

# Woza Albert! Performing Christ in Apartheid South Africa

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## Abstract

This article investigates the important South African anti-apartheid protest play, *Woza Albert!*, written and performed in 1981 by Percy Mtwa and Mbogeni Ngema, which retells the story of Jesus Christ so that it takes place in apartheid South Africa. The article begins with a historical overview of how the play came into being, followed by an exposition of the play's script, specifically focusing on the way it reimagines the gospels' account of Christ's life, death and resurrection. The article finally engages theologically with the play (with the help of Hans Urs von Balthasar's *theological dramatic theory*), in an attempt to see why *Woza Albert!* has proved to be such an effective literary tool in speaking out and protesting against the injustices of the apartheid state.

**Keywords:** protest theatre; apartheid; *Woza Albert!*; Market Theatre; Hans Urs von Balthasar

## Introduction

Throughout history, it has often been seen how the most abhorrent realities can serve as a setting and stimulus for some of the most inspired works of art; how the most terrible of situations and darkest of hours can call forth the Muses of Parnassus,<sup>1</sup> and instigate some of the most powerful and transformative artistic creations. This has also been the case in a country such as South Africa, where institutionalised apartheid reigned supreme for nearly five decades in the 20th century (Williamson 1989, 8).

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1 In ancient Greek mythology, the muses who inspired artistic creation were said to reside on Mount Parnassus, towering over the sanctuary of Delphi, in central Greece.



Amidst the discrimination and dehumanisation effected by the apartheid state, South Africa saw a remarkable upsurge in “extraordinarily rich” artistic works, in and through which artists endeavoured to expose, oppose and dismantle the evils of the day (Williamson 1989, 9). The realities of apartheid, the struggle for freedom and the promise of a better tomorrow indeed engendered, in the words of John de Gruchy, an “explosion of art in all its many and different variations” as it was recognised that the arts can speak a liberating language, and help bring about transformation and hope in a country desperately in need thereof (De Gruchy 2009, 199, 206).

When considering this explosion of artistic activity during the apartheid years, it is interesting to see that one art form which, in particular, rose to prominence amidst, and in response to, the atrocities committed in South Africa at the time, is that of theatre. Especially in the latter part of the 20th century, against the backdrop of the Sharpeville Massacre and the Soweto Uprising, the performance of drama texts became one of the central means of artistic resistance in South Africa, as a number of playwrights, directors and actors, from different strands of society, created powerful theatre productions which confronted the realities of life under the apartheid regime head-on.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most important and, in the words of Mary Benson (1997, 118), “politically potent” anti-apartheid theatre pieces from this time, which came to play a central role in the struggle against the apartheid state, was a work created by the actor-duo Percy Mtwana and Mbogeni Ngema. With the help and creative input of the political activist, director and co-founder of the Market Theatre, Barney Simon, they created *Woza Albert!* (which means, “Come forth, Albert!” in languages such as Sesotho, isiZulu and isiXhosa). This play, first performed in 1981, provocatively asked what would happen if the second coming of Christ would occur during the apartheid years. It goes on to retell the narrative of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, as found in the gospels, so that it takes place in South Africa in the 1980s.

This article begins by investigating how *Woza Albert!*, with its retelling of the Christ-narrative in a modern idiom, originally came about. This historical investigation is followed by an exploration of what transpires in the play. I will then offer a brief theological engagement with *Woza Albert!* by making use of Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *theological dramatic theory*, as developed in his five-volume work, *Theodrama*. Balthasar believed that drama can be regarded as a “promising point of departure” for theology, since it not only helps us to better understand and respond to the drama of earthly existence as it plays out on the world stage, but because it can also point towards, illuminate and express something of the divine drama of salvation, which finds its highpoint in the dramatic events of the life, death and resurrection of Christ (Balthasar 1988, 9–12; Nichols 2000, 21–46; Oakes 1994, 212–49). Balthasar’s *theological dramatic theory* can thus provide helpful insights into the reasons why the

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2 For an overview of anti-apartheid protest plays stemming from the latter part of the 20th century, see e.g. Loren Kruger’s chapter, “Spaces and Markets: Theatre as Testimony and Performance against Apartheid,” in Kruger (2019, 121–146), as well as the edited volume by Davis and Fuchs (1997).

dramatic representation of the Christ-narrative proved to be such an effective literary tool in speaking out against, and bringing hope amidst, the injustices of the apartheid state.

### South African Anti-Apartheid Protest Theatre and the Genesis of *Woza Albert!*

From the 1960s onwards, one of the central figures behind the anti-apartheid protest theatre movement in South Africa was Barney Simon. At first, Simon, together with contemporaries such as Athol Fugard, David Phetoe, Corney Mabaso, and Zakes Mofekeng, staged politically defiant productions, with multi-racial casts, at a venue called Dorkay House—an old factory building in Eloff Street, Johannesburg, which was the home of the Union of South African Artists. After the apartheid authorities closed down Dorkay House, given the potentially dangerous political activities that were taking place inside, Simon and others decided to take the productions they were developing to the streets. They began presenting spur-of-the-moment performances in parks, storefronts, private homes, community centres, and church halls, especially in the townships (Schwartz 1988, 83). Simon would also regularly rent the dining-rooms of student communes in Parktown and turn them into make-shift theatres (Simon 1997, xiii). He later recalled: “We just made theatre ... it was quite agile, a sort of guerrilla theatre, as you might say” (Davis and Fuchs 1997, 225). There is even an anecdote of them performing some of their productions in someone’s backyard, so that political prisoners, who were under house arrest at the time, could watch from over the fence (see Schwartz 1988, 16).<sup>3</sup>

Around this time, Simon met and befriended Mannie Manim, a gifted theatre-maker, with whom he co-founded a new theatre company. Manim was the head of drama at the Performing Arts Council of Transvaal (PACT) and managed the experimental Arena Theatre in Doornfontein, Pretoria. Convinced of the evil of apartheid, Manim initially attempted to challenge the political *status quo* from within by, for example, finding ways to stage multi-racial productions in front of multi-racial audiences at the Arena Theatre. Faced with increasing opposition from PACT, he, however, soon decided that it would be better to resign, and, upon doing so, he joined Simon in establishing what they called *The Company*.

At its inception, Simon and Manim’s *The Company* functioned in much the same manner as Simon’s previous street-theatre endeavours. Productions were staged in unconventional spaces at unconventional hours, and the multi-racial audiences were

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3 Most of the plays that were staged around this time still came from outside South Africa, so as to bypass government censors, but were chosen and adapted so that they would speak to the current situation in the country. They, for example, performed works by Brecht, Becket, Camus, and Peter Weiss. As was the case with Athol Fugard’s *Serpent Players* in Port Elizabeth, Sophocles’ *Antigone* also became an important part of their repertoire. Simon would later write that *Antigone* is a “play for our time,” as it deals with an unjust political system, which, in the words of the character Antigone, “offends the laws of God and Heaven.” See Fuchs (2002, 45).

mostly notified of performances by word-of-mouth. While this approach was effective and drew much attention, they nonetheless realised that they would eventually need a more permanent venue in which to rehearse and perform. As they started looking for such a venue and explored options such as “a brewery, several nightclubs, old barns, an abandoned cinema and even a synagogue” (Schwartz 1988, 19), Manim received a tip-off that the old Indian fruit market, in an area called Newtown, was to be demolished by the Johannesburg municipality. He and Simon immediately enquired about the possibility of converting this beautiful old domed building, which resembled “Shakespeare’s Globe” (Schwartz 1988, 19–20),<sup>4</sup> into a theatre, and the municipality miraculously granted them permission to do so. Much to their own surprise, and that of the municipality, they also soon discovered that, as the newly-planned theatre stood in an industrial area and previously served as a market-place, where white clients could buy fruit and vegetables from Indian vendors, the building was zoned for multi-racial use, which would make it one of only two theatres in the country that would be open to people from all races.<sup>5</sup> “There’s no logic to it,” Simon exclaimed at the time, but we “are legal!” (Benson 1997, 106). Consequently, the Market Theatre, which would become the “theatre of the struggle” was born in the middle of 1976, and had its very first performance only days after the Soweto Uprising.

At this time, two young actors, Percy Mtnwa and Mbogeni Ngema, were touring the country as part of legendary Soweto playwright, composer and showman Gibson Kente’s production, *Mama and the Load*.<sup>6</sup> The plan was for their acting ensemble to also visit and stage a production in Bophuthatswana, but upon nearing the homeland’s border, they were stopped by the police and refused entry. This humiliating encounter led to a heated argument on the tour bus, especially about the relationship between politics and the Christian faith. “All sorts of ideas were tossed around,” Mtnwa remembers, including “the question of what would happen if Jesus Christ, known in Sesotho as Morena, was to come back to earth in apartheid South Africa” (quoted in

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4 Manim described his first visit to the old market as follows: “I came down with a carload of dark-suited, blue-tied city planners. We had to sit on one another’s laps. ... We walked in at the end of the trading day and all these guys were transformed into thespians. They all started jumping onto the raised dais in the middle where the boxes were stored. I ran up to the gallery ... and there were all these guys sprouting their school Shakespeare. ...” Pat Schwartz continues: “The proportions were perfect, [t]he situation was perfect—at the crossroads of the city, the southwest corner, close to the motorway which would bring people in from the north and the south and would also be accessible to those without their own transport. The acoustics were perfect. The atmosphere was pure theatre. In the tradition of London’s Roundhouse which started life as a railway engine-shed or Paris’ Gare d’Orsay, this fruit market simply had to be reincarnated as an arts complex.” See Schwartz (1988, 19–20).

5 The only other multi-racial theatre in South Africa at the time was the Space Theatre in Cape Town, which was opened by the photographer, Brian Astbury (with the help of Athol Fugard) in 1972. As it was housed in an old warehouse in an area also zoned for multi-racial use, it managed to defy South Africa’s segregation laws for a few years, even though the authorities still did their absolute best to disrupt the theatre’s productions (by, for example, conducting raids and harassing actors and audience members on a regular basis). Faced with immense political and financial pressure, the theatre eventually closed down by the end of the 1970s. See Astbury (1979).

6 For more on Kente, see Solberg (2011).

Schwartz 1988, 99). For the rest of the tour the cast kept on discussing this fascinating question, and when they were back home in Johannesburg, Mtwā and Ngema started working on a play based on this idea. When they had a rough draft, they decided to meet with Barney Simon, as they felt he had the expertise and the theatre-space at the Market Theatre to help bring this production to life.

When Mtwā and Ngema first approached Simon, he was not too sure about what to make of this idea of Christ's return to apartheid South Africa; partly, because he did not actually know the Christ-narrative. As someone from Jewish descent, he was normally asked to leave the room when the gospels were read in school, and afterwards he never really found any need to read them himself (Schwartz 1988, 100). After speaking to Mtwā and Ngema, and seeing parts of their performance, he, however, took some time to acquaint himself with the gospel narratives (while he was sick in bed), which came to make an immense impression on him. As a theatre-maker and, also, as a political activist, Barney Simon was deeply moved and inspired by the narrative of Christ's life, death and resurrection, and what he called the parallels between "his story and ours" (Ngema 2006, 189). He thus agreed to become part of the production, and, as Ngema later recalled, asked that their play should be "exactly like the New Testament" (Ngema 2006, 189). In the next few months, while working on the play, it was of utmost importance for Simon that they continually revisit the biblical text itself, in their attempt to re-imagine how, on the one hand the Christ-story would play out today, and on the other hand, how black and white South Africans, respectively, would respond to Jesus' words and deeds. By a fascinating turn of events, it thus happened that in the middle of one of the darkest hours in South African history, two black township actors and a white theatre director and playwright, who self-identified as a secular Jew, became completely consumed with the dramatic life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Mtwā and Ngema ultimately finished the play at the beginning of 1981, after more than a year of non-stop work, and performed it for the very first time on 25 March that year, in front of 50 people in the Laager Room of the Market Theatre. The reason for this relatively small audience was, in Mannie Manim's words, "to draw less attention from the censure type people" (Manim 2006, 78). Soon, however, the word began to spread about *Woza Albert!* and reviews began to appear in the newspapers, which prompted Manim and Simon to move the play to the Market Theatre's main auditorium, where it would be performed in front of thousands of South Africans over the next few months, becoming "the biggest box office drawcard in the history of the Market Theatre" (Schwartz 1988, 100). From the very first performance, as Temple Hauptfleish writes, "the response by the public and the critics alike was almost uniformly ecstatic," with everyone agreeing that this "inspired and inspiring play" hailed "a new phase in South African theatre" (Hauptfleish 1983, 21). While exposing and strongly speaking out against the horrendous realities of apartheid, with an intensity which rivalled that of any political or protest theatre in history, it offered a defiant and joyous message of hope that proclaimed, to the oppressors and oppressed alike, that hate, darkness and death will not prevail, but will ultimately be overcome by love, light and life.

After the highly successful opening in Johannesburg, the production visited many more cities and towns throughout South Africa, playing mostly in township venues, and it also embarked on an extensive international tour to the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States and Australia. *Woza Albert!* also made a big impression on overseas audiences, and Mtwa and Ngema's "unparalleled talent for mimicry" won over "just about everyone who came to see" the play (Schwartz 1988, 100). "Directly or indirectly," Pat Schwartz writes, *Woza Albert!* would thus "change a lot of lives and profoundly influence the direction of black South African theatre, spawning dozens of derivative and more or less successful spinoffs" (Schwartz 1988, 102). It became a "bridge for indigenous theatre from the township to the world," and, as John Kani remarked, encouraged black artists all over "to dream" (quoted in Schwartz 1988, 102). Above all, however, *Woza Albert!*, with its depiction of the inhumane struggles of the "African Everyman" and its brazen suggestion of where Jesus Christ's solidarity would lie in this situation, offered a staunch challenge to the apartheid government, which echoed throughout the country and the world, and undoubtedly contributed to bringing about a new South Africa in 1994 (Hauptfleish 1983, 36).

So, what exactly happens in the play *Woza Albert!*? How is the Christ-narrative retold to take place in and challenge the realities of apartheid South Africa?

### An Overview of *Woza Albert!*

Inspired by the works and theatre techniques of, for example, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook, *Woza Albert!* takes place on a bare stage, with no real props. All of the play's characters and situations are acted-out by only two actors (Mtwa and Ngema in the original production). The play consists of 26 short scenes, which can be divided into two distinct parts.

In the first 17 scenes, the audience is presented with a number of snapshots of typical scenarios in apartheid South Africa as seen and experienced by Mtwa and Ngema, while they were doing research for *Woza Albert!* in Soweto and other parts of Johannesburg. The opening scene, for example, takes place in a lively jazz club, with Mtwa and Ngema depicting two jazz musicians playing saxophone and electric guitar to an adoring audience. One moment they "are" the musicians, and even act-out the instruments they are playing with their bodies, and the next moment they "become" the audience members, who are "applauding wildly" (Mtwa, Ngema, and Simon 1999, 209). While they are still making music, an alarm suddenly goes off, as the jazz club is infiltrated by the police. We then see how a racist policeman interrogates one of the musicians and forces him to show his passbook, the booklet that all black South Africans had to carry with them which said where they were allowed to live and work. In his passbook, the policeman reads that the guitar player had only been given permission to work at a fast-food restaurant down the road in the daytime, and definitely not to play music at a jazz club at this time of night. He subsequently grabs him by the collar and throws him into a police van.

This rather shocking opening scene is followed by a number of similar scenes, which portray the horrendous realities of life during the apartheid era. Some of these scenes take place in prison, where white prison guards humiliate and harass black prisoners; some take place at an old rubbish dump, where a character called Auntie Dudu, “an old woman, wearing a white dust-coat as a shawl,” is seen searching the garbage “for something to eat” (Mtwā et al. 1999, 213); some take place at a township market, where a young meat vendor, who should definitely still be in school, is pestered about his mother by a migrant worker from the “Dube Hostel” (Mtwā et al. 1999, 218–9); and some take place at a makeshift, open-air barber stall, where people having their hair cut, talk about the “death and destruction of the Soweto Riots in 1976” (Mtwā et al. 1999, 221).

Throughout all of these scenes depicting life under the apartheid system, the audience gradually becomes aware of a rumour doing the rounds that Jesus Christ, or Morena (which, directly translated means “Lord”; “Chief”; “Leader”; “Master”), is on his way back to earth and will be coming to South Africa to liberate the oppressed. At first, there is only a brief mention of Morena’s name, but as the scenes follow one another, more and more of these characters start to speak about Morena’s supposed return. Some of the characters, like one of the prisoners harassed by a guard in his cell, discard the rumour as mere nonsense, while others, such as Auntie Dudu at the rubbish dump, movingly express the hope that the rumour would indeed be true.

This sequence of different scenes continues to build up to scene 16, where Morena, against the expectations of many, indeed appears at the Passbook Office in Albert Street, “the most terrible street in the whole of Johannesburg” (Mtwā et al. 1999, 226). Upon making his arrival, Morena immediately begins to speak of justice, freedom and peace, and tells those standing outside the office that they should throw their passbooks away and follow him to the Regina Mundi Church in Soweto, which they continue to do, as they joyously sing the following words: “We are no longer pieces of paper, man, we are people/Let them know our faces as Morena knows our faces/With Morena we walk as one” (Mtwā et al. 1999, 228). In the following scene, the joyous celebration initially continues, but then two unnamed characters suddenly appear and make an ominous prediction regarding what will happen next. They say that hundreds of thousands will “gather at the Regina Mundi Church in the heart of Soweto,” yet “the government will begin to take courage again” and “the police and the army will assemble from all parts of the country,” and they will “come and kill Morena” and then “life will go on as before” (Mtwā et al. 1999, 231–2).

On this rather disheartening note, the second part of the play begins, and we are immediately introduced to two new characters, Zuluboy and Bobbejaan (Afrikaans for Baboon) working at a place called the Coronation Brick Factory. Initially, just like in the first part of the play, this second part of *Woza Albert!* begins by showing the audience the often brutal realities of life under apartheid, with Zuluboy and Bobbejaan being shouted at by their white boss, who calls them racist names and continuously threatens to send them back to the jungle (as if they were animals). Once they are alone,

Zuluboy, however, tells Bobbejaan that they would not have to work so hard and experience so much abuse anymore, because Christ—or Morena—has arrived in South Africa, and he believes that he will come to Coronation Bricks and free them from this horrible place. At first, Bobbejaan, like many of the characters in the first part of the play, is not really interested in what Zuluboy has to say and laughs at the idea that Morena, the Son of God, will be coming to Coronation Bricks, of all places. However, as they are still talking, Morena indeed shows up, just like Zuluboy said he would. What then follows is one of the most heartfelt and humorous scenes in the whole play. As Morena embraces Zuluboy and Bobbejaan and again repeats his message of freedom, justice and peace, Zuluboy starts asking him a number of questions about what one eats in heaven, and if he, as Morena, had heard of this wonderful drink called Coco-Cola, that we have here on earth.

While they are still talking, the owner of the brick factory shows up and starts screaming at Zuluboy and Bobbejaan because they are not working. He also wants to know who this person sitting with them is. When Zuluboy answers that it is Morena, the Son of God, the owner screams out a few profanities, and runs back home to call the police. When his phone does not want to work, he calls Bobbejaan over and asks him to go to the police station and report what is going on. If he does so, he tells Bobbejaan, he will give him a big raise when all of this is done. Like Judas in the gospels, Bobbejaan agrees to betray his friend Zuluboy, as well as Morena, and runs off to the police station. Shortly thereafter, the police show up and arrest Zuluboy and Morena on the spot. At first, Zuluboy pulls out a knobkerrie, a traditional African weapon, and attacks the policemen, but Morena, as in the gospels, immediately stops him, saying that when “a man hits this cheek, you give him the other,” and “forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Mtwā et al. 1999, 245). As they drag the two of them off the stage, Zuluboy screams out: “Aikhona Morena [No Morena]! They know! They know!” (Mtwā et al. 1999, 245).

In the next scene, the audience learns that while Zuluboy has escaped, Morena has been incarcerated and is being held on the 10th floor of John Vorster Square. A policeman, who was part of “Operation Coronation,” tells his commanding officer how proud he is that they could capture this “communist troublemaker” posing as Jesus Christ, especially given the presence of “one mad Zulu” who was armed with a “branch of a tree,” as he refers to the knobkerrie (Mtwā et al. 1999, 246). However, while he is still speaking of his act of patriotic heroism, a sudden commotion erupts, as Morena starts to fly down from the 10th floor of the prison towards freedom, in the arms of the angel Gabriel. This miracle of Morena escaping from John Vorster Square, with the help of an angel, puts the South African government in a tight spot, for this is clearly then not an imposter, but indeed Jesus Christ, the Son of God, himself, whom they, as the “good and faithful” white Christian community, also worship. They thus decide, as we learn from a conversation between two unidentified passengers on a train, to welcome and embrace their “honoured” visitor from heaven, and to take him around the country so that he can see that South Africa is not such a bad place. They go on to visit the Kruger National Park, as well as the gold mines of the Witwatersrand. They also have a meal



at the famous Panorama Wimpy Bar on the 50th floor of the Carlton Centre, the tallest building on the African continent. Lastly, they visit the luxurious casino resort called “Sun City—the Las Vegas of South Africa,” in one of the homelands where they try to win Morena over with the resort’s “good-time girls” and the “gambling machines” (Mtwā et al. 1999, 248). Yet, all of this is in vain, for when asked what he thinks about this wonderful place, a deeply saddened Morena begins to condemn, stronger than ever, the realities of apartheid, asking how it is possible that there can be people with “burning mouths,” who sit in the “dust and beg for work that will buy them bread,” while on the other side, there are people “living in gold and glass, whose rubbish bins are loaded with food for a thousand mouths” (Mtwā et al. 1999, 248). “What country is this,” Morena asks, where such atrocities are allowed?

This is then too much for the apartheid authorities, and they immediately take Morena into custody again. This time, he is sent off to Robben Island, the same place where Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners were being held. Robben Island cannot, however, stop Morena’s mission on earth—Christ can, after all, walk on water. In the play’s penultimate scene, Morena slowly starts walking across the ocean from Robben Island back to Cape Town. Terrified by these events, the South African government responds by dropping a nuclear bomb on Morena’s head that ultimately succeeds in killing him, while also blowing up the whole of Cape Town and Table Mountain. As is the case in the gospels, this is, however, not the end of the narrative. The final scene, scene 26, takes place in a graveyard, where we find Zuluboy, from earlier in the play, now working as a gravedigger while hiding from the police. The next moment a figure appears and asks Zuluboy if he perhaps knows where he can find the grave of a man called Lazarus, for he has something that he needs to do. At first, Zuluboy is a bit confused about what is going on, but after a while, he recognises that the person standing in front of him is Morena. “How can it be—they killed you with that bomb?” he asks, to which Morena replies with a smile on his face, “Oh no Baba. Have you forgotten, I will always come back after three days, bombs or no bombs” (Mtwā et al. 1999, 256). Absolutely elated, Zuluboy asks Morena what will happen next, to which Morena replies that he would also like to raise others from the dead, and that he would begin by raising the struggle heroes who have died fighting against apartheid. And as music starts to play, Morena goes on to call forth and raise from the dead struggle heroes such as Albert Luthuli, the “Father of our Nation,” Robert Sobukwe, who taught us about “Black Power,” Lilian Ngoyi, who taught “our mothers about freedom,” and Steve Biko, the “hero of our children” (Mtwā et al. 1999, 257–9). As this happens, joyous music becomes louder and louder, after which the curtain drops.

### *Woza Albert!* and Balthasar’s Theological Dramatic Theory

This article contends that a fruitful way of engaging, both theologically and historically, with *Woza Albert!*, is with the help of the *theological dramatic theory* of the 20th century Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, which he developed in his five-volume work, *Theodrama*. For Balthasar, the beautiful form of Christ—which he first discusses in his work on theological aesthetics (see Nichols 1998, 211–53)—is not merely a static image, icon, or artwork that is “crystallised in immobile perfection”

(Nichols 2011, 49), but a dynamic and embodied performance on the world stage. Balthasar holds that, as we perceive the *forma Christi* in all its radiant glory and splendour, we find, perhaps to our surprise, a drama or stage play, as Chesterton once remarked (Balthasar 1990a 190).<sup>7</sup> Balthasar believes that this drama reveals, for all to see, who the triune God is, and brings about liberation and redemption for a world drenched in sin and death, with the result that it can, and should, be seen as the drama of all dramas, the “summit of both the questions posed by and the response to all human dramatic explorations,” as Ben Quash (2016, 28) writes. It is important to emphasise that, for Balthasar, this performance of Christ does not impede or bring an end to other dramatic activity on either the world stage or the theatre stage, but that it in fact opens up a myriad of new dramatic possibilities as it asks to be re-enacted in different forms and contexts, as also happens in the play *Woza Albert!* (Balthasar 1988, 66–9).

In his *theological dramatic theory*, Balthasar begins by focusing on what he describes as the theatre’s wondrous ability to shine a “ray of light into the confusion of reality,” so as to “reveal” what is truly transpiring in the world (Balthasar 1988, 10, 17–8, 259ff). For Balthasar, this is not only done so that audience members can have better insight into what is going on around them, but also so that they can make ethical judgments about these realities, and work towards subverting evil and bringing about the good in and for the world (see Balthasar 1988, 266). This is, then, exactly what we see in *Woza Albert!*, especially in the first half of the play. Scene after scene, Mtwa, Ngema and Simon succeed in holding a mirror up to the South Africa society, presenting the audience, as described above, with images of what is really happening under the apartheid state. In seeing a policeman violently interrogate and apprehend an innocent jazz musician because his passbook is not in order, or inmates, who were most likely wrongfully imprisoned, harassed and humiliated by prison guards, or an old woman searching for something to eat in a rubbish dump, or a young boy unable to receive an education because he has to work, or labourers from the homelands demeaning themselves to try and win the favour of potential employers in the city, or two factory workers being physically exploited, screamed at, and insulted by their boss, audience members cannot but ask themselves if what is happening on the theatre stage and, in effect, outside the auditorium, can in any way be justified or tolerated. All of these situations, which, while being fictional, reflect the daily realities of life in South Africa, appeal to the humanity of the audience, and ask the onlooker to make a definite judgment about what is transpiring on the stage, a judgement concerning what is right and wrong, and good and evil, in the world. It also asks of audience members to rethink their own roles in the drama of South Africa, which, as Balthasar argues, can lead to a new sense of “calling” to live and act differently, and to take part in what he calls the “struggle for the good” (Balthasar 1988, 413).

Yet, as mentioned above, Balthasar’s *theological dramatic theory* does not only focus on the connections between the theatre stage and the drama of everyday life. It indeed

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7 The quotation Balthasar refers to is found in Chesterton (1986, 281–2), and reads as follows: “God had written not so much a poem, but rather a play.”

also focuses on another drama, namely the drama of God's redemptive and liberating work throughout the ages, which, according to him, culminates in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Balthasar, Christ does not only represent or speak about an alternative reality but enacts God's coming kingdom, which is exactly why the rulers of his time sentence him to death (Balthasar 1994, 435). Those in power, Balthasar holds, are terrified of Christ's performance, and therefore, respond in the only language they are fluent in, namely that of violence (Balthasar 1994, 157; Nichols 2000, 157). In his suffering and death, Christ, however, goes on to take upon himself all the instances of injustice and violence that have been inflicted upon the weak, vulnerable and defenceless throughout the ages. Christ's cry of dereliction on the cross, Balthasar holds, sounds in solidarity with every other cry of suffering that has ever sounded in human history. In the moment of his death, Christ does not only suffer *for* us, but also, importantly, *with* us—indeed, *with* all those who have suffered in the past and will suffer in the future (Balthasar 1994, 267ff).

When viewed through the lens of Balthasar's *theological dramatic theory*, it is seen that Morena's life, and especially also his death, indeed stands in absolute solidarity with those who suffer under apartheid. Morena is not depicted as some or other exalted, other-worldly saviour-figure who is far removed from the everyday realities of South Africa but shown as an ordinary human being of flesh and blood, who lives, eats and even dances with the poorest in the South African society. What clearly made the Christ-drama, as recalled in the gospels, so appealing and relevant to Mtwá, Ngema and Simon was the fact that this Jesus-character, as Balthasar emphasises, does not side with those responsible for upholding the oppressive kingdoms of this world, but deliberately identifies with, and can be found among, the poor and the marginalised, those described by Balthasar as the "so-called unimportant" (Balthasar 2014, 447). Following Balthasar's *theological dramatic theory*, Morena's imprisonment on Robben Island and ultimately his death, also then speaks of a solidarity with those who are suffering under, being persecuted by, and killed by the apartheid government. Morena, just like Jesus in the gospels, does not only live and suffer *with* those who are poor, oppressed and imprisoned, as seen throughout the play, but also dies *with* them; his solidarity reaches down to the "abyss of death," as Balthasar would say (Balthasar 1990b, 161).

As we learn in the gospels, the suffering and death of Christ is, however, not the end of the drama. After three days Christ is brought back to life. For Balthasar, the resurrection of Christ signals, once and for all, that the coming of God's righteous kingdom cannot be stopped; that suffering, death and destruction will not have the final say in this world; that justice, goodness and freedom will ultimately prevail (Balthasar 1994, 361–88; Balthasar 1990b, 189–290). According to Balthasar, Christ's resurrection speaks, in a distinct and absolute manner, of justice in the face of injustice, of love in the face of hate, of light in the face of darkness, of hope in the face of hopelessness, of life in the face of death. This is also the case in *Woza Albert!* Following Balthasar's *theological dramatic theory*, it can be said that Morena's resurrection in the last scene of *Woza Albert!* not only serves as a "validation" of the "provocation" of his life and mission, to use the words of the Balthasar scholar, Edward Oakes (2004, 272), but is also a hopeful

assertion that the suffering and death, which mark life in South Africa, will not have the decisive say in the drama of this country, but will finally be overcome by and transformed into, light, life and love. This is emphasised by the way in which Morena, after his own resurrection, goes on to raise others who have also died while taking part in the struggle against apartheid, including Robert Sobukwe, Lilian Ngoyi, Steve Biko, and of course, Albert Luthuli.

## Conclusion

In being confronted with Balthasar's dramatic representation of the Christ-event in his *theological dramatic theory*, one starts to get a sense of why, perhaps, Mtwa, Ngema and also Barney Simon turned to the story of Christ in creating this important production in 1981, and why *Woza Albert!* ultimately became one of the most influential anti-apartheid protest plays in the history of South Africa. *Woza Albert!*, just like the Christ-narrative it is based on, speaks of a saviour who does not only suffer and die *for* the victims of apartheid, but also *with* them. This saviour is also then raised from the dead (and continues to resurrect others who have died fighting against apartheid), which powerfully suggests, in and amidst some of South Africa's darkest hours, that the powers of death and destruction would not have the final say in the country, but, to quote Archbishop Tutu, "that good and laughter and justice will ultimately prevail" (quoted in Perry 2010, 42).

Interestingly, *Woza Albert!* was not the only protest play that Barney Simon would base on the story of Christ's life, death and resurrection. In 1992, two years before the dawn of the new South Africa (and three years before Simon's untimely death) he and another important theatre-maker and actor, John Kani, would create a similar play called *The Lion and the Lamb*, which was also first performed at the Market Theatre, and again re-imagined the Christ-narrative so that it took place in modern-day South Africa, exactly as *Woza Albert!* had originally done. Clearly, it could be argued, Simon realised that this Christ-drama (that he was introduced to by Percy Mtwa and Mbogeni Ngema), had something important to say to people being oppressed and yearning for freedom, people in the clutches of death, yearning for life.

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