

John Kani's *Kunene and the King* is a triumph and a privilege

 By [Terry Levin](#)

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Following the 2019 premiere at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, *Kunene and the King* opened in Cape Town at the Fugard Theatre on 30 April 2019.

Multi-talented and awarded South African actor and playwright John Kani has forged an iconic piece of South African theatre to compare with his former personal achievements, notably, *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* and the *Island*, both co-authored by theatre namesake Athol Fugard and Winston Ntosh.



Delight and unite theatrical audiences

A key underlying theme and successful device of *Kunene and the King* could be said to be how a love and appreciation of the universal genius of the works of William Shakespeare succeed not only in uniting the two diverse protagonists of the play but also in guaranteed to delight and unite theatrical audiences anywhere.



The centre-stage presence, in the form of a bust of the Bard himself, acts as a kind of unifying entity between the two characters – Lunga Kunene, a black male nurse played by Kani and his charge, Jack Morris a Shakespearian actor suffering from the final stages of terminal cancer, played by another proudly SA expat export Sir Anthony Sher. Kani and Sher last performed together as Prospero and Caliban in the 2009 production of *The Tempest*, which, under the direction of theatrical stalwart Janice Honeyman, took the world by storm. In *Kunene and the King*, Honeyman's hand, once again, seamlessly allows these great talents to shine.



To see actors of this range playing characters, polarised as they are by their inevitable South African realities, who are still able to extract humour and common ground by reciting *King Lear* and other Shakespearian works is a rare treat. The delivery of Shakspeare's *Julius Caesar* as translated by Xhosa academic WB Mdllele into the South African vernacular is a highlight that will stay with audiences for a long time.

Another classic in the South African miscellany

The above scenarios allow the actors to explore their life stories, personal issues and relationships as two distinguished middle-aged gentlemen, separated by history, politics and economic opportunity, but united in a contemporary context complete with capture, crime, corruption and erstwhile degrees of truth and reconciliation.



Kani's script reveals many of the aspects of the South African history that local audiences know only too well, played out in new literary iterations which serve to showcase the best and worst of our national identity with all its subtexts of racial co-dependency and simmering resentments. Apart from the excellence of the performances, the work is ultimately resolved by a heart-rending twist, laugh-out-loud humour, cultural nuance and academic rigour that will likely see it become another classic in the South African miscellany.



All things considered, *Kunene and the King* is a triumph and a privilege. The opportunity to watch actors of this stature as comfortable and easy with each other as a pair of velveteen slippers, should not be missed.

Kunene and the King runs at The Fugard Theatre from 30 April 2019, Tuesday to Saturdays at 8pm with matinees on Saturdays and Sundays at 3pm. Tickets from R190 to R340. Bookings at The Fugard Theatre box office, 021 461 4554 or www.thefugard.com.

Photography by Claude Barnardo

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