

Drama: Sophiatown

GENRE: Drama

TITLE: SOPHIATOWN

DIRECTOR: Malcolm Purkey

PLOT SUMMARY

'Sophiatown' is a play about the people who live at 65 Gerty Street, Sophiatown, in the 1950s and the forced removals that took place during this time. It is a musical (a play with singing and dancing) and has songs throughout the play to make important points about the story. The main character is Jakes. He is also the narrator of the play. He opens and closes the play and tells us about events at certain points of the play.

Jakes is a young black journalist who writes stories for 'Drum' magazine. He rents a room in a house which is also a shebeen. Mamariti owns the house and the shebeen. Her 16-year-old daughter, Lulu, lives with her. Mamariti's son, Mingus, is a gangster, and lives close by in Toby Street. With Jakes's help, Mingus starts a relationship with a girl called Princess and brings her to live in the house in Gerty Street. Mingus's sidekick (companion who is of a lower status), is Charlie. He does whatever Mingus tells him to do. Fahfee lives in a shack in Toby Street. He is a frequent visitor to the house. He works for a Chinese man who runs the gambling game called fahfee. This is why he is called Fahfee. Fahfee is also a member of the organisation, The Transvaal Congress, which is active in resisting the government.

Act 1, Scene 1, begins with the characters on stage singing a song about refusing to move from Sophiatown. Jakes acts as a narrator telling us about Sophiatown – the famous places and the famous people – and how he came to be living at 65 Gerty Street. He mentions that

the government does not like Sophiatown because it is a mixed-race area. The government believed that races should live separately from each other.

Jakes works as a writer. He writes about boxing for 'Drum' magazine. He wants to get a promotion for writing an interesting story, so he makes a deal with Mingus. Mingus will tell Jakes about what he does with his gang, The Americans, so that Jakes can write a story about them. In return, Jakes agrees to write a love letter for Mingus to a girl called Princess. Mingus tells Jakes what to put in the love letter to Princess. Mingus wants to impress Princess. Mingus tells Jakes to write about Mingus's fancy clothes and all of the fancy places he will take Princess. But Mingus also shows himself to be a demanding person. He wants Princess to come to the house at six o'clock and says she must not be late. While Jakes and Mingus are talking, Charlie keeps trying to clean Mingus's shoes. This shows his submissive position (Charlie does anything Mingus asks him to do). Fahfee arrives at the house and reports the latest news about the plans to resist the forced removals. Fahfee tells Jakes that he should write about these plans to resist. Jakes says his job is to write about boxing, but he is hoping to get a promotion soon. The four men close the scene by singing about Princess, love, Sophiatown and moonlight. This symbolises hope for the future at this point of the play.

Jakes has put an advert in 'Drum' magazine asking for a Jewish (white) girl to live with him and the others in the house. He thinks this will make an interesting story for him to write about (and may get him the promotion he wants).

In Act 1, Scene 2, Ruth Golden, a white Jewish girl from Yeoville (a suburb east of Johannesburg's city centre), arrives at the door, ready to move in. She says she saw the advert and she wants to know what life in Sophiatown is like. At first, many of the other

characters are uneasy (worried) because of the segregation laws. However, Mamariti lets Ruth stay because she will pay a lot of money for rent. Ruth also says she will help Lulu, Mamariti's daughter, with her school work. Finally, because she is white, Ruth can buy alcohol, which Mamariti can sell in her shebeen. Princess, who has also moved into the house, is not happy to have Ruth there and calls her a 'moegoe' (stupid). Ruth believes she will have a room to herself and a place to bath. She soon finds out she will have to share a room and probably a bed. There is no bath. Mingus immediately sends Charlie to find a bath for Ruth. The scene ends with the characters singing a song about women and relationships.

In Act 1, Scene 3, Lulu, Jakes, Mamariti and Fahfee watch Princess and Mingus argue about Ruth being in the house. Princess is jealous of the attention Mingus is paying Ruth (because he wants to impress Ruth). Jakes wants Ruth to stay because a white person staying in a mixed area like Sophiatown will be a popular story which will really interest his readers. Mingus wants Ruth to stay because Ruth will help Lulu (his sister) with her school work. He hopes Lulu will be an educated person like Jakes. Ruth comes into the room. She says she is tired because the barking dogs keep her awake. Charlie comes into the house. Mingus tells Charlie to stay outside at night and to kill the dogs if they bark. Charlie tells Mingus to come outside. He shows Mingus the bathtub he has found for Ruth. Mingus gets all the other men to help bring it into the house for Ruth to use. However, Ruth will not use it because she wants to be like everyone else. At the end of the scene, the characters sing another song about their love for Sophiatown and the threat of being removed. Jakes closes the scene by becoming the narrator. He tells the audience that the bath ends up being used to brew beer, and that Ruth seems like part of the family. He talks about planning his big story to publish in the magazine. Lastly, he says that the characters have decided to teach Ruth how to fit into Sophiatown.

Act 1, Scene 4 begins with Fahfee, Mingus, and Jakes teaching Ruth some of the customs and ways to speak in Sophiatown. They teach her some words in 'Tsotsitaal'. They also teach her about the fahfee numbers – that different numbers have different meanings. The numbers tell you different things about what will happen in the future. Ruth is learning slowly. Ruth feels frustrated when she cannot remember something. She talks about going back to Yeoville, but Fahfee tells her she is giving up. Mingus tells her she is ungrateful after everyone in the house has made her feel welcome.

Fahfee and Jakes encourage her to stay. The characters discuss their identities. Ruth speaks about being Jewish, white, South African and a Democrat. She also says she is confused. This shows she is still searching for an identity. Jakes explains that he speaks many languages. Jakes is angry that the government wants to move everyone to separate locations based on their racial identities. Jakes explains that identity is more complicated than just racial identity. He argues that one part of a person's identity should not decide where she or he lives. He is voicing his protest against the segregation that is coming.

In this scene, we also see another side of Mingus. We see that he can be violent and aggressive towards women. Mingus tells the other characters that he hit Princess until she loved him. Ruth is shocked. Mingus also gets aggressive towards Ruth. Mingus takes hold of Ruth to dance with her. As they dance, Mingus starts to scare Ruth by getting too close to her. When she moves away from him, he chases her around the room and she runs behind Jakes. The scene ends with Mingus yelling at Ruth that she must learn or go back to Yeoville. He is angry that she has rejected (said no to) his advances on her.

Act 1, Scene 5 is very short. Only Ruth is on stage. She is trying to remember the meanings of the fahfee numbers. This symbolises that she is trying to understand the predictions that

say trouble is coming to Sophiatown. This foreshadows (tells us) the trouble that is coming. The audience is reminded that the forced removals did happen. There cannot be another ending to the play.

In Act 1 Scene 6, we see Ruth trying to help Lulu with an essay for school. Lulu must write about her family. Lulu writes that her brother is a gangster and that her mother brews beer. Lulu writes about them in a critical way, because she does not like what either of them does. Ruth tries to help Lulu see that there is a different way to look at things. Mingus pays for her school fees, and her mother also works hard brewing beer, to support her family. Whilst they are talking, Mingus and Princess come back from the movies. They do not see that Ruth and Lulu are there and they act out a scene from the movie 'Street With No Name'. Then Jakes comes into the room. Lulu shows herself and laughs at Mingus and Princess. Mingus is annoyed.

At this point, Fahfee arrives and is upset. He is talking about the meanings of the fahfee numbers. He has dreamed of bees, the number 26, and also the number 27. He explains that this means dogs, policeman and trouble. He also says that he dreamed of the number 8, which is the pig, or as he says, the white man. This is important to the play as it foreshadows trouble (tells us that trouble is coming). Then, Fahfee shares the date that the forced removals are set to happen. He tells all the characters that black residents must move to Meadowlands on the 12th of February. The police will start with Toby Street. (We, as the audience, know that this was part of the Native Resettlement Act of 1954).

No one wants to move to Meadowlands. Fahfee talks about how his family has been in Sophiatown since 1924 and explains that he will lose his job if he is separated from his Chinese boss.

Everything that Sophiatown stands for – a way of different cultures coming together – will be lost. Fahfee announces that The Congress is going to resist. In a moment of anger Mingus turns on Ruth and blames her. He tells her to go back to Yeoville. The scene ends with the cast singing the song 'Meadowlands' to show defiance. In the song, they say they will not go to Meadowlands. In this scene, we have a strong sense that trouble is coming to Sophiatown.

In Act 1, Scene 7, Jakes publishes the story of Ruth living with them. He has made up many of the details. He includes all the characters from the play in his story. They have a party to celebrate and sing a song of celebration, which gets quite noisy. Ruth gets some homemade Jewish wine (Jewish people drink wine and pray on Friday nights). She says a Hebrew prayer. It is the only Hebrew she knows. The characters then have a conversation about Passover. They discuss the story in the bible about Passover. In that story, God's angel of death passed over the homes of the Jews because they had placed a symbol on their doors which was a sign that the angel of death must leave them alone. The story of Passover is an allegory (a story with a hidden meaning) to show how the Egyptian oppressors were punished for keeping the Israelites (Jews) in slavery. In the play, this bible story suggests to the audience that the same thing could happen in the future to the Apartheid government. Like the Egyptian oppressors, the government will be punished for oppressing black people. Mamariti wishes there could be a sign on her door that would make the police leave them alone too. The characters discuss the similarities between the Jewish god, the Christian god and the African ancestors. Jakes talks about how Sophiatown represents a brandnew generation and that they are blessed with 'perfect confusion' (pg. 73). He means that Sophiatown is a mixed racial area and so it is like a brand-new society. He is saying that when all different people live together, without categorising themselves according to race or religion, it is a better type of society.

Mingus then surprises Ruth by giving her some stolen pearls. This makes Princess jealous. Ruth does not want to accept them at first. She changes her mind because Princess sneers at her, calling her 'too clean, too holy, too white' (pg. 76). In other words, Ruth takes the pearls in order to feel accepted by them. There is a knock on the door and Lulu has to open it. It is a notice for Mamariti, informing her that all the black inhabitants of Sophiatown will be relocated to Meadowlands. Poor Charlie believes he is going to get a house in Meadowlands, but he is coloured, so he will be left behind (coloured people were relocated to specific coloured areas in later years).

Like Act 1, Scene 1, Act 2, Scene 1 begins with a song. However, this time it is a song of defiance rather than praise. The characters storm onto the stage, singing. All the characters (except Ruth, because she is white) take turns to shout out something in protest against the forced removals, while the other characters sing the song. Fahfee brings news about the resistance against the forced removals. He also announces that there has been a call for a total boycott of all schools. Lulu says she will stop going to school to protest against the Bantu Education Act (this was the act which was passed by the government to give people of colour a far more inferior education than white people). Mamariti wants Lulu to keep going to school. Mamariti also wants to stay in Sophiatown in the freehold house that her husband bought, and which she now owns. Fahfee reminds everyone about the Defiance

Campaign (when the ANC told people to burn their passbooks rather than carrying them).

He encourages the other characters to actively resist. At this point, Mingus comes in looking for Princess. He tells Charlie to go and find her. Fahfee asks Mingus if he will get his gang to be part of the resistance but Mingus says no. Mingus is only interested in how he can use the situation to make money. Fahfee is disappointed in Mingus.

Charlie returns carrying Princess. Mingus wants to know where she has been, and he hits her. She tells him she has a job as a model. He tries to take off the dress he bought her, but she runs away. Later, Ruth and Jakes argue about how Mingus treats Princess. Ruth cannot understand why Princess does not leave. Jakes says that Princess does not have many choices like Ruth has. He tells Ruth that she will always be an outsider because she is white. Ruth tells him he is an outsider too, because he just watches what everyone else is doing, and never gets involved. She wants to know if Jakes will join the resistance or if he will just carry on watching from the side. He tells her that she does not understand why he does what he does. He explains that she can just go back to her old life in Yeoville if things go wrong. Therefore, nothing can really go wrong for Ruth. She accuses him of keeping himself separate from everything by making up stories and by using his writing as an excuse. She wants him to really get to know her properly.

Act 2, Scene 2, is another very short scene. Ruth is alone on the stage repeating the fahfee numbers and their meanings from 17 to 26. This again shows that trouble is coming and cannot be stopped.

The whole of Act 2, Scene 3, is a sad song about the removals and about losing Sophiatown. Jakes, Mingus, Fahfee and Charlie enter dressed in smart evening dress like the famous Manhattan Brothers (a music group). They are wearing white jackets and bowties with walking-sticks and hats pulled down low over their eyes. The four men dance and sing 'Bantu Bahlala' ('People Stay'). This song tells us that the special culture of Sophiatown will be lost with the forced removals.

In Act 2, Scene 4, Mingus comes home and finds Ruth alone at midnight. Ruth cannot sleep, and she is reading one of Jakes's stories on his typewriter. We see that she is curious about and interested in Jakes. Mingus asks Ruth to go for a ride with him. He gets angry when she says no. She avoids him and goes back to bed. He is very upset. He shouts at her

and tells her to go back to Yeoville.

In Act 2, Scene 5, Jakes starts to write about the resistance to the forced removals. Fahfee arrives with the news that his shack on Toby Street has been demolished. It is three days early (before the notice stated). By coming early, the government has prevented too much resistance. Mingus arrives with all his boxes of stolen goods. His storeroom has been demolished. Again, we see that Mingus is angry and aggressive towards Ruth, blaming her for the forced removals. (The white government is responsible for these forced removals. Mingus is angry with white people for destroying his home and community. Ruth represents the white community). Fahfee and Jakes ask Mingus what he has done to stop the removals. Mingus says he was too busy working to do anything. Fahfee needs a place to sleep, since his home has been destroyed. Mingus tells him to sleep in the bath. At the end of the scene, Princess comes in and announces that she is leaving Sophiatown. She says that she is going to live in Hillbrow (another suburb in Johannesburg) with the Dutch photographer for whom she was modelling. She says he treats her well and she has a place to stay. She leaves saying 'This Softown, it's finished' (pg. 108).

In Act 2, Scene 6, we see the characters beginning to go their separate ways. Mingus decides to move willingly to Meadowlands. He plans to make money there by selling his goods. Charlie helps Mingus to load his goods and personal belongings onto one of the removal trucks. Then Charlie goes to get his tattered suitcase. He does not realise that he cannot go with Mingus. Mingus shows some compassion (caring) when he explains to Charlie that he cannot come because only black people are allowed to live in Meadowlands – coloured people are not allowed to. Charlie is devastated. He does not know where he will sleep or work.

Ruth comes to say goodbye to Jakes. She confesses her (romantic) feelings for Jakes, but he rejects her. He says that they cannot be together because of the segregation laws. Because Ruth is white, she cannot go to Meadowlands. However, she decides not to go back to Yeoville. She feels she cannot go back to her old life after her experiences living in Sophiatown.

Act 2, Scene 7 is the final scene of the play. The cast sing sadly about leaving Sophiatown as they pack up their belongings. The bath is tipped on its side to symbolise that the residents have been tipped out of their homes. Mamariti climbs on her chair which is on top of an old tin trunk. This looks like she is climbing onto the truck that will take them to Meadowlands. Each of the characters takes a turn to speak in a monologue about what happened that day. They describe how the bulldozers and police came to move them, and their feelings about it. The only characters who do not speak are those who are not being relocated to Meadowlands – Ruth, Charlie and Princess. A flashback scene showing Charlie striking telegraph poles shows how some people tried to resist the removals, but ultimately failed. Finally, Jakes tells the audience what happened to each of the characters. Princess went to Europe with her Dutch photographer boyfriend. Mingus was sent to prison for stealing. When he came out, he was a qualified plumber. Lulu never finished her education. Fahfee disappeared and probably joined Umkhonto we Sizwe – the armed wing of the ANC. Mamariti died from a broken heart. Charlie was living in a pipe. He was stabbed and crawled to the place he felt was home. He was found dead in the rubble of the Gerty Street house. Jakes mentions that he did try to see Ruth for a while, but that it was impossible. Jakes speaks of his bitterness at what has happened. Sophiatown is cleared to make way for the white suburb, Triomf. He says he hopes that the government will pay for what it has done. He knows that it will take a long time for the people to get over this terrible event.

The cast sing 'Izinyembezi zabantu' ('Tears of the people') to conclude the play.

SETTING

The play is set in Sophiatown in 1955. The events take place in Mamariti's house at 65 Gerty Street. Her house represents all the households in Sophiatown at that time. The stage directions indicate that the backdrop of the stage should be made up of painted images from newspapers, magazines and photographs of Sophiatown at that time. This backdrop is meant to recreate what was happening at that time – celebrating the exciting cultural scene of Sophiatown and reminding us of the violent political events that took place there. The stage shows a typical living room at the time, with the basic furniture. This living space is 'cramped but comfortable, suggesting care and warmth' (pg. 2). Each character has a corner defined by his or her things. There are telegraph poles placed at different points on the set. These are attached to wires which run out over the audience, suggesting a link with the outside world.