

# Life & Times Theatre

## Kunene and the King

*The Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon,  
finished 23 April 2019*

### PERSPECTIVES ON CARING AT THE END

A play by the South African playwright John Kani had its world premiere at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-Upon-Avon, in March 2019.

Set in contemporary South Africa, an ageing white actor, Jack Morris (Antony Sher), has terminal liver cancer and encounters his carer Lunga Kunene (John Kani), a black community nurse. Morris, an alcoholic actor, knows that he is dying yet wants to play Lear in *King Lear* one last time. He recounts how he was told his diagnosis by an oncologist:

*'You have stage four liver cancer.'  
Morris asks, 'How many stages are there?'  
The doctor replies, 'Four.'*

Morris discharges himself against medical advice and is assigned a home carer, which is where Kunene comes in. Initially taken aback that he has a black, male nurse from Soweto, Morris begins a journey of enlightenment that, in many ways, mirrors that of *King Lear* regaining

**John Kani and Antony Sher. *Kunene and the King* production. Photo by Ellie Kurtz ©RSC.**



his humanity.

We discover that Morris and Kunene share a love of Shakespeare, and, as Kunene helps Morris learn his lines, they come to appreciate the genius of Shakespeare in crossing time and cultures to achieve reconciliation. In one moving scene they recite Julius Caesar's burial speech together in English and Xhosa (a Nguni Bantu language with click consonants and one of the official languages of South Africa).

The play explores beautifully the close relationship that can develop between patient and carer. At one point Morris asks Kunene, *'What do you fear in dying?'* When Kunene attempts a reassuring response, Morris interrupts and points out that, although Kunene has been close to hundreds of patients' deaths, he wants to know how he views his *own* death. This is somewhat akin to the line in *King Lear*: *'Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say'* (Edgar, Act 5, Scene 3, William Shakespeare, *King Lear*).

These existential questions are among the most difficult to answer. When Kunene explains his belief that he will become an ancestor after he dies, Morris retorts, *'We don't have ancestors.'* Perhaps because the two characters come from such different class backgrounds — Morris from affluent Cape Town, Kunene from the more deprived Soweto, and different racial backgrounds — the development of their deep empathy over time is particularly poignant. Sher as the scruffy, dying Morris shuffles around his room, at times raging at Kunene and always hunting for yet another hidden gin bottle. Kunene the dignified nurse shows great patience but is driven to an angry outburst when recollecting injustices endured in the past.



**John Kani and Antony Sher. *Kunene and the King* production. Photo by Ellie Kurtz ©RSC.**

However, it is to Kunene's home in Soweto that Morris goes in order to be with him for his last night alive. He does not survive to play Lear but, like Shakespeare's king, he gains greater character and benevolence through his suffering and his friendship with Kunene.

Directed sensitively by Janice Honeyman, the play brilliantly explores the political tensions of post-apartheid South Africa. However, at another level it also generates understanding of empathy in end-of-life care.

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*Kunene and the King* will be on at the Ambassadors Theatre, London, from 24 January to 28 March 2020.

<https://www.rsc.org.uk/kunene-and-the-king/>

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