

BOOK REVIEW

Tyler Fleming. *Opposing Apartheid on Stage: King Kong the Musical*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2020. Bibliography. \$125.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-58046-985-2

In Tyler Fleming's *Opposing Apartheid on Stage*, the reader follows two concurrent composite histories: a layered biography of the production and reception of the landmark jazz opera *King Kong*, and the life histories of boxers at the center of the theatrical productions, along with the musicians, cast, and crew, from the 1950s to the late 70s. *King Kong*, a theatrical enterprise of the musician Todd Matshikiza with lyrics by Pat Williams and Matshikiza, based on a book by Harry Bloom, follows the rise and fall of a heavyweight boxer, Ezekiel Dlamini. Fleming's exposition is an opportunity to explore the history of prize fighting, racial discrimination with the rise of apartheid, urbanization, cross-racial artistic collaborations, and exile. This is an extraordinarily rich and ambitious work, and quite unlike anything in recent African historiography.


Fleming begins his book with an incisive question: was *King Kong* a moment or movement? What he means by this is, how do we fairly historicize the inception, successes, and failures of this remarkable artistic collaboration, which triumphed in South Africa in 1959 before touring abroad and scattering its Black African cast across Europe and North America? The subject himself, Dlamani, was a momentary phenomenon. He was a fighter and gangster of but brief notoriety, albeit generously reconstructed by Fleming. Yet his legacy as a theatrical creation is profound, because as Fleming reveals, it offers an unusual, possibly unique, vehicle with which to transect the complexity of urban race relations and tentatively optimistic national self-narration even as apartheid consolidated, just prior to the horrific violence of Sharpeville that put an end to almost every form of genuinely interracial collaboration. While Fleming himself does not definitively answer his own question (and there is no epilogue or conclusion), the book strongly suggests the latter is a more accurate description, not the least because it spawned quintessentially South African Black Atlantic jazz genres by launching the careers of Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Jonas Gwangwa, and others.

King Kong was the first entirely South African musical theater based on an unequivocally South African story, featuring an all-Black cast steeped in South African jazz genres, such as *marabi*, *kwela*, and *mbaqanga*. When it premiered in Johannesburg, it was before an integrated audience, and as it toured the nation, it captivated the country, instilling a curious national pride that appeared to transcend the gaping racial divide. It was the hottest ticket in town, despite the fact that by centering on a story of urban decay, violence, sex, alcohol, and crime it seemingly embodied the worst fears of South Africa's racist White minority government. Fleming's meticulous research involved scouring public, private, and personal archival collections for reviews, newspapers, correspondence, audio and visual recordings, published memoirs and biographies, and interviews. For Fleming, *King Kong* represented both an opportunity to tell a transnational story of South Africa that wasn't entirely centered on apartheid or anti-apartheid, and an occasion to de-exceptionalize South African history and historiography by talking about South African lives and struggles through the international languages of music, art, performance, and celebrity.

Opposing Apartheid on Stage is curiously titled. While the reader has a strong sense of the hostility to racial segregation by all parties involved, and how various organizational and personal capacities, such as a performers' union, marshal energies to resist the White supremacist state, demonstrably anti-apartheid sentiment per se features unevenly. The Union of Southern African Artists for example, a subject in Chapter Two, uses *King Kong* to mobilize support, raise revenue, and transform the landscape of interracial artistic activity, albeit temporarily. Yet in London, the struggle of the "King Kong exiles" in Chapter Five is revealed to be less about apartheid and more a sorry series of personal encounters with fiercely British institutional racism. By contrast, Chapter Six, focusing on the U.S.-based success of the more famous exiles, such as Makeba and Masekela, and Chapter Seven, which relates the largely unsuccessful attempt by American director Joseph A. Walker to remake and relaunch *King Kong* in 1979, directly address how former cast and crew drew on the musical and its legacy to generate powerful anti-apartheid narratives and instantiate the foundational role of South African musical forms with the burgeoning world music repertoire.

When *King Kong* first appeared in 1959, it was billed as an "all-African jazz opera." No doubt some musicologists will continue to trip over the designations of "opera" and "musical," but this is not among Fleming's core concerns. He refers to George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" as a musical (while Scott Joplin's "Treemonisha" [1911] is commonly known as a "ragtime opera"). Nor is there mention of the 2017 revival in Cape Town. Fleming is much more interested in how the biography of an artistic endeavor can reveal the complex underbelly of the quotidian apartheid experience. In one particularly prescient moment, he describes how a White woman applying for passports for Black South Africans to travel to London first entered the Whites Only door of the Department of Home Affairs, only to be told by the flustered official upon reviewing the documents that she should leave and

reenter using the “Non-White” portal. She did promptly as instructed, and then delivered the same documents to the very same clerk a moment later. While I found myself craving illustrations, Fleming’s prose more than compensates. *Opposing Apartheid on Stage* is a spectacular achievement and a pleasure to read.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Grundy, Kenneth W. 1996. “Cultural Politics in South Africa: An Inconclusive Transformation.” *African Studies Review* 39 (1): 1–24. doi:10.2307/524666.
- Gugler, Josef. 2010. “African Films in the Classroom.” *African Studies Review* 53 (3): 1–17. doi:10.1017/S0002020600005643.
- Jolaosho, Omotayo. 2019. “Singing Politics: Freedom Songs and Collective Protest in Post-Apartheid South Africa.” *African Studies Review* 62 (2): 6–29. doi:10.1017/asr.2018.16.