

## Shakespeare in South Africa: Alpha and ‘Omega’

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To sketch the presence and influence of Shakespeare in South Africa, past and present, in the space available, would leave the reader reeling and dizzy. There are simply too many producers, writers, educational impacts, translations, cultural debates, academic books, performances, editions, school texts, films, poems, dances, squabbles and surprises to consider. Instead, in line with the theme of the conference at which this paper was originally presented, ‘Shakespeare: Looking Before and After - - -’, I’m going to organize my observations around two particular performances, one ‘Before’ and one ‘After’.

‘Before’ and ‘After’ must carry particular connotations in the South African context. The great watershed is the liberation election of 1994, however contested or partial that liberation might be. The performances I have chosen to comment on are at two chronological extremes: the first Shakespearean performance on the sub-continent, together with the debates surrounding it, and a recent, groundbreaking Shakespearean production which premiered in July 2001. So as well as ‘Before’ and ‘After’, we will, in a sense, be looking at ‘Alpha’ and ‘Omega’, the beginning and the end of Shakespearean production in South Africa (taking ‘Omega’ here in a teleological rather than its literal bearing). For, of course, the pervasive question hovering over the entire discourse concerning Shakespeare in South Africa (perhaps more so than in many other post-colonial contexts) is ‘Why Shakespeare?’

First, an important point. From a sober Africanist perspective, Shakespeare in South Africa is a side-show to a side-show, just one significant strand in the marginal story of colonial drama and its heritage. The creative traditions that today feed the mainstream of South African theatre lie elsewhere, in South African history and tradition. The performance practices of the nomadic Khoisan, some 100 000 of whom today battle for cultural survival in the semi-desert areas of southern Africa (see Skotnes: 2001 for a short overview of their struggle), preserve ritualistic dances and dramas that go back, according to anthropologists, some 6000 years and more. Some of the dramatized songs and enacted ritual narratives of pre-colonial Africa, like the Xhosa *intsomi* and the Zulu *inganekwane*, are still performed, and key South African plays such as *Woza Albert!* (1981) and *Asinamali!* (1985) incorporate the influence of these genres in their formal structures. Syncretism and synthesis are the names of the game.

Nevertheless, if one chooses to focus on the colonial margin, and looks from there towards the processes shaping the cultural ferment that is taking place in the country at present, then colonial drama and Shakespeare in particular have made a significant impact. The organizational framework, the theatrical assumptions, and indeed, many of the theatres themselves (the buildings) grow from the conventions of theatre introduced into the sub-continent at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The framework I shall appropriate for this essay is that employed by Ian Willison in his survey of the development of national book cultures in the English-speaking world (Willison 2001). I'm not much of a believer in slavishly adhering to patterns in history when it comes to cultural studies because the superficial coherence they provide invariably tends to evaporate on closer inspection. Nevertheless, Willison's broad brush-strokes do provide a starting point. He adumbrates four roughly chronological stages of cultural development:

- 1) Exploration
- 2) Consolidation of cultures
- 3) Progress towards a national culture
- 4) Convergence in a poly-centred, largely anglophone, multi-media cosmopolis.

What interests me about this pattern is that it may be far closer to developments in Australia and New Zealand than it is to the South African case. The reason is that the schema reflects a notion of gradual colonial emancipation, where the coloniser remains on top to effect the transition to globalised cultural participation. In South Africa the colonial culture was always a precarious construct predicated on a denial of reality. Reality has broken through, and is breaking through, with a power of surprise that will probably never occur in Oceania. That is why I'm going to try and emphasise aspects of Shakespeare in South Africa that may differ to an extent from the kind of experience discussed in the book edited by Golder and Madeleine (*O Brave New World: Two Centuries of Shakespeare on the Australian Stage*, 2001). Of course it would indeed be possible, and important, to replicate that kind of discourse with reference to South Africa.

### **The Beginning**

Shakespeare in South Africa starts with an apparition, then a ghost and finally a concrete event. The apparition and the ghost both concern Hamlet. First the apparition. On December 17, 1607, two ships from the East India Company's third voyage dropped anchor in Table Bay. Tradition has it that a performance of *Hamlet* took place aboard Captain William Keeling's flagship, the *Red Dragon*, during the fleet's two-week stay at the Cape (for example, see Racster 1951). There is absolutely no evidence for this. The supposition rests on extrapolation from the famous performances of *Hamlet* and *Richard III* off the coast of Africa earlier in the same voyage. This evidence appears in Thomas Rundall's *Narratives of Voyages towards the North-West* [1849], which includes transcripts from Keeling's journal indicating his reasons for permitting and encouraging drama on board. He saw it as 'a beneficial source of recreation', as a possible remedy for idleness and boredom, as opposed to 'gaming', which was prohibited according to his commission from the East India Company (Taylor 2000: 230-31). Sidney Lee, following Clements Markham, threw doubt on the authenticity of these entries because the crucial passage was missing in what he took to be Keeling's journal. Unfortunately, Markham phrased his account of the *lacuna* using language such as 'robbery' and 'abstracted', in

such a way as to lead Sidney Lee to suspect forgery or other skulduggery. A farrago of scholarly misprision followed. It took the redoubtable William Foster, like Rundall an employee in the India Office, writing in 1900, to clear up the mystery when he showed that Markham had confused a journal kept on board the *Hector*, not by her captain but by a factor, with Captain Keeling's journal; that the latter was missing in its entirety, bar the first virtually illegible leaf; and that it really was not very surprising that this should be the case, given the casualness with which these earlier records were treated by the India Office over a prolonged period (See Foster 1900 and Foster 1919: i-ii). Indeed, the introduction to Frederick Danvers' 1896 East India Company *List of Marine Records* indicates doubt as to whether Samuel Purchas himself returned many of the original journals used for his *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas his Pilgrimes* (1625) to East India House (iv). A final complicating factor is a misprint, or rather an omission, which dates the second of the two recorded performances of *Hamlet* as taking place rather mysteriously on September 31, 1607. This puzzle is cleared up, as Foster notes (1900: 42), when one examines the India House copy of Rundall's book in which the second performance is carefully dated, in pencil, possibly by Rundall himself, as having taken place on the 31 March 1608. This would place the second *Hamlet* performance as occurring while the *Dragon* lay becalmed shortly before arrival at the island of Socotra on the east coast. Thus we have *Hamlet* before Cape Town, *Hamlet* after Cape Town, so why not *Hamlet in Cape Town*?

I confess myself agnostic on the whole issue. A play provides an occasion for entertainment, for hospitality, and for political influence, just as it has for The British Council ever since. *Hamlet* could have been used to consolidate British authority among the diverse colonial populace in Cape Town. On the other hand, two weeks is not a long time, and after a strenuous voyage there was much to be done to prepare the ship for the next leg. In all probability, we will never know. So much for the apparition.

The 'ghost', also a performance of *Hamlet*, possibly took place towards the end of 1799 on the battlements of Fort Frederick, a British redoubt constructed on the hills above the Baakens river in Algoa Bay, where Port Elizabeth stands today. In the mid -1970s, during refurbishment of a Masonic Lodge on Richmond Hill in Port Elizabeth, several documents were uncovered among early Lodge records. One of these was a hand-drawn and dated poster advertising a performance of *Hamlet* by the garrison at Fort Frederick. It may well have been that the performance was associated with the completion of the Fort, which occurred towards the end of 1799.

With no further testimony, the inspiration behind the endeavour can best be deduced from the topography. The Fort was hastily constructed to reinforce a temporary wooden blockhouse earlier assembled almost at shore-level to guard the most obvious landing place in Algoa Bay, at this date the furthest outpost of the Cape Colony. The strategy was two-fold: to put down a rebellion by disgruntled Dutch farmers inland around Graaff-Reinet, who were taking advantage of the Napoleonic upheavals in Europe to claim independence from authority of any kind, be it the Dutch East India Company or the British; and, secondly, to stop the French exploiting the situation by supporting the rebels from the sea. In addition, the Xhosa made common cause with the Khoikhoi at this time

to attack the Dutch farmers, together with the British Dragoons and a company of Khoi soldiers under the command of Brigadier-General Vandeleur, who were sent to restore peace. Viewed from Cape Town, the situation was messy and construction of the Fort was the response.

The new stone structure was built high above the Bay, where it could dominate shipping. Lady Anne Barnard in Cape Town, probably repeating the views of her capable husband Andrew, Secretary to the Colony, was scathing about the whole operation. She wrote to Lord Macartney, erstwhile Governor of the Cape (Jan 9 1800), ‘A blockhouse was sent for by Genl. Dundas, it arrived, he placed it where he liked without taking advice, it was good for nothing, being too low in its situation, & is now used as a corn-mill. He erected another on a height so great that cannon cannot be drag’d up to it, so I believe this must be a windmill’ (Fairbridge 132). And, indeed, other than through its very existence, Fort Frederick, as it was named after George III’s son, the Duke of York, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, contributed little militarily either to the conquest or the defence of the Eastern frontier. From our point of view, it could probably be seen as the most expensive and durable set for *Hamlet* ever constructed! – that is really its only claim to fame. For existential colonial isolation, the dramatic situation could hardly be bettered. From a European perspective, there was nothing there, no town, few structures nearby other than the barracks and officers quarters, nothing further inland other than a few scattered farmsteads, and then the wilds of Africa. Cape Town is a rugged 800 kilometres away, and home is Britain. Here *Hamlet* is played - if the advertised performance actually took place - presumably by a small group of theatrical enthusiasts among the military, to an audience composed of their fellow soldiers and a few hangers on. Or so we may imagine.

Unfortunately, this performance of *Hamlet* is, we hope temporarily, a ghost also in the bibliographical sense. The crucial document having been bound (in the green leatherette preferred by Lodge Caledonia) along with records of the founding of the Port Elizabeth Camera Club and the local SPCA, the latter found their way back to an appropriate *fons et origo*. The Shakespeare document had no obvious home. It was left with the Lodge records, became separated from them, and the search is still on for its recovery. So the historicity of the event at present relies on testimony: what we still need is the evidence.

Now we come to the real event. The first recorded performance of Shakespeare in South Africa took place at the opening of the African Theatre in Cape Town in September 1801, the year after the first Australian production which, if it happened, took place in Sydney on April 8, 1800. As with Australia, the play was *Henry IV, Part 1*. Let us start by looking at a notice from the *Cape Town Gazette*:

Theatricals being on the eve of being introduced into this Colony, and, of course, the customary honor paid to our Immortal Bard, by opening with one of his pieces, the admirers of Shakespeare will be gratified at hearing the price at which the first editions of some of that Author’s works sold for, at the sale of books, the property of the late Mr Steevens, the Commentator:

“The Chronicle History of Henry V.”

produced - - -	L. 27 6 0
“Midsummer Night’s Dream,”	“ 25 0 0
“Merry Wives of Windsor,”	“ 28 0 0

(*Cape Town Gazette* 14.1, Saturday, November 15, 1800)

Here we have, it would seem, a classic instance of Shakespeare the national British playwright (as constructed in the eighteenth century) being moulded to imperial needs, and about to instantiate Roland Frye’s comment that ‘it seemed natural for Englishmen to take a copy of Shakespeare with them wherever they might go in the course of founding an empire’ (Frye plate 66). Moreover the impending performance is rhetorically yoked by violence (or natural affinity?) to the monetary value of the Shakespeare text as cultural commodity, using information gleaned from notices of the auction of Steevens’s library which took place in London in May 1800. Add the fact that Dutch farmers and Khoisan traders were moved from the land on which the African Theatre was built, formerly Cape Town’s informal market where they had habitually done business (see John Barrow’s comments below), and you have an almost perfect prospectus for the future indictment of colonial entertainment in South Africa.

This is certainly part of the story, but the reality is much more complicated and lies in the curious personality of the new Governor Sir George Yonge, whose goings on remind one of nothing so much as those of Toad of Toad Hall, with Sir John Barrow and Andrew Barnard playing Ratty and Mole respectively. The future of the Colony was very undecided, the British having taken over in 1795 with their intentions rather unclear. Lord Macartney, the previous governor, put in place a sound administrative system in the course of his short stay. Sir George fouled the whole thing up effortlessly. He virtually ignored his hard-working colonial secretary, Barnard, and went ahead with lavish schemes, all involving the expenditure of large sums of money. He repaired the Castle and the Great Barracks in Cape Town, as well as those in Simons Town; he restored and elaborated the Government Gardens and fishponds, and attempted to turn them into the Governor’s private gardens (much to the alarm of young women used to being courted there, according to Lady Anne). Sir John Barrow, writing to Yonge’s predecessor, raged:

The prodigal manner in which the public money has been thrown away in the course of the last twelve Months is scarcely credible. The Garden alone, with its walls and water Spouts and fishponds has cost fifty thousand Rixdollars, exclusive of the labor and enormous expence of five and fifty slaves that are daily employed in it to the great detriment of the public works and defences of the Settlement - - -’

(John Barrow 1800)

Then, having particularly enjoyed an amateur theatrical production at the Barracks, Sir George leapt from that experience to the idea of a fully-fledged theatre for the Colony. Barrow was appalled. His catalogue of folly rises to a notable climax:

How ever so much the preceeding government might have gained of confidence in the people is more than lost by the present one. In their eyes Our Nation has disgraced itself. – The articles of Capitulation [signed by the Dutch administration and the British naval and army commanders on September 16, 1795] broken in almost every act – New taxes imposed and old ones encreased – ancient privileges trampled on and new ones granted – monopolies created – a maximum fixed on the produce of industry – the old Servants of Government – treated with the greatest contempt and indifference – the Country people driven out of their old accustomed resort, the Hottentot’s Square, & ordered under the brow of Lion’s Head in order to make room for a Theatre ! – Such things justify complaint- - .  
(John Barrow 1800)

The point I’m making is that had it not been for the idiosyncracies of Sir George Yonge, which flew in the face of responsible colonial policy, Shakespeare’s debut on the sub-continent, wherever and whenever it might have occurred, would probably have been far less impressive. At this particular moment, official opinion was against the scheme, and an uncertain zone somewhere between rude political power and its congruent colonial culture opens up in a subtly dissonant manner. Into the space steps Shakespeare. Sir George spent hours watching the construction of his theatre, which he designed himself, in the company of his companion, Miss Blake (who was *not* his niece, Lady Anne tells us), until he was relieved of his position thanks to gross incompetence and dishonesty, returning to England before the theatre opened. Perhaps the worst of the numerous blots on his record was his condoning the attempt to import illegally thousands of slaves from Mozambique, by means of a faked logbook and perjury, pretending they had been captured aboard prize ships off Madagascar. Yonge accepted a large bribe and his aides would have benefited from the deal (Kannemeyer 169). So Toad went home.

The cost of the building was £2500. It was lavishly equipped, operated by subscription, (£24 per annum for a box for 6 persons) and there was no pit for ordinary people (see Barnard 1973, 252). A thoroughly elite affair. Barrow refused to subscribe, so incensed was he (Barrow 1801). Lady Anne wavered, worried about her husband’s views and the dreaded thought that she might be required to act in it. That was tantamount to something far worse.

Eventually she gave in and with her husband attended the opening, which she described in a letter to Lord Macartney, thus inadvertently producing South Africa’s first extended piece of theatrical criticism, in which she skewers those who had supinely succumbed to Sir George’s lax regime. It reads in part:

The piece was a dull one, the first part of Henry the 4<sup>th</sup>. The Doctor thought that he shone in Falstaff, we did not agree with him. Do you remember the soliloquy upon Honour? It was not a bad stricture on some people present had they felt it so. ‘What is honour? A word. Who hath it? The man that died on Wednesday - - . Do you not think I had some virtue for not loudly clapping, & looking certain folks in the face?

(Fairbridge 290-91)

Why *Henry IV, Part I*? Well, the obvious point is that a military play suits a cast made up of soldiers and, as we have seen, ladies were reluctant to participate for reasons of social propriety. James Orde, a Captain in the 98<sup>th</sup>/91<sup>st</sup> Highlanders (the Regiment changed its name in 1798) played Hotspur. He evidently owned a horse at the Turf Club, then situated at Greenpoint, and was serving as Steward of the Club at the time. The Prince was played by Henry Baring of the East India Company, who was visiting the Colony quite fortuitously for reasons of health. He arrived in July 1801, and departed in September, giving him just time to be part of the show. But perhaps military sensibility was not the only factor determining the choice of play. It may well have been that somebody wanted to play Falstaff.

As we have seen, the role was taken by ‘the Doctor’, Edmund Somers, Physician to the General Hospital. Several months before the production Lady Anne Barnard had written of him, in a letter to Lord Wellesley (14. 9. 1800): ‘tho a good comedian, [he] is a very bad physician from having his faculties in a total state of inebriation every day after dinner’ (Barnard 1973: 252). Perhaps Dr Somers had something to say about the choice of play.

Charity and the need for social development were not forgotten. The *Cape Town Gazette* for Saturday September 9, 1801 contains a notice which reads as follows:

It is with pleasure we have it in our powers to announce, that the profits of the First Six Nights representation at the African theatre, (after the necessary expenses have been defrayed), are to be applied to the Fund of the late established institution, the “lying in Hospital for Soldier’s Wives.”

The African Theatre was certainly not an ‘Anglo’ affair. The Dutch, Germans and the French all used the theatre, with their own amateur dramatic groups performing in their own languages. Having completed his imperial task, Shakespeare didn’t get a further look in there until much later, to the best of our knowledge. The African Theatre survived until 1838, when it succumbed to puritan pressures emanating from the Dutch press and filtering largely from there into the English-speaking community. The theatre was sold, lock, stock and barrel - including costumes, backdrops and lighting - by its then sole owner, one John Thomas Buck. It was converted into a church for freed slaves, a fact which so incensed the local citizenry ‘deprived of their slaves and now of their entertainment’ (Fletcher 1994:67) that they rioted, stoned the church and smashed its windows.

Today the African Theatre building, only slightly altered, stands forlornly amidst a car park in Riebeeck Square, off Long Street in the heart of Cape Town. Passers by know it as St. Stephen’s Church - after the Christian martyr who was stoned to death - and few have the faintest idea of its significance.

## **Exploration**

Of course, the roots of colonial theatre in South Africa go back well before this landmark Shakespeare production, but I want to argue that it would be inappropriate to regard the gradual development of colonial theatre in South Africa, including Shakespeare, as belonging to a cultural phase styled 'exploration' (cf. Willison's schema), and instead see it as part of a largely deluded effort at colonial consolidation. This is not to say that the story is without interest or importance, merely that colonial theatre failed until much later to engage meaningfully with southern African *realia*, and even then with dubious success.

But Shakespeare *has* made a tangential contribution to genuine cultural exploration through processes of translation, and here we begin to look towards the second production (the 'After' production) upon which I intend to focus, which has tapped into this heritage of appropriation. South Africa has a rich heritage of Shakespearean translations, some 60 in all, approximately half of them into Afrikaans, the remainder in African languages. Some of them are lost, found only in fragments, but the majority awaits further study, adaptation or performance. Among the more famous of these are Sol Plaatje's Tswana translations of *A Comedy of Errors* (1930) and *Julius Caesar* (1937) (his translations of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *Much Ado* have been lost); Uys Krige's Afrikaans translations of *Twelfth Night* (1967) and *King Lear* (1971), and the seven translations by K.E. Masinga into Zulu in the early 1950s. Breyten Breytenbach produced an Afrikaans translation of *Titus Andronicus* in 1970; André Brink did *Richard III* (1969) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1975).

The motive behind these translations in most cases seems to be a mixture of fascination with Shakespeare by creative writers and a desire to build the cultural authority of the target language by testing it against the blue-chip international standard of Shakespeare. As is well known, under missionary influence translations of the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Shakespeare are staples of early cultural development for African languages across Anglophone Africa. Sol Plaatje's Tswana translations undoubtedly extended the range of the language, and are admired even today for their style and cultural deftness. The experience also convinced Plaatje of the importance of creating an adequate Tswana dictionary. Other efforts, so I read, are sometimes stodgy plods through academic literalism (Shole 1990/91). For African languages as a whole, the translation phase can be viewed either as a deviation from indigenous development or a necessary base for the growth of internationalism. Both viewpoints seem to apply, though contemporary South African theatre owes little to Shakespeare.

An exception may be Yael Farber's production *SeZaR* which premiered at the Grahamstown Festival in July 2001. It has gone on to win plaudits at the Oxford Playhouse, as well as in Cape Town and Johannesburg. The production draws heavily upon Plaatje's 1937 translation of *Julius Caesar* (*Dintshontsho tsa bo-Juliuse Kesara*). Sol Plaatje was a pioneering journalist, politician, cultural visionary, and writer. He was also one of the founders of the ANC. His engagement with Shakespeare, recorded most forcibly in his contribution to Israel Gollancz's Tercentenary *Book of Homage to Shakespeare* (1916), a work he probably helped to edit (Willan 194), bore fruit in his novel *Mhudi* (1930), which treats the defeat of the Barolong by the Ndebele in the 1830s.



Originally published by the Lovedale Press, this is the first full-length novel in English by an African. Certainly the debt to Shakespeare is written all over it, from the sense of history, to the function of genre and details of diction. One thing indeed which Shakespeare saved Plaatje from was the sclerotic Victorian naturalism that might have been his lot had he taken the novel genre as his model. The vein of cultural translation inaugurated by *Mhudi* can also be seen in the Shakespearean impact on some of the long-neglected plays of Herbert Dhlomo, such as *Dingane* and *Cetshwayo* (both 1936/7), though here the influence is less fruitful.

Perhaps the tail-end of this line of cultural exploration via Shakespeare comes with R.L. Peteni's *Hill of Fools* (1976), a re-working of the *Romeo and Juliet* story in terms of ongoing tension between the Thembus and the Hlubis, the former being among the earlier Xhosa-speaking occupants of this region – Nelson Mandela is a Thembu chief - and the latter Mfengu, a splinter-grouping that retreated into the Eastern Cape in the early nineteenth century following the successive upheavals associated with the regime of Tshaka. The story derives from childhood memories of similar conflicts, though Peteni was never a participant (see Peteni, forthcoming). Two points about *Hill of Fools* are interesting. The novel is rooted in deep-rural Xhosa concerns, it has no white characters, and more or less ignores apartheid. (One of the readers for the Heinemann African Writers Series wrote furiously: 'I feel not just disappointed with this one – but angered. How can a competent writer (he is) in S.A. in 1973 expend his energy on a tale of simple tribal life – a moral tale, what's worse?' ([R de L]).) Other referees, while not over-enthusiastic, pressed for the book's publication, and so via the clout of an influential overseas publisher, *Hill of Fools* was propelled towards a global audience, appeared in hardback in South Africa through an agreement with the local publisher David Philip, and later went on to become for some years a school set-work.

The most obvious, even time-worn, example of South African Shakespeare being projected onto the world stage by a process of cultural translation is, of course, Welcome Msomi's *Umabatha*, a reworking of Zulu epic on the lines of *Macbeth*. The original production, directed by Pieter Scholtz and produced by Elizabeth Sneddon, went on tour in 1969 and opened the World Theatre season at the Aldwych in London on April 3 1972. London audiences went berserk, overwhelmed by the energy, spectacle and – dare I say it – the exoticism of it all.

Msomi revived the show after a surprise encounter in New York in 1991: 'President Mandela looked at me and said, 'I know you. You are Welcome Msomi – where is *Umabatha*?' (Pacio 1997). The revived version tried (perhaps unsuccessfully) to distance itself rather more from its roots in a Shakespearean catalysis. The show has once again been all round the world. When it played in London in 1997, and once more in 2001 at the Globe, the enthusiasm was still there. It is difficult to argue with success.

But I'm going to try. In 1997, Binghampton University in the US devoted a semester to the theme 'Africa, Shakespeare and Global Perspectives', with a programme that included the Orson Welles *Macbeth*, Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, a display of African sculpture and two episodes of *Shaka Zulu*, the controversial TV series. A panel

discussion involved luminaries such as Ali Mazrui, Immanuel Wallerstein of the Fernand Braudel Centre, and Michael Horowitz. But the centerpiece of the whole occasion was – you guessed it – a ‘world-class theatrical event, *Umabatha, The Zulu Macbeth*.’ Evidently no one saw any incongruity. Still, here and there a dissentient voice is raised. Jean Meiring wrote from Oxford in a recent review:

Yes, during the Apartheid years some pieces of South African theatre were proffered to the world and were embraced by foreign audiences on other than artistic grounds. Those years – gloriously – are past. So should our bringing inadequate art to foreign shores.

That phase of Shakespeare’s influence on South African cultural development, starting with the missionaries and ending with *Umabatha* is over, and will not come again. Individual artists will probably continue to make use of him from time to time. Nadine Gordimer’s novel *My Son’s Story* (1991) has been moved into the realm of women re-writing Shakespeare, in this case *Othello*, courtesy of Marianne Novy’s work (e.g. Novy 1999; 2001). Several of André Brink’s best-known novels bear testimony to his prolonged preoccupation with Shakespeare (Diale 2002). Geoffrey Haresnape has recently published a collection of stories in which Africa writes and re-writes Shakespeare (Haresnape 1999). The visual artists have not been idle: one thinks, for instance of the late Lucky Sibiyi’s series of *Macbeth* prints in the Fort Hare Art Gallery, or Cecil Skotnes’s illustrations for the Quagga edition of Plaatje’s *Mhudi* (1975). There is the remarkable ballet *Hamlet*, choreographed by Veronica Paeper with music by Peter Klatzow (1992), which apparently caused something of a sensation when the Cape Town Ballet took it to Sadler’s Wells. And so the process of transfiguration will probably go on.

### **Consolidation**

Could it be argued that Shakespeare has been part of a process of cultural consolidation in South Africa? I hardly think so. True, he has been wheeled into force fairly thoroughly in secondary and tertiary education for many years (see below). But it might profitably be argued that his role has been that of a metropolitan reference point, as the centerpiece of western literary culture rather than as a living entity in the South African cultural pantheon. Shakespeare is generally respected in South Africa but he is not regarded, in Conrad’s phrase, as ‘one of us.’ The exception to this generalisation occurs, as it so often does, when a thoughtful production leads to magical moments of identification and surprise in live performance, and it is these which keep Shakespeare part of the South African theatrical repertoire. He survives because Shakespeare is good theatre.

As far as theatrical history is concerned, a particular academic focus on Shakespeare (and I’m not here referring to the crazed conspiracy theorists who adorn the international Shakespeare scene at the moment) can reveal only one component of the colonial dramatic enterprise, and indeed, I’m coming to question whether colonial Shakespeare can or should be studied apart from the full spectrum of theatrical entertainment, the real

story of colonial theater. Look through the play-listings and sure, Shakespeare is there. But is he there with the emphasis placed on him by today's international academic Shakespeare industry? That seems to me an important question.

### **Progress towards a national culture?**

Much the same could be said of Shakespeare's role in the bogus effort of Afrikaner Nationalism to create a white apartheid culture, with a capital 'c'. The establishment of the four National Arts Councils towards the end of 1963, one for each province (remember that today South Africa has nine provinces), was to inaugurate what the apartheid regime fondly imagined would be a period of national formation, the South African equivalent of Ian Willison's third phase of cultural development. The thrust of the exercise can be sampled from the introduction to a lavishly illustrated official book, ominously 'Issued by the Department of Information', celebrating the achievements of the performing arts four years after the establishment of the Arts Councils. It goes like this:

The standards by which a people's degree of civilization should be measured are bewildering in their complexity and diversity - - - There is, however, a single barometer from which a nation's measure of maturity can be gleaned at a single glance: the vitality of its cultural life and its achievements in the fields of art, literature, theatre and music.

*(Performing Arts in South Africa, [1])*<sup>1</sup>

There follows a book-long eulogy of South African creativity in which not only is there not one reference to a South African of colour, but the entire discussion is focused on western art forms. If this was nation-building, it can only be described as an effort to confirm and consolidate a fantasy.

Shakespeare production was obviously part of this dispensation, but not as conspicuously as one might anticipate. In the four years in question CAPAB, the Arts Council for the Cape Province, produced one Shakespeare – an Afrikaans production of *Richard III* – out of 69 productions; the Natal Council (NAPAC) produced 5 Shakespeares in English out of 40 productions – Natal was a more 'English' province, in apartheid terms; the Orange Free State did 6 Shakespeares out of 35 productions (interestingly, the 6 came from only 18 English productions); and PACT in the Transvaal produced only 4 Shakespeare-related productions out of 63, just one of which was a straight production in English. We learn from this, bluntly, that the Netherlandic or pan-European orientation of the Afrikaner elite perhaps tempered any tendency to Bardophilia in public, however much the literary establishment might have admired Shakespeare in private. In this sense, Shakespeare under apartheid was something of an inconsequential victim of the agonies suffered by the Afrikaners during the Anglo-Boer War.

The Shakespeare productions under the Arts Councils were often very good. There was a tendency to ape Stratford, but also some refreshing experiment, particularly in the late

80s. A Director like Ralph Lawson likes his Shakespeare and likes him straight-up (I'm thinking here of his 1993 production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at Maynardville). Marthinus Basson, on the other hand, enjoys intelligent iconoclasm. His *Macbeth* at the National Arts Festival in the 80s disrupted venue schedules because there was so much blood. The stage-hands couldn't get rid of it before the next performance was due to start.

(There is a rich field here for theatrical research, a major task of which will be to separate out the national and international influences on Shakespearean production during apartheid.)

### **The future**

While all this was going on, the real energies of South African creativity were somewhere else altogether, battling to reconcile protest and subversion with very different notions of the function of art, and very different sources of inspiration. Shakespeare didn't make waves – unless, that is, he made a grand entrance as part of a cultural infusion from that mythical realm known as 'overseas.'

The cultural boycott which gathered strength in the 1980s tended to make South Africans hyper-picky about theatre – a kind of reverse 'cultural cringe'. That was certainly part of the reaction to two overseas-influenced productions, this time injected into the country from the cosmopolis. One was Janet Suzman's 1997 production of *Othello* at the Market Theatre, starring John Kani in the title role and the late Richard Haines as Iago. Kani got some bad press for seeming a bit swamped in the role, being unintelligible at times and forgetting his lines. Haines tended to overplay. But the production overall was powerful in conception, clean, and made its cultural and racial point without resorting to strident signposting. The evidence is there in the film record of the production. Then came Antony Sher's *Titus*. The production was huge when it later toured in Britain. At the Market it rather flopped, not least because Sher relied on a foreign cast to play clumsy stereotyped Afrikaners. This didn't really work. Sher was deeply wounded, and assumed that the reaction was the result of his leading role in galvanizing the cultural boycott. Well, it may have been in part, but the lesson perhaps was that exile is a state of mind not easily relinquished. He has written in detail about the whole experience (Sher and Doran 1996; Sher 2001).

Even off the stage Shakespeare retains his power to provoke public debate. 2001 was enlivened by a *fracas* about school literature prescriptions in Gauteng Province (the industrial and commercial heartland of South Africa) in which Shakespeare was reasonably prominent. The *scandale* centred on the all-too-public revelation of the mindset that underlay the idiosyncratic judgments of prescription committees. *King Lear* had a 'rather ridiculous and unlikely' plot. *Hamlet* was 'not appealing to modern learners as royalty is no longer fashionable'. Many more such bizarre pronouncements were bandied about, but Shakespeare was not especially singled out in the prescription process. Gordimer's *July's People*, for instance, was 'deeply racist, superior and patronising'. The depth of public reaction from all quarters was encouraging. Petitions flourished and letters to the editor frothed and foamed. Writers leapt to the defence of literature:

everyone from Nadine Gordimer to Achmat Dangor, to Andries Oliphant and Mike Nicol.

From a Shakespearean standpoint, one of the more interesting responses came from Deputy Safety and Security Minister Joe Matthews, who urged that ‘the Gauteng latterday Zdzhanovs would be more sympathetic to Hamlet if they were aware of a close connection with SA’. Matthews is the son of ZK Matthews of Fort Hare University (he was that institution’s first graduate and first black Rector – though in an acting capacity – and a leading politician, activist and intellectual in the ANC). Joe Matthews recalled that his father’s autobiography had been edited by the distinguished South African anthropologist Monica Wilson, daughter-in-law of John Dover Wilson. (In fact, if you look at the introduction to Dover Wilson’s Cambridge edition of the Sonnets, you will read there a romanticized account of him sitting in the shade of a Deodar tree on the lawns of Hunterston, his daughter-in-law’s home high in the Hogsback Mountains of the Eastern Cape looking over the valley of the Tyume river, as he finishes work on the manuscript. Adventitiously, this is the landscape over which the drama in Peten’s *Hill of Fools* plays itself out.) This family association, Joe Matthews asserted, ‘should provide justification for reversing the absurd decision to exclude Hamlet and other literary works from the syllabus’ (Matthews 2001).

Despite such robust if partial defence, the future of Shakespeare in the South African education system is less than certain. To date there is no sign of him disappearing from the school syllabus as an option – and it is important to note that Shakespeare has not been compulsory since the early 1980s. He is popular with many teachers for both good and bad reasons. The good reasons include the high quality of the learning opportunities that can be created around Shakespeare in the hands of talented and skilled teachers. The bad reasons include the ease with which a standard Shakespeare prescription can lead to zero levels of innovation and preparation on the part of lazy teachers, and the equal ease with which egotistical pedants can indulge themselves in the gratifying role of privileged mediators of esoteric background knowledge to hapless initiates, at the expense of experiencing the plays.

These were among the findings of a study undertaken in the Institute in which I work, which dealt with the use of literature generally in the additional language classroom (Walters and England 1988). To cut a long story short, the research team, in consultation with other researchers, devised a very different approach to the Shakespeare text, one which treats the words on the page primarily as a script for performance, and starts from higher-order constructs of story and situation before working towards the hurdle of learning to read Shakespeare’s language (Lemmer 1988). The major emphasis is on imagining an experience, rather than bottom-up decoding of text. We find this approach has the added advantage of satisfying the diverse needs of heterogeneous classrooms more appropriately than various literary-critical or media-reliant alternatives. Its danger is that the unwary may subtly subvert the noble educational maxim that intellectual engagement should be fun by inferring from it that whatever is fun must be educationally valuable. This isn’t so.

The turmoil through which the South African school system is passing has very little to do with Shakespeare. Those parts of the system that are dysfunctional – and they are not only black schools formerly managed by the Department of Education and Training, the black educational authority under apartheid – are so not merely because of inappropriate curricula, poor teacher-training and resourcing, inadequate monitoring, and ineffectual governance and management (the legacy of apartheid), but because the modernisation process itself, a deep-lying social and cultural transformation, takes effect differentially, unevenly, and according to parameters which are not amenable to smooth transition. Other parts of the system, and not merely the formerly whites-only schools, are performing spectacularly well. In all the turmoil of transformation, Shakespeare really is not a hot issue.

No, the real challenge to Shakespeare in South Africa is more subtle and far-reaching. It lies within the universities, and concerns their capacity to reproduce the next generation of scholars. The productive research population in South African universities, across the disciplines, is largely white, ageing and male. The younger generation, particularly children of the newly-enfranchised middle classes, has ready access to high-status jobs with swift promotion prospects in the central economy. Why opt for a poorly remunerated life of scholarship? – and so the universities lose the best and brightest. There are exceptions, and strenuous efforts at research capacity development are under way, but in my view only the next generation, those for whom affluence has become normal, will be naturally attracted to academia. And when they do rediscover the academic life, will Shakespeare be on the South African research agenda? Who knows - it seems at present rather unlikely.

Shakespeare is still there in university curricula, though he is certainly less prominent. Few young researchers will focus on early modern Europe if they hope to make a career in Africa. This may even imply a return to full dependency on metropolitan scholarship in the long term, if indeed Shakespeare continues to be taught in the universities.

As far as Shakespeare-in-performance goes, the large, unwieldy and outwardly very comfortable structures of the apartheid Arts Councils have been dismantled, and what remains is shaky and under-funded. Unfortunately, those responsible seem not to have realised that without several established companies and orchestras with a reasonably secure future, there is no career-path for the youngsters everyone is so keen to encourage. There is too much reliance on artistic entrepreneurship alone, and not enough on the legitimate role of state funding – not for bureaucrats, but for the people who produce literature, visual and public performance art.

Despite friction on the funding side, Shakespeare's surest future is still probably in performance, for the simple reason that few theatre practitioners can resist the challenge of Shakespeare. Surely he will never again be burdened with the repressive cultural validation foisted on him by remnants of Euro-colonial culture; but that he will continue sporadically to be produced, re-processed, argued with and re-invented in all the art forms, not only as part of Ian Willison's multi-centred global cosmopolis, but as part of South African and African efforts at self-understanding, is a strong probability.

Individual fascination with Shakespeare as a vehicle for exploring local and global concerns will flourish as readily in South Africa as elsewhere. His prominence in a pantheon of international cultural figures viewed as peculiarly significant to the country is likely to decline, or be accepted more critically as an essentially foreign construction.

But the Shakespeare bandwagon will roll on. As I write, a film of *Othello* is shooting in Cape Town, a contemporary story about a black officer in today's South African Navy. Maynardville in Cape Town and Mannville in Port Elizabeth, the two Shakespearean open-air theatres, continue to deliver an annual Shakespeare production. The premiere of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary production of *The Taming of the Shrew* at Mannville took place in February 2002, with Kate looking like Annie Oakley and shooting pistols all over the place. Fred Abrahamse's 60s 'summer of love' production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ran at Maynardville the same year, with youngsters standing up against the repressive laws of Athens, to music by Carl Johan Lingenfelder and a soundscape designed by Dave Cathcart. In 2000 Clare Stopford's production of *Romeo and Juliet*, featuring the gang-ravished (or ravaged) youth culture of the Cape Flats, its premise the divided city of Cape Town, took Maynardville by storm. None of this cultural adaptation and interrogation is without risk. As a newspaper writer perceptively put it, 'cultural sensitivities in the Cape (and the country, for that matter) are, well, sensitive. Go for the obvious and one will invariably piss off at least half one's potential audience' (Rutter 2000). How true. With cultural translations or counter-interpretations, the result is either good theatre or it isn't.

None of this is really surprising, but I don't want to leave the reader with the impression that Shakespeare has any particularly privileged place in South Africa, even in the dugouts of 'high culture'. All kinds of cross-pollination is going on. For instance, alongside staples like *The Magic Flute* and *Madam Butterfly*, the Spier Opera season at the famous wine estate this year includes an Africanised adaptation of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* – if one can be said to Africanise an already African story – using a combination of the percussive ensemble Amampondo on one side of the stage, a classical chamber orchestra on the other, and contributions from the Free Flight Dance Company. This follows a similar success last year with *Carmen and the Mysteries*, which drew large audiences in South Africa, comprising many who had never before experienced opera. The production went on to a very successful run in London: booked for two weeks it ran for three months. *Carmen* herself (Pauline Malefane, a graduate of the Cape Town Opera Studio Programme) was promoted from the chorus, 98% of whom are black (Streek, 2001). The show toured Australia early in 2002.

### **Conclusion**

In terms of world theatre, then, there is a lot about Shakespeare in South Africa that is routine, much that is invigorating and even inspiring. I would guess that many comparisons and contrasts with Australia and New Zealand would be fruitful, but not untoward.

I want to finish by describing a production unlike any I have seen, something that presages new possibilities and, in a way, encapsulates the sketch of South African Shakespeare I have striven to outline. There have been countless adaptations and recontextualisations of Shakespeare down the years, but to my mind this is the first and only truly post-colonial production of Shakespeare to have taken place in South Africa. Part of the review I wrote, fresh from a first encounter with the production, reads as follows:

Yael Farber's adaptation of *Julius Caesar* marks something of a breakthrough in South African Shakespeare productions. The key achievement is that the play is no longer about Rome or Renaissance England, nor is it about processes of cultural translation or trendy theatrical Africanisation, largely cosmetic. This production is, in a generous way, squarely and pointedly about Africa.

*Whose Africa* is a moot point. The play's 'Azania' - Shakespeare's Rome - could be anything from AZAPO's visionary pan-African idyll, to some generic post-independence black state, to the scurrilous Azania of Waugh's *Black Mischief* (1932). What it is not is a neocolonial appropriation of Shakespeare, making vague obeisance to metropolitan heritage by whimpering 'me too!'

The set is open and flexible. Two sawn-off tubular pyramidal towers on wheels, four-square, rather like stumpy electrical pylons, stand left and right of the acting space which extends over the theatre floor in front of the seating with the proscenium stage behind as a second level. The pylons clash noisily as they are smashed together during the battle of Philippi, which is choreographed to traditional stick-fighting in slow motion. A smallish turntable occupies center stage on the upper level with a similar one on the lower. (One thinks oddly of children's merry-go-rounds.) Anything from *Mad Max* to *Antigone* or *To Kill a Mocking Bird* could take place in this space. A mobile arched wooden door, wheeled on to represent the entry to the Senate Chamber, looks like standard lacquered western pomp on the one side. Turn it about (for the inside view of the chamber, where the murder takes place), and it is seen to be covered with painted writhings of ghost-like grey figures, shades of past political intrigue, the whole eerily reminiscent of Rodin's 'The Gates of Hell'.

Costumes are generic African, with touches of ancient Egypt, Arab North Africa and a lingering flavour of Rome. The scarlet of SeZaR's cloak counterpoints the rich tones of sandstone, ochre and tawny yellow that dominate the colour palate, all related to the rich brown skin-tones of the cast members. Props range from knob-kerries to cigarettes, the latter used rather niftily to shift the characters out of their public personae and into moments of ordinary personhood, outside the flux of history. The piece is enriched with passages of African dance. The acting is bold and large-scale. Menzi Ngubane's Brutus is magnificent, and I also liked Mmabatho Mogomotsi's poignant 'Porshia'.

Shakespeare's Soothsayer, represented here by Njkono (Mary Twala), could be seen as speaking for the dispossessed-of-the-dispossessed, those original human inhabitants of southern Africa, generically the Khoi-San. She forms a kind of prologue and chorus to



the piece, entering before the performance-proper starts as an urban street-sweeper ('hygiene technologist' in labour-relations newspeak) clad in smart orange overalls and a doek, properly gloved and equipped with a supply of refuse bags tucked under her belt. Having symbolically (or literally, for that matter) swept the stage prior to the action, she utters her initial warnings from a seat in the audience, thus allying the spectators to all those who witness the African power-struggles.

The universalisability of the story is obvious. With local variations, the plot of *Julius Caesar* is played out round the world in national and local governments, boardrooms, mayoral elections, imbizos, team selections, PTA's, churches and most other social organizations. The challenge of Faber's *SeZaR* is that the play focuses its attention relentlessly and exclusively on Africa.

SeZaR (Hope Sprinter Sekgobela) returns in triumph from military victory, high in popular esteem, a candidate for political office, perhaps the top office? The rich overtones of the contrast between Brutus's conscientious political prudence and SeZaR's charismatic heroism resonate eerily as they have done down the ages in different climes and contexts. For South Africans, the assassination of Chris Hani may hover at the verges of consciousness. The commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the ANC, himself an admirer of Shakespeare, was gunned down before he could establish himself in the post-apartheid polity. And then perhaps the (utterly unsubstantiated) accusation last year [2000], tributary to the R48bn South African arms procurement fiasco, that President Mbeki had something to do with this earlier traumatic event may spring to mind. Or was it, ought it to have been, Mbeki himself (who, like SeZaR, has been accused of being too involved with foreign affairs, too concerned with his own image, of not relating effectively to internal affairs of state) who most fittingly stands in the shoes of SeZaR? In which case, where are the plotters, where do we find our Brutus and Cassius? The media at the time, following off-the-cuff remarks by safety and security minister Steve Tshwete, put forward a brace of possible candidates. Mark Antony ('Mark Anthony' here) comes across as a hapless PR politico trying to spin-doctor the truth in an impossible situation – 'honour' translates rather freely into 'public image'. Audiences from further north might have felt impelled to think of the late Laurent Kabila and his son Joseph in the DRC, or the struggle for democratic succession in Zambia, or Robert Mugabe's desperate hanging on to power at any cost in Zimbabwe. Moise Tshombe, Patrice Lumumba, Idi Amin, Jerry Rawlings, Sierra Leone last year, Ruanda before that, Nigeria for the last twenty years, the list goes on. As Cassius puts it in Shakespeare's text:

How many ages hence  
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,  
In states unborn and accents yet unknown.  
(3.1.111-113)

Those accents were only marginally a problem mainly because they were generally intelligible, but also because verbal language was not of the essence. The message of the

production was visual and dramatic. We empathised with the passion and spirit of these characters, their pride and ‘port’. The love scenes were moving, the communion with the ancestors powerful – a belief rendered actual by the substitution of African ritual in reading the entrails, gorily visible on stage – while the collapse into surreal slaughter at the end was captured in the piling up of chocolate-coloured limbs and torsos – window dummies - on the lower turntable and along the stage at the rear, a terrible sight reminiscent of Belsen or Ruanda. As for the helpless assertion of normalcy at the end, it was - well, feebly and appropriately inadequate.

Farber’s conscious decision to strip the verse ‘of its civility’ (programme notes) leaves us with a play far more raw and frantic than Shakespeare’s. It is no longer a tragedy, because tragedy requires an explicitly valued civility ripped through by the very forces it strives to contain. Farber’s Azania is the African nightmare *sui generis*. There are no excuses, no ameliorative gestures towards the colonial legacy, the IMF or the World Bank. Equally, there is no explanation. This is what happens.

Shakespeare’s language came second both as verbal substance in relation to the total impact of the play, and by virtue of the fact that it was only about 50% of the text used. The rest comes from Sol Plaatje’s 1937 Tswana translation (*Dintshontsho tsa bo-Julius Kesara*), workshopped vernacular contributions from the Zulu, Pedi and Tswana-speaking cast-members, plus some interpolated media commentary slipped into the play through the sound system. This fictional radio reportage, not all of which is clearly audible or meant to be, conveys the bland dismissiveness of international Afro-pessimism.

When I first saw the show, I was sitting next to a Tswana-speaking schoolgirl from Potchefstroom who chatted away about her experiences at the Festival. She was impressed by the play, particularly by the fact that ‘Sammy Chirendza’ (Tony Kgorogi playing Mark Anthony) and ‘Agnes Matibane’ (Keketso Semoko playing Kalphurnia) from the successful SABC television soapy *Isidingo* (The Need) were in the cast. She rolled along with the mixture of contemporary English, Shakespearean English, oldish Setswana and township argot as if to the manner born. There is enough of a scaffolding in English for the linguistically challenged to follow the play, and I suspect that the drift of events would be intelligible even if you didn’t know Shakespeare’s text.

This de-emphasizing of language in South African theatre, and elsewhere, at present is an intriguing phenomenon. On the one hand, it is deplorable because it constitutes a retreat into the felt but indefinable, the inexact and therefore incontrovertible. Where will we be without a strong element of *contemplatio* and its credible representation on stage? On the other, there is a sense in which the South Africa nation’s fragile sense of itself, its lack of genuine self-awareness and articulate debate, is faithfully rendered in this triumph of ambiguous gesture over explicit articulation. Music unites, dance and physical theatre unite, the visual arts unite because they are sufficiently pure to be incontestable, except perhaps in formalist or ‘in-house’ terms. But say something clearly, precisely and you have no excuses, no hiding place. One day we will begin to edge once more towards the

unblushing truth – this time in contestable verbal language. Till then, *SeZaR* is a remarkable portent.

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Notes

1. The volume carries the following mandatory disclaimer, printed in a tiny font on free leaves at the back of the book:

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This was the intellectual equivalent of a U.S. Government health warning, designed to muffle, if not muzzle, the apartheid propaganda machine.

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