

# THEATRE

## S. African play The Sleepwalkers

Andries Walter Oliphant is a black South African playwright, poet, visual artist, and literary teacher on a Fulbright Scholarship studying Comparative Literature at the University of Oregon. He has won various awards for his dramatic works including the Amstel Playwright of the Year Award in 1979.

In 1977, while studying at the University of the Western Cape, he organized and participated in a cultural festival during which four of his plays were confiscated by the South African police in a pre-dawn raid. The plays included *The Judgement*, *The Evil Eye*, and *The Uprising* which were produced in the course of the festival. The police indicated that they intended to use the plays as a basis for charging him with incitement against the state. Alarmed by what then seemed to be a new incursion into the already restrictive conditions under which writers have to work, progressive writers throughout South Africa condemned the actions of the police. In the face of this opposition the state abandoned their plans to prosecute the playwright.

In 1978, shortly after this incident, Andries Oliphant took up the position of Resident Play-

wright at *The Space Theatre* in Cape Town. This was one of the first professional theatres in South Africa which opposed the government's policies of social and cultural segregation. The theatre played a major role in developing and supporting contemporary South African theatre. This is where the playwright completed his award winning play, *The Bicycle*.

In early 1980, when *The Space Theatre* was forced by a hostile political and economic environment to close down, the playwright took up a teaching post at the University of Transkei. He intends to return to this position in December 1986, on completion of his academic program.

*The Sleepwalkers* was first conceived in 1983 under the title *The Night Call* and entered for the annual Amstel Playwright of the Year Award, which the author won in 1979 for his first full-length play, *The Bicycle*. When the script was returned without any comment on its theatrical value, the playwright re-worked the play by exercising self-censorship in an attempt to circumvent the restrictions which plague South African cultural life. The insurrectional overtone of the original title,

among other things, was replaced by the name *The Sleepwalkers* and re-submitted in 1984. This time it was nominated for the award.

The play explores the disruptive impact of political imprisonment on the domestic life of a Black South African family: When their son is arrested a mother and father find their lives dominated by his absence. Concerned about his safety and well-being they are soon in a situation where their home is transformed into a prison. The effect is devastating.

By utilizing theatrical metaphors, fantasies, dreams and nightmares, the play enacts the mental and emotional struggles, anguish, anger, and confrontations of the family. When nominated for the Amstel Award, *The Sleepwalkers* was singled out for its subtle and symbolic, yet penetrating and uncompromising, portrayal of the realities human beings have to contend with under oppressive circumstances.

The play stars Willie Dee, Sharon Claesens and Daniel Corona, and is directed by Andrew DeRycke. It will be performed November 14 and 15 at the University's Pocket Theater at 5 pm. Admission is \$1.



South African playwright Andries Oliphant.

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