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Mpho Osei-Tutu and Thami Mngqolo in *The Island*

**Theatre**  
**The Island**  
Oval House, SE1  
★★★★☆  
IAN JOHNS

It's more than 30 years since the actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona and the playwright Athol Fugard first evoked the lives of South African apartheid prisoners for British audiences. Kani and Ntshona made *The Island* their own, touring the world well beyond the apartheid era.

This latest revival from the Market Theatre of Johannesburg, heralding an eight-week national tour as well as a Southern African season at the Oval House, features Thami Mngqolo and Mpho Osei-Tutu as John and Winston, prisoners on Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was held for 22 years. We first see them miming the humiliation of hard labour, and then watch as they try to keep despair at bay in their shared cell.

The urgency of the politics behind the play has now diminished, and we no longer have the poignancy of the real-life bond between Kani and Ntshona in performances that were authenticated by experience. Perhaps that's why the play now seems to fall a bit too neatly into mime, odd-couple comedy, a yearning for home and a play within a play.

At times *The Island* now seems more like a testimony to the power of make-believe and theatre. In the concluding prison-concert scene, the pair act out the trial from *Antigone*, her

admission of guilt for doing the right thing becoming a powerful condemnation of a tyrannical state. Winston, previously afraid of being laughed at for having to wear a rope wig and tin-cup breasts, actually gains in dignity as he delivers *Antigone's* speech.

In a touching moment, as John pretends to phone a friend, Winston can't wait to grab the cup acting as the telephone receiver. But as the conversation continues, the pain of the life denied becomes all too real. And news that John's appeal has been successful threatens to sour his relationship with lifer Winston, who smells the "stink of freedom" on him.

Mngqolo and Osei-Tutu are both amiable presences, bickering like a married couple and fuelling each other's sanity-preserving fantasies. But Malcolm Purkey's production could do more to differentiate this chalk and cheese couple to mine the poignant tensions between them.

Yet the play remains a moving testimony to friendship and a reminder that regimes may come and go but prisoners of conscience remain. As John says, amusing his cellmate as a weatherman: "Conditions locally remain unchanged... It's cold, but the worst is still coming."

Tour: www.ukarts.com

## In the main paper

Borne from the USA:  
Bruce Springsteen  
begins his tour in Dublin