

# John Kani from Snake Pit to King

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This storybook is about Bonisile John Kani.

He was born in 1943 in New Brighton, in the city of Gqeberha. From an early age, he loved acting and stories.

This boy from the Eastern Cape grew up to be a world-famous actor, author, and director!



John's grandmother introduced him to the world of stories.

She told him many folktales and taught him how to create stories.

Every evening, before bedtime, John's grandmother would tell stories.

They were frightening stories about a witch with long teeth and long nails!

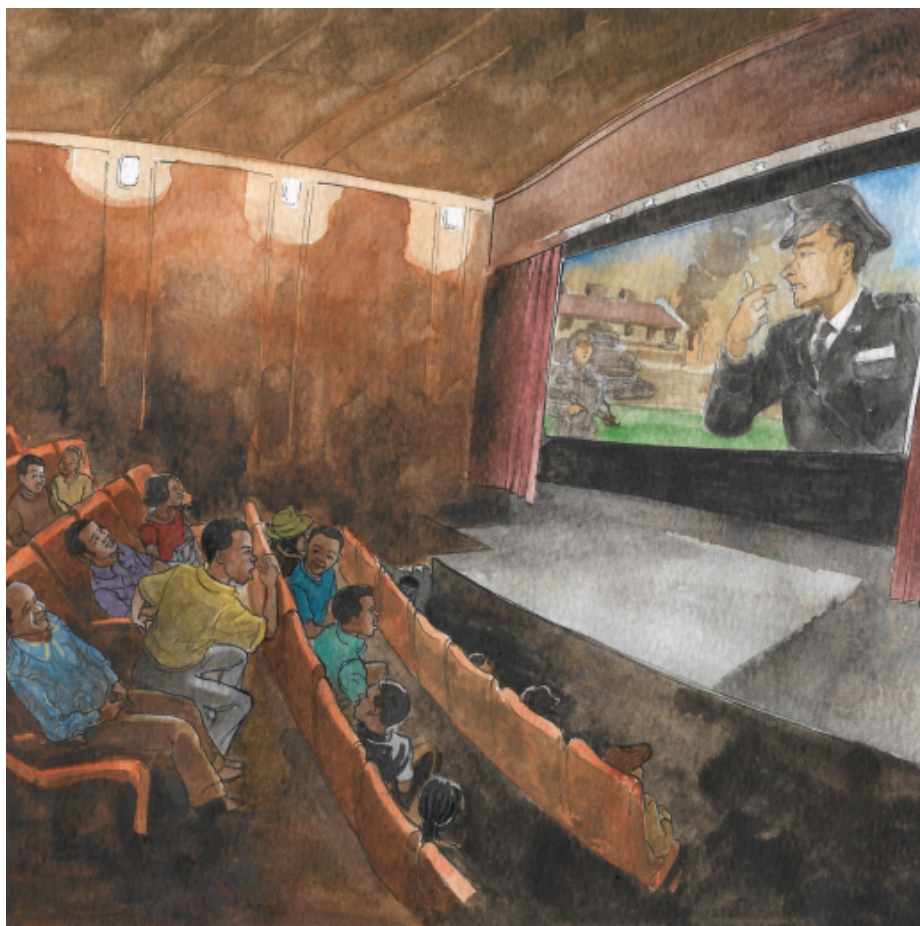


One day, his grandmother asked John to tell her a story.

He began, "Once upon a time, there was an old woman who always wanted children to tell her stories!"

John enjoyed telling stories. He began acting in plays at school.

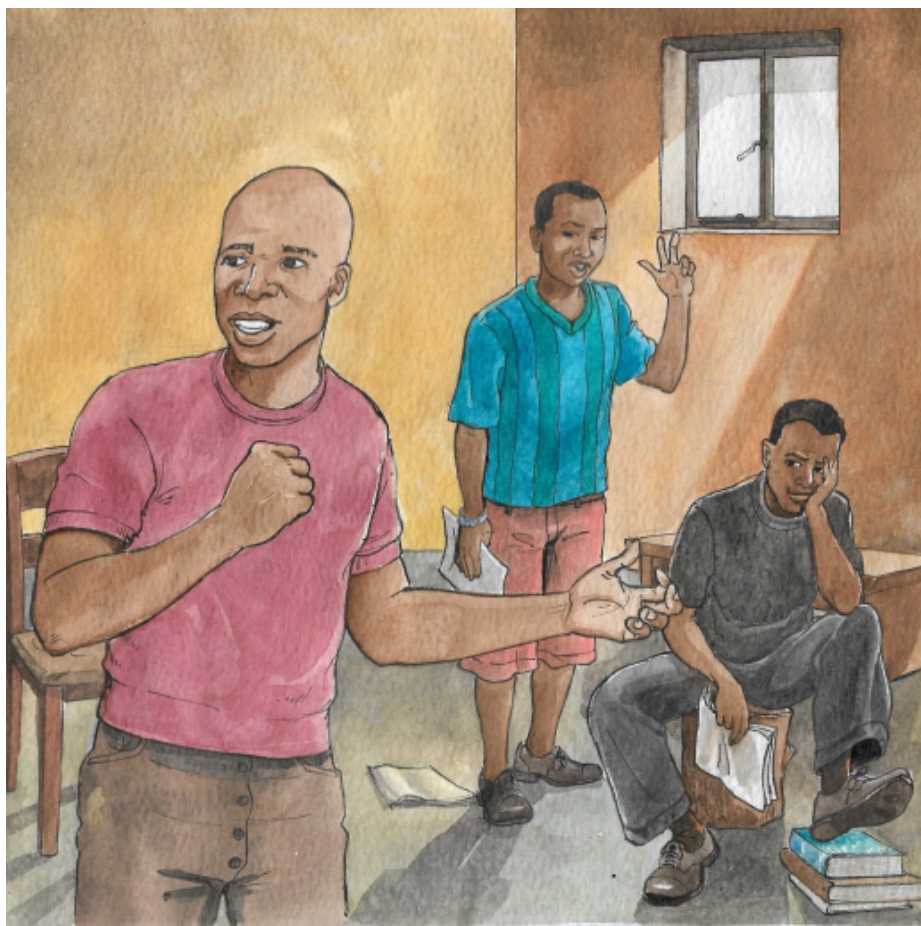
A play is a story performed by actors.



Actors can change their voices and pretend to be different people. They play all types of characters in plays and films.

When John was young, he would watch films with his friends who didn't understand English well.

John interpreted the English dialogue to his friends, playing different characters.



After completing High School, John worked at a factory. He also joined a group of actors, who worked in other jobs. They were mostly Black actors.

John said, "We were more than just a drama group. We were soldiers on stage. We used art to speak out against wrongs."

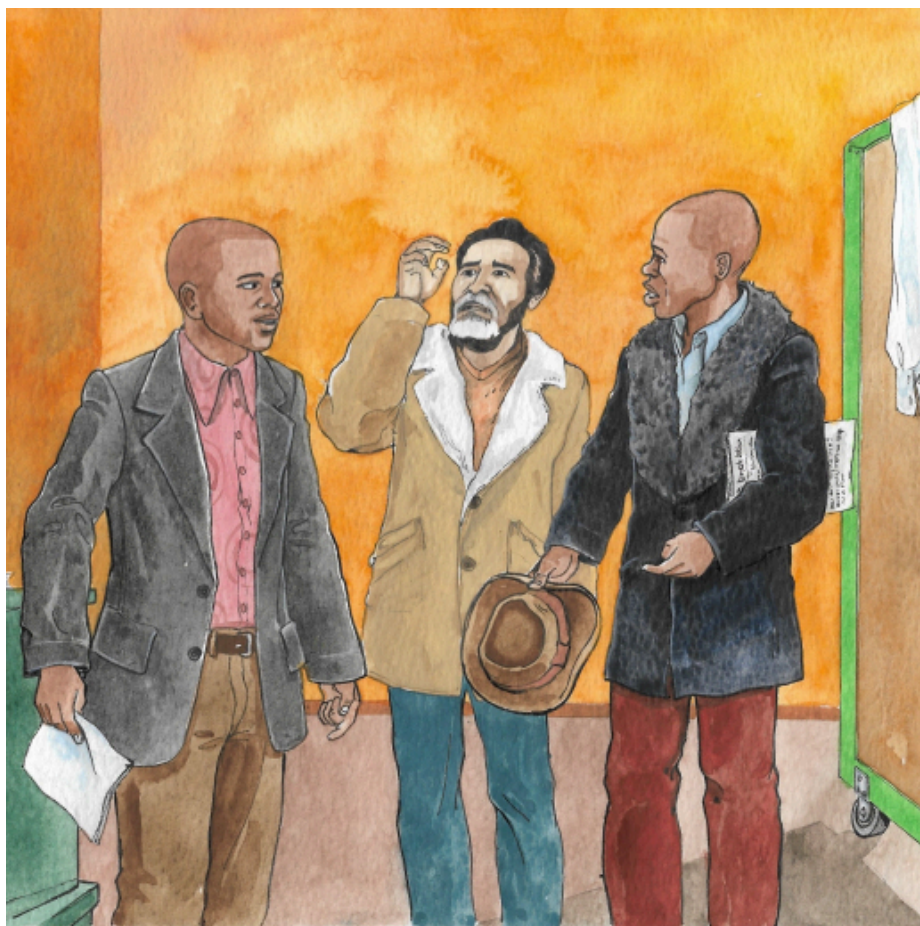


At this time, John became good friends with actor Winston Ntshona. They began creating plays together.

They were in a drama group called the Serpent Players.

This group's first performance was in the empty snake pit of the Gqeberha zoo.

That is why they called themselves the Serpent Players.



The Serpent Players was organised by Athol Fugard, another actor and writer.

Athol, John and Winston worked together to create two important plays in the early 1970s.

The plays were about the effects of apartheid on Black people.

The plays are called 'Sizwe Banzi is Dead' and 'The Island'.



‘SizweBanzi is Dead’ is about pass laws, when Black people had to carry an identity document called a passbook.

Sizwe Banzi can’t work because he can’t get a permit in his passbook.

‘The Island’ is about two men on Robben Island, in the famous jail for political prisoners.



In 1975 in New York, John and Winston won Tony Awards for 'Sizwe Banzi Is Dead' and 'The Island'.

The Tony Award is an important international award for excellent performance in theatre. (Plays are performed in a theatre.)

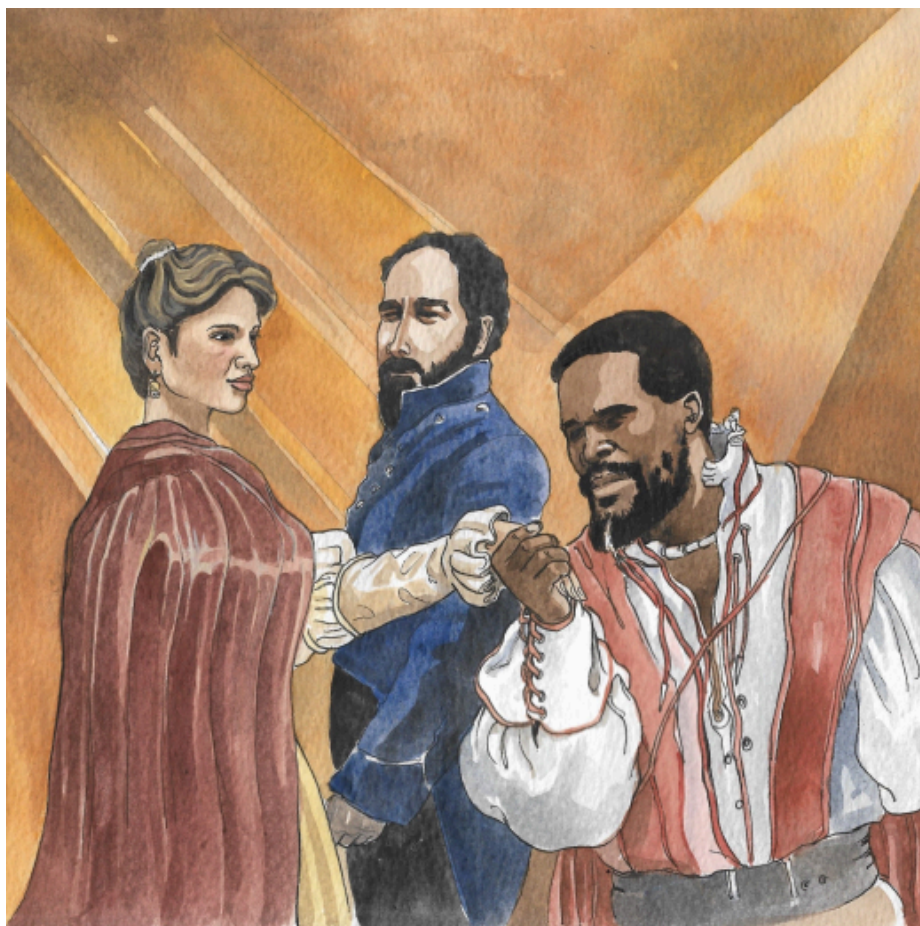
John began working with a theatre director called Barney Simon.



John and Barney established the Market Theatre Laboratory, which is part of the Market Theatre in Johannesburg.

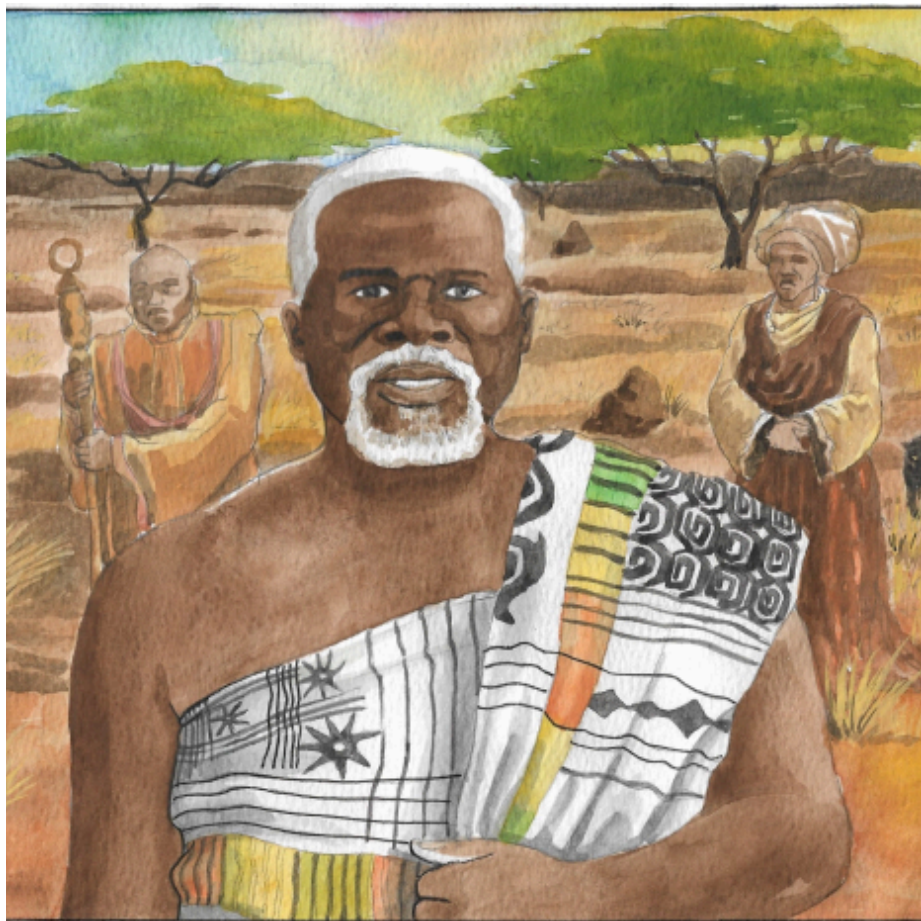
The Laboratory trains people who want to work in theatre, especially acting.

In 2014, the Market Theatre changed the name of its biggest venue to the John Kani Theatre, to honour him.



In 2002, John wrote his first play on his own. It is called 'Nothing but the Truth' and is set in South Africa after apartheid.

Over the years, he has acted in many types of plays, including "Othello" by William Shakespeare, and 'Miss Julie' by August Strindberg.

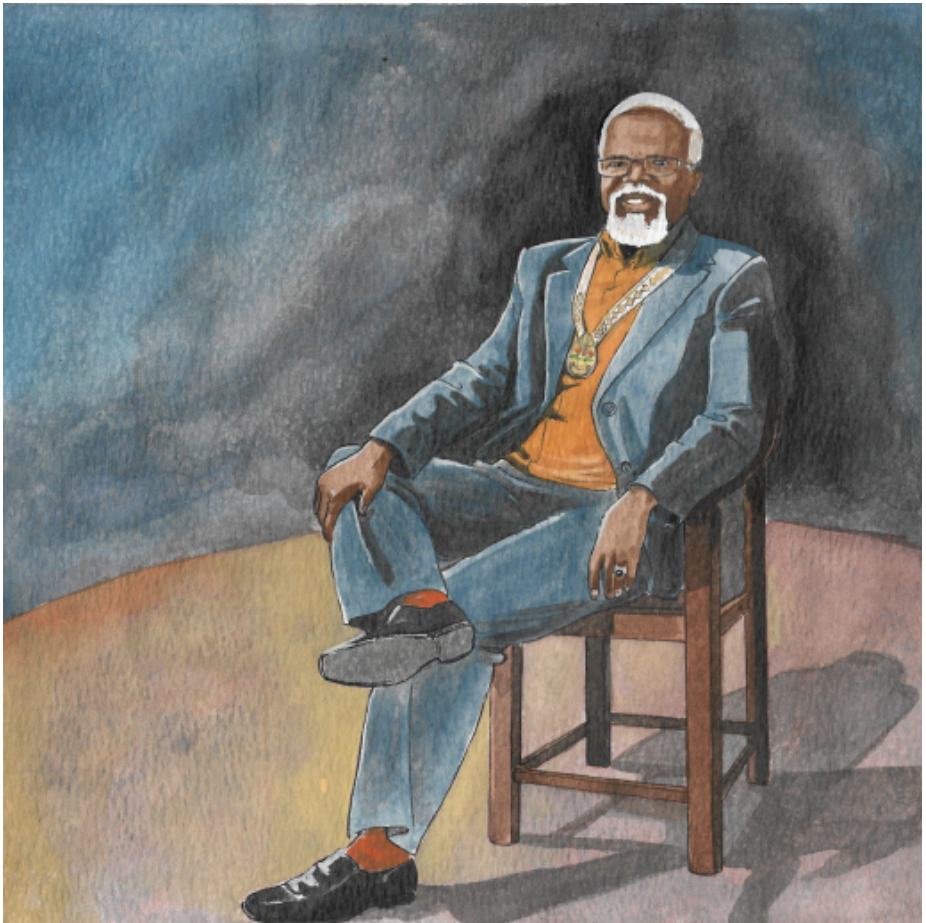


John has also acted in TV series and films.

In 2016, he played King T'Chaka of Wakanda in the film 'Captain America: Civil War'.

Two years later, he again played the King of Wakanda in the film 'Black Panther'.

John introduced isiXhosa as the language of Wakanda!



In 2005, John was awarded The Order of Ikhamanga by the South African Government.

This award is for excellent achievement in the creative fields, for example, in theatre, literature, music, or journalism.

Today, John is still writing, acting, and achieving in the world of theatre.

—This is what John Kani says about his achievements:

- “Theatre, writing and performing enable me to relate to what's going on inside me, in the centre of my soul.”
- What do you think he means? Talk about this with others.

## —Questions

1. Who influenced John Kani to tell stories? Why do you say so?
2. Explain what these people do in the theatre: actor, writer, director.
3. What was the origin of 'The Serpent Players' drama group's name?
4. Find out if there's a theatre group in your community.
5. How do actors become famous in their career?.
6. What are your views about the work of actors and musicians?
7. John Kani says, "We used art to speak out against wrongs." What wrongs might they have spoken against?
8. Why do you think people use art to speak about the wrongs in society?

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This storybook was created and written in Tshivenda, as part of the Zenex Ulwazi Lwethu reading materials project in 2021.



Ulwazi Lwethu is a Zenex Foundation funded and initiated project to develop a series of graded and leisure African language readers and teacher support materials. This project is targeted at teaching and supporting learners in the Foundation Phase to improve their home language reading and understanding. The readers have been originated in nine African languages in collaboration with Molteno Institute for Language and Literacies, Nelson Mandela Institute for Education and Rural Development, Room to Read South Africa, and Saide. All resources are developed as Open Education Resources (OER).



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