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Callaloo, Volume 44, Number 1, Winter 2026, pp. 32-37 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2026.a983235*

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AN INTERVIEW WITH FATIMA DIKE

Stephen Gray

This interview originally appeared in *Callaloo* Number 8/10, 1980.

The following interview was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in August, 1977. Fatima Dike is author of two published plays, The Sacrifice of Krele *and* The First South African. *Stephen Gray is author of the satirical novel,* Local Colour.

STEPHEN GRAY: Fatima Dike—we always call you Fatts Dike—

FATIMA DIKE: With a double "t," because I'm not a carbohydrate.

GRAY: How old are you? Who are you?

DIKE: I was born Royline Fatima Dike in 1948, 13th September. I grew up in Langa in Cape Town, and was educated in Moshesh High Primary School until my standard six, and then I went to boarding school in Rustenburg in the Transvaal up to my matric. And then I went back to Cape Town and worked in a steakhouse for a few months; I went to work in another steakhouse for another few months and I left; finally I was employed by my family—my brother-in-law owns a few shops in the location. I've worked as a blockman in a butcher for four years, and I've worked in a bookshop for six months; I've worked in a supermarket for a further two years—until one day in 1974 a child in Guguletu in Cape Town was raped to death, a seven year old girl, and her body was found inside the garbage bins behind the shops. And from that moment I felt very frustrated; I wanted to push the walls of those shops away, and burst out, because I had something to say to my people for that. So I left the family business, and I went to work at the Space Theatre as a stage manager for a year, in 1975; then I started writing in 1976.

GRAY: Let's start with your first play, *The Sacrifice of Kreli*.

DIKE: Well, *Sacrifice of Kreli* was conceived through two articles in the *Daily Dispatch* of 1890, where the King, Kreli of the Gcalekas, was interviewed, first in the *Daily Dispatch* and then in an old newspaper called *The Watchman*, which has died out since then. The play tells the story of the fate of the Gcalekas after the Ninth Frontier War, or as it is well-known in South Africa, the Ninth Kaffir War. The tribe was about sixty-six thousand people, and when the war broke out the dispute was over cattle, which the British claimed

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that the Gcalekas had stolen from them. And they demanded that the Gcalekas should bring those cattle back, and war broke out between the two nations. Kreli led an army of twelve thousand warriors against the British army. Then the British thought that, as usual, it's a riot; if they had a police force like they had in Ireland they would get a police force to come and quiet down the riots. Instead they had to use the army, because they didn't have a police force then. At one stage the war got so heavy that there were only three soldiers left to look after the Castle in Cape Town; all the men were sent out to go and fight this one tribe in the Eastern Cape. At the end of the war, the British had cut down the Gcalekas from twelve thousand to five hundred. They had captured from the one tribe thirty thousand head of cattle, fourteen thousand sheep, and they had taken all the land. But still the men refused to give themselves up to British rule, and they decided to go into exile in a small place which was then called The Hole, which was a natural fortress twelve miles long by two and a half miles wide. On the Cape side they had the Bashee River—of which of course the real name is Umbashi, but the British called it the Bashee River; it had the Bashee River on the western side as a boundary, and on the eastern side it had cliffs and krantzes hundreds of feet tall. And no man could go down into that Hole if he did not know how the land lies. And these men stayed there, and the King died in exile in 1902.

But the play takes place seven years after the end of the Ninth Frontier War, when these men are getting restless. The warriors are split into two groups: one side is led by the divine Mlanjeni, the other side is led by the praise-singer Mpelesi. The dispute between the two is that the one side says that we must go back and fight the British and get our land back from them; the other side says before we go out and fight the British, let us make a sacrifice to our ancestors and see what they say about this. Finally, they all decide to make the sacrifice to the ancestors. During the procedure a white reporter, in the play called Southey, arrives, and the sacrifice has to be stopped to attend to him. In that way, then, the sacrifice fails, and the men claim that the divine Mlanjeni is a false prophet and he must be killed. So Mlanjeni is punished. They take his body and they wrap it up in the skin of a bull which was slaughtered that morning for the sacrifice. They sew him up in the skin and they lay him out in the veld for three days and three nights. Through the heat of the sun the skin shrinks and crushes him. After three days they open the skin and they find that Mlanjeni's body is crushed, but Mlanjeni is still alive. He has a message for his people from the ancestors which said: there is a way out.

Now, what made me write this play is that one day I woke up and realized that there were eighteen million black people in this country who had no past, because whatever past we had as a nation was oral history—it was not written down; and it was wiped out by the written history which the white people in South Africa had written against what we had to say. And when I discovered this I realized that here was a part of my history, my past. From then onwards I felt if I had a past, a present, I could also have a future.

GRAY: Did you mean the play as a political parable about our present times?

DIKE: Yes, but also in the structure of the play—I was trying to do a play in the form of Greek theatre, but a black one. Because I had a feeling that for black theatre to advance we've got to try and develop as much as we can in form and structure, so that we can

also have parallel theatre, as the white theatre has. Like they have classics, Shakespeare and all that. I'm trying to push it towards that.

GRAY: Well, let's talk about what *The Sacrifice of Kreli* looked like as a production. You yourself produced, so you had an unusual amount of control over how it would go.

DIKE: Well, when we started off we had a cast of sixteen. We had the King and all the leading actors; I used five warriors, each warrior representing a hundred warriors, in that sense. Then, because we needed a bull—we couldn't use a bull every night on stage—we had to mime a bull. And the most fascinating part of it was that the people involved are black people who have grown up with animals, and they knew animals, and they just got the right effect. For the journalist we found somebody very suitable, who was very English, to play the part. And Julius Mtsaka carried off the part of the King very, very well; I think he did an extremely good job in that he directed and acted in the leading role in the play.

GRAY: You made the show a real ritual of theatre. Now how consciously was that planned?

DIKE: Yes, I had to go back into time. I spent a lot of time with diviners or so-called witchdoctors, and I wanted to know about the black god called Qamatha, and how the people worshipped Qamatha. And I got all this information from elderly people and diviners. Then I then went back and read a book by Tiyo Soga; he was also in fact involved in the play about black customs and rituals. With that I got a lot of tribal music from the men in the cast, because fortunately in Cape Town they still stick to the old custom of circumcision whereby a lot of tribal songs are sung during that ritual. That's how the play was put together.

GRAY: But you built it into an overwhelmingly impressive spectacle. Was that at base an attempt to re-ritualize theatre in South Africa?

DIKE: Yes, because I have seen a lot of so-called tribal plays which don't go directly deep down into the roots and expose African custom as honestly as possible. And that is why when we did it we went full out and did everything, and highlighted each little cameo in everything that made to build the play into what it was.

GRAY: But this was now of enormous interest, not only to theatre people, but to—let's call them—anthropologists. Did you feel that you could also fall into another kind of trap, and that was pandering to the type of argument that says: well, they're black people, they do plays and they act like black people?

DIKE: I am not at all interested in that kind of thing, because I have one belief: if and when I talk about my blackness, I am honest. I am not ashamed of my customs. They are my customs, but what I would like to do is put them across in such a way that they can not be misinterpreted.

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GRAY: And *The Sacrifice of Kreli*—did it have a good audience response?

DIKE: It did in Cape Town, a lot. It didn't have a lot of good response in Johannesburg, although out of all the newspapers here, two gave it bad crits and about five gave it very, very good crits.

GRAY: And how do you, mobilising your own company, get financial backing for a venture like this?

DIKE: Fortunately, when I started with this play, the gentleman who discovered me, Rob Amato, happened to be a very wealthy gentleman, and was very interested to put me on the scene. So he spent something like fifteen thousand rand on the production, which was very lucky for me.

GRAY: The script of *The Sacrifice of Kreli* is coming out in book form in a collection of plays. Do you feel that on the page it will have lost something?

DIKE: No. I'll tell you what happened when I was writing the play. The play was meant to be written in Xhosa. But I did not want to write for one particular audience; I wanted to write for everybody. I wanted to expose the work to everybody concerned. And I had to use English as a medium. Now if I'd used straight English it would have lost all the richness that the play had in text form. So what I did was I wrote the play in poetic verse in Xhosa, and then I would do literal translations directly from Xhosa into English—e.g., where the praisesinger presents his case to the King he says: "Mntan'o mhle,/you are great/Let us not stumble over each other/For our hearts are wounded./The corn is burnt,/The baby on your back is crying./Its cry is cutting./Don't you feel it in your womb?/Throw your breast over your shoulder/ And let it suckle." It was that kind of thing, directly from Xhosa into English so as to keep the rhythms of Xhosa in English.

GRAY: Now the finished script comes out in the English—only, rather cut down; does that worry you?

DIKE: Not at all, not at all, because I'm quite happy about how the dialogue flows.

GRAY: Now you as a writer, and you've told me that you have written some poetry too, do you compose by ear or on the page?

DIKE: I'm inspired by the visual thing. I see something, it hits me and I write it down immediately. And then I work on it, you know, until I find the right shape and the right feeling.

GRAY: You believe as a theatre person that you've got to be in there, in theatre, all the time?

DIKE: Oh, ja.

GRAY: You're not a lone writer in your study?

DIKE: No no, no no!

GRAY: Can you tell us then about the experience working at the Space Theatre in Cape Town that generated your second play, *The First South African*?

DIKE: When I thought of writing *The First South African* it was in September, 1976, whilst we were still doing *The Sacrifice of Kreli*. The story is based on a true story; the play is based on a true story about a man whose mother was black and his father was white, and through some fate in the genes he was born white physically, blond hair and blue eyes. And he grew up in Langa, spoke Xhosa fluently, was classified as a Coloured when he was old enough. And when I thought about this one day, I suddenly realized that the society we live in today in South Africa classifies people into different sects: whites, blacks and coloureds. The question was: here was a man who looked like a white man, who had the heart of a black man, and was a coloured. Now my question was: what is that man? That man is not white; he's the shadow of a white man. He is not black; he's the shadow of a black man. And he's not coloured. What is he under the laws of the system? And that was my question.

Now, *The First South African* also gave me an opportunity of presenting black life at home, day to day, in a very open and honest way. And it also gave me an opportunity of bringing up the different kinds of characters that make up black people. We had a shoplifter, and a shoplifter is looked upon as a thief, but in our community we look upon a shoplifter as a kind of Robin Hood, who robs the rich to help the poor. We had the father, who was a very passive black man who accepted what the system was doing and had no say. We had the mother, who was a very bright woman, and fought for her son. And we had that whole mixture of so-called township people in the one play, and thus we were able to bridge, I hope, the cultural gap for those who came to see the play.

GRAY: But you're not writing uniquely for a white audience?

DIKE: No no, but you see there are things I don't like about my own people, and I will always bring them up in my plays. Violence. I'll always bring whatever qualities I don't like in my people into my plays, so that when they see them they can go back, or go out of the theatre and think about them. And I'm not going to teach that they must either accept what I've said, but you know, I've made my gesture.

GRAY: Your experience working in the Space means working in one production, being a secretary on another, writing your own play, correcting the script of another one, do you enjoy this kind of bargaining and backstage attitude to theatre?

DIKE: Yes, very much. It keeps whetting my appetite all the time to theatre. One of the things is that working in a play in a poor theatre like the Space, one gets to do everything. So that if I should have my own company, then I'm not going to sit there and be the writer

and dictate to the other people; we can all come together and work together. And one of course gains a lot of experience in technical things, you know, that are like lighting and sound equipment, and building sets. You actually have all those things in you. In fact, I designed the costumes for *The Sacrifice of Kreli*, and made them.

GRAY: Do you have a plan for an ideal South African play?

DIKE: At the moment I'm thinking of my third play, which is called *The Glass House*. This is a play about two women—one black, one white. The white girl comes from a rich family, and the black girl comes from a middle-class black family. And I want to portray the two cultures meeting and clashing, and how two people can become friends under the circumstances that are in South Africa at the moment. Now, in fact, the plot of the play is based on portraying the passive stage of a black woman and a white woman, the protest stage of both, and then the third and last stage is when each one of them creates her own perspective, and decides what she wants to be in life. Now we have a problem here in that a lot of the people in our white society sympathise a lot with black people, but there is one thing that they tend to forget—that the black pain can only be experienced by the black man. They can accompany us on our journey as far as the door, but they cannot cross the threshold which is the pain of being black. And I would like in this play to portray that it is no harm for a white man to help a black man that far, but one thing that they must remember is that they must let us walk the road, they must let us read the book, and they must let us see the film, on our own, and make our own judgment thereafter—without being told what to do.

GRAY: Yet you come from a culture which is incredibly deprived of basic rights of access to things like this—do you feel that your drama is a gesture of defiance of this having the good things of life and culture withheld from you?

DIKE: My personal feelings are that I do not feel in any way that I am deprived of anything, because I've freed my head from that. Because, you know, I have my writing—I can do anything with my writing. Nobody can ever take my writing away from me; I've got that. And I wouldn't like to exchange what I have now for what the other side has, because I don't think it's very, very nice. But I think the kind of experience that we as black people are going through has helped to strengthen us a lot, because one needs a lot of patience. And I think that by what I'm doing I'm proving to the white society here that I am better than they are. I'm not prepared to turn around and stab them in the back; I'm prepared to accept them, and show them exactly what humanity's about.

GRAY: Have you felt under especial pressure in the last eighteen months since Soweto '76?

DIKE: Very much, very much. I have actually been very frustrated, to a point where I just thought what is the point of sitting here and writing these plays. But I came out of it again, and I said, listen, we have suffered for a long time; I don't see why I should give up now. I must just carry on talking until I can talk no more.