurred in a micro-world based on transformations such as transforming Percy’s scream into a train sound. It can be said that the performance stresses the idea that identity is not fixed as the spectators become aware of the scenes’ motion. Suggestively, Percy reads a passage from the Bible that he is holding,

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for there is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are ye when men shall revile ye and persecute ye and shall send all manner of evil against ye falsely, for thy sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad for great is the reward of heaven. (p. 12)

Percy's sermon reminds the audience of the main theme of the play in the realm of these multiple transformational processes. That is, both characters are revolting against oppression and against the fixation of black identity and ascribing it to skin color. It is a moment of *fluid collectivity* that serves as an invitation for every oppressed person—those who suffer racial oppression, from poverty, religious bias, and colonization, etc.—to share with them the same identity. *Woza Albert*'s actors play with Blackness and whiteness; it becomes like a game of breaking identity limitations. In addition to protesting against the Apartheid policy in South Africa, the existential socio-political dimensions of the play, through mimicry and humorous moments during the performance, help break down the detachment between Blackness and whiteness. Also, it defies the assumption that the body and skin color are the only signs of Black identity.

As *Woza Albert!* challenges the racist construction of identity, it also dramatizes the fluidity of Black identity to encompass other oppressed people. Throughout the performance, the play touches on sundry issues of Black themes such as unemployment, poverty, and equity among social classes. In fact, such themes transcend the restrictions of the classical binaries of black vs. white to a more universal appeal. It enlarges the space of Black existence by moving from the domestic sphere to the public sphere. This becomes clear in the interviews that Percy and Mbongeni perform about the possibility of Morena's appearance in South Africa. Different people from different social sects are interviewed in streets such as the barber, the street meat vendor, the boy, and the poor woman. This adds authenticity to the reality of the Black suffering not only in South Africa, but the suffering of all Black people in the world. In "Ridiculing Racism in South Africa," Ron Jenkins points out that these interviews were based on actual interviews rendered by Mtwana and Ngema during their preparation for writing the play. This authenticity, Jenkins has reiterated, "resulted in rapt audience attention wherever the play was presented in black townships" (2003, p. 256). All of these people express their hope for the end of racism and for collective freedom and welfare. For example, the barber says, "I want him to build me a barbershop in a very big shopping center in Johannesburg" (p. 22). The multiple kinds of oppression the play touches on make it clear that the performance derives its universality from the context in which it is performed. It enables other people outside South Africa to see themselves in the performance.

Consequently, the play should not be seen merely and exclusively against Apartheid per se, but it is a committed play against iniquity, against racism, oppression, and colonialism. Therefore, Percy and Mbongeni's transformation of identity is not restricted to skin color, but it also includes transformational processes among a variety of social groups of the underprivileged. For example, in the ninth scene, Percy transforms into a street meat vendor. Percy is asked by an invisible interviewer about his wishes regarding Morena's visit to South Africa. He responds by stating that he wishes Morena will bring him good luck so that people will buy all of his meat. Spectators see Percy, the street meat vendor, holding two newspapers; one he chases flies with and the other he uses to protect his head from sunrays. The situation shows how such poor people are not interested in news and politics as much as they are concerned with their basic needs such as food and shelter. This issue is more important to them than any other thing. The racialized identity dissolves in these transformational processes from racial issues to issues of poverty and hunger caused by racist ideologies.

Similarly, in scene ten, Mbongeni transforms into a very poor woman who is searching for food in garbage bins. Her wishes about Morena's second coming are that people will have a lot of food and they make a lot of parties, so she can find more food in garbage bins as the rich will have much leftovers to throw away. The poor woman stands for millions of people who feed on crumbs remaining from the rich's tables. Here identity not only travels among social sects, but also becomes fluid and travels through the history of oppression, suggesting that oppression has no specific identity. The woman emphasizes by the end of her speech that she longs for "all the nice things white people eat. Huh?" (p. 19). Interestingly, to emphasize the transformation of identity and collectivity, the same shawl this poor Black woman carries to collect food from the garbage bins becomes the same sheet that the barber, Percy, uses in scene eleven.

The argument against the fixation of identity is also highlighted in scene fifteen. In this scene, Mbongeni plays the role of the interviewer who interviews the false Morena. The interviewer asks the false Morena several questions concerning the reason behind choosing South Africa for his landing. As Morena is astonished by such questions, it is revealed to Mbongeni that this is not the true Morena. Morena in this scene is depicted as a white man wearing sunglasses. The fact that Mbongeni is unable to recognize the false Morena—although he is presented as a white-skinned man—suggests that Morena, as a savior, could be any person irrespective of his / her skin color. By the end of the interview, Mbongeni and the false Morena join together in their search for the true savior—the true Morena.

The fluidity of identity is also directed toward the audience. The audience is engaged in the performance and in the philosophy behind the performance. In "The Politics of Black Identity in *Slave Ship* and *Woza Albert!*," Francis Ngaboh-Smart argues,

The slenderness of the cast allows the actors to augment their numbers by co-opting the audience, which is probably why most of the action takes place in the community, or among the peasants and workers. By thus soliciting the involvement of the audience, the play can, and does in fact, vividly appropriate images of township existence. This makes the performance partly the creation of those who confront the harrowing environment. The method, as it were, ensures that *Woza Albert!* not only stages its strategy of political intervention, but that it also gives scope to the people to dramatize the power of the state so that they feel its implication for their existence. (1999, p. 181)

That is, it gives the audience the scope to reflect on their own situation and identity, on the one hand, and through addressing the audience the play achieves its *collectivity*, on the other hand.

The spectators are addressed in a gradual manner. First, the spectators' role is played by Percy and Mbongeni, but, later on, the actors address the audience directly in their search for the savior, Morena, and they are addressed in the process of raising Black heroes. In a very indicative moment in scene sixteen, Mbongeni claims that he sees Morena, pointing at the audience. It indicates that everyone, Black or white, among the audience might become Morena,

Mbongeni (now totally stunned by what he is watching): Heeey. heey! Ssh man, ssh.

Percy (cautious): What?

Mbongeni (indicating the audience): Morena. . . . It's Morena—that one there with the white shirt. (p. 33)

Morena's character is figured in multiple vignette that serves multilayered existential dimensions: an imaginary Black savior, a stranger, a spectator involved in the dynamics of white and black gaze.

These characterizations show his identity in motion and build on the existential Black identity construction as not static.

In addition to presenting Morena in a comic way such as coming on a jumbo jet, Morena is not only presented as a religious figure, but he is also presented as a Black existentialist as he sides with the downtrodden. He is concerned with freeing Black people as a whole and he is concerned with achieving social, economic, and political justice. In scene twenty, Mbongeni speaks about Morena, saying, "Morena will say, I pass people sit in dust and beg for work that will buy them bread. And on the other side I see people who are living in gold and glass and whose rubbish bins are loaded with food for a thousand months" (60). Therefore, the play highlights the importance of the existential human choice made by Morena and, in turn, by the audience that is forced to acknowledge their existence through the stage and through the direct communication the actors use toward the audience. Jacques Hardré in "Sartre's Existentialism and Humanism" has reiterated that the individual is not

responsible to himself but also to the others. For when Man chooses he does so for all men, since by his choice he indicates the image he has of what all men should be. For example, if a man decides to join a certain political party, he indicates that he would like the others to do likewise, else he would not choose that party. (1952, p. 538)

On the other hand, as the stage is contingent on different degrees of censorship surrounding the performance in relation to its political and social context, it highlights the existential burden the audience shoulders to revolt against racism and oppression bearing in mind that at certain point through the performance Morena becomes one of the spectators. They might become accomplices in choosing not to revolt against discrimination. In *Being Black, Being Human*, Ojo-Ade has reiterated, "in case the audience is non-South African, they are given quick lessons on the system so that, finally, they agree with authorities that 'kaffirs can lie, hey?'" (1996, p. 73).

In addition, the play deconstructs the idea of redemption in the process of moving from wretchedness to martyrdom. In scene twenty-two, Mbongeni reveals the absurdity of waiting on Morena to make action. He addresses Morena, "But I'm getting bladdy disappointed. How long must we wait for you to do something? Morena, I must tell you, I'm among those who have stopped waiting" (p. 63). Mbongeni complains against Morena's passive situation. Consequently, Morena is not looked at as the savior for South African blacks. This is also evident by the end of the play as he goes to the cemetery to raise several black heroes to continue the struggle for liberation. Importantly, in the process of raising the dead South African Black heroes, Mbongeni points at individual spectators for Morena to raise. This suggests that the audience shoulders the responsibility to make the choice and save their people from all kinds of oppression. The process of resurrection shows the fluidity of identity as it is based on shared causes in the face of oppression. In "Proclamation and Protest: The Lost Sons," Boesak (1985) has argued,

Behind the ideology of apartheid is the theology of apartheid . . . Afrikaners . . . believe that they are the chosen people of God, that whites in some special way have a divine right to rule, and that their overprivileged position is somehow God's will ... The truth of the gospel cuts through this propaganda. It is liberating for black South Africans to discover that the message of the Bible is that God is the God of the poor, that He is on the side of the oppressed. (pp. 76-77)

The deconstruction of Morena's theological power makes him be seen as one of the community. It is the idea of untying the theologian ties toward humanistic bonds. He is recognized by Mbongeni



(Zuluboy) as a friend by the end of the play (p. 73). He represents community's hope of unity and freedom. In "Ridiculing Racism in South Africa," Ron Jenkins argues, "The political comedies of South Africa end on a note of hope for the future rather than despair over the past" (2003, p. 256). Therefore, "Woza Albert" is the outcry of Black people rather than Morena's.

### 3. Conclusion

To conclude, the play presents multiple possibilities of identity. Through presenting identity in motion performed by just two black-skinned actors, the play challenges the racist construction of identity, which assumes that identity is static and fixed. Throughout the performance, it becomes so easy for the actors to change their identities from Blackness to whiteness and vice versa, deconstructing the false detachment between Blackness and whiteness. The play hypothesizes that identity is performative and not fixed. Just by putting on a pink-bubble nose, the actors are transformed into whites, on the one hand, and removing the pink nose enables them to perform several Black roles, on the other hand. Indeed, presenting white characters in a comic way generates laughter. In turn, laughing together generates the desire of equality and the need to transcend segregation and the racialized identity toward a larger Black *self*. In addition, the play touches on universal Black themes such as racism and racist regulations which lead to disfranchising the oppressed.

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