

The Questors Theatre Archives
Questories
[The Second New Plays Festival \(1961\)](#)

THE SOUTH AFRICAN

The Questors premiere of the **Tom Sharpe** play **THE SOUTH AFRICAN** at the second New Plays Festival caused something of a stir in South Africa. A clipping from the **Natal Daily News** dated 4 May 1961 described it as, "a powerful three-act play with South Africa as its background and apartheid as its theme ... honest, sensitive and dramatic, and in its final curtain, almost unendurably poignant."

All three plays in the festival were eligible for the coveted Foyle Award, and Tom Sharpe's play was confidently backed as a winner. But the author told the newspaper that he was "less concerned with the possibility of laurel winning than with putting across an honest statement of his belief that apartheid, legally enforced and logically pursued, can only lead to tragedy."

The following month an altogether different report appeared in the Daily News under the headline, "Ssh! It's a play about apartheid".

"Extraordinary precautions and security measures are being taken in London this week at the The Questors Theatre ... " it read, "[The play's] author, Tom Sharpe, of Maritzburg, is a mystified and a very angry young man."

"I wrote the play to put across a point of view to as many people, preferably pro-apartheid people, as possible", Sharpe is quoted as saying. "I hoped that the stage would prove to be a soapbox for my purpose. I would have liked the whole of South Africa House to be there."

"Instead," the newspaper goes on to report, "the audience is being carefully screened". Apparently three South Africans asked for tickets, only to be told that they would need a personal recommendation. "The theatre authorities [i.e. The Questors] are being very careful whom they allow in owing to the contents of the play, says a letter from London. Yet the same letter admits that the play gives a fair hearing to all points of view - the confirmed Nationalists, the Africans, the Liberals. What is there to hide?" asks Tom Sharpe.

"He was astonished to find that in the advance publicity he had been given a pseudonym ("Jim Latan" - Natal spelt backwards), with the cryptic explanation in print, 'Jim Latan is a British South African for many years resident in Natal. Without wishing to over-dramatise the situation, we feel that it would be unwise to publish his real name or any information that might lead to his being identified.'

"Rot," said Tom Sharpe. He sent an airmail demanding forthwith that his own name be used. And so it is, on the souvenir programme, with the footnote: 'A play by T. R. Sharpe. At his request, the pseudonym Jim Latan used in advance publicity has been discarded.'

"His is not the only false name. The producer, a South African woman living in London (a former drama coach at the University of Cape Town), first used a pseudonym and then retired altogether from the job, as she was afraid of 'reprisals' against her family in South Africa."

"A friend in London", the report continues, "who sent copies of the programme to Mr. Sharpe wrote: 'I hope they reach you. I have had warnings galore from various people and from The Questors about the inadvisability of contacting you too much in case you get some back-kick.'

"I am staggered," said Mr Sharpe. "Things in South Africa may be bad, but they are not as bad as that." When last I saw him he was on his way to put a call through to London to tell them so and to ask them to let in anyone at all who wanted to see his play on its last night - tonight."

A month later Tom Sharpe was dismissed from the Technical College in South Africa where he was teaching English. No reason was given, despite the Principal's assurance that his work had been excellent. Mr Sharpe said that he could only surmise that his dismissal was connected with his play, and was "pure and simple victimisation."