

Editorials

TONY VOSS

For this guest-edited issue of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, contributions were invited on the theme of “Banishment, xenophobia, home and exile in Shakespeare and the Renaissance”. The general theme offers many ways into the literature and the period, and, if any explicit link were needed, connects Shakespeare’s time with our own. While interesting in such ways in itself, the topic was, perhaps opportunistically, suggested by the ‘xenophobic violence’ of 2008 in South Africa. There seems never to be any shortage of other examples (apartheid deployed both external exile and internal banishment), but it was felt that *SiSA* could carry an individual perspective on the theme.¹

The idea of the issue was also given impetus by some recent scholarship. Richard Wilson’s essay, “Making Men of Monsters: Shakespeare in the Company of Strangers” (2005) refers to the work of Twycross and Carpenter; drawing on the distinction between carnival (outside, in the streets) and mumming (indoors on the host’s ground), the latter, more than the former, depending on “the interaction between participants” (Twycross and Carpenter 82), he arrives at a sense of Shakespeare’s playhouse dramatising and offering “inclusiveness in an age of migrations” (Wilson 12), suggesting the “absolute hospitality” of Levinas and Derrida. Wilson also quotes Michael Bristol, who finds “violent Carnival” (11) in *King Lear* and interprets *Othello* as a race-riot. Linda Woodbridge and Edward Berry argue that “scapegoat thinking was alive and well in Shakespeare’s England” (10) and Linda Woodbridge suggests that “fulminations against vagrants’ geographical mobility project or displace other kinds of change and mobility: religious and intellectual change, social mobility...” (26). It seems clear that the mobility of the vagrant, the exile or the wanderer may give rise to envy and frustration. Those who feel trapped in the limits of history, geography and economy, may well resent the fact that the strangers in their midst have clearly not been bound by *their* time, place and ancestry.

Janet Kingsley-Smith’s *Shakespeare’s Drama of Exile* (2003) shows how deeply ingrained in the plays is the theme of banishment, and explores particularly the exiles’ linguistic re-fashioning of identity.

The theme of the stranger has its own resonance in the twenty-first century. As a number of writers have shown, the globalised intensification of the plight of refugees, boat people, political exiles and other persons displaced is both a great humanitarian challenge and an opportunity.²

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On the walls of the charge offices of some South African police stations are displayed two groups of four framed posters.³ The first announces that “These posters were donated by SSSBC for display in all police stations.”⁴ Reminiscent of the Ten Commandments painted on the walls of medieval chapels and churches, each of the other seven posters is devoted to a particular common crime, group of crimes, or crisis: Human Trafficking, Housebreaking/Robbery/Theft, Missing Persons, Rape/Indecent Assault, Domestic Violence, Assault, Xenophobia.

Between them these cover much of what faces the duty officers on every shift, and together they represent a negative, a counter-image of post-apartheid South Africa. My concern here is Xenophobia, to which, in retrospect, the focus of this issue should perhaps have been limited.

Defining Xenophobia as “an intense or irrational fear or dislike of foreign people, their customs and culture, or foreign things”, the chart goes on to outline the duty (especially of citizens, presumably) to “Protect the rights of non-citizens” by helping illegal aliens obtain legal documents, combating violence and discrimination against, and ill-treatment of non-citizens by the police; ensuring that claims of such treatment are properly investigated; and ensuring that non-citizens are not removed or returned to a place where they are at risk of suffering serious

human rights abuses. As Francis Bacon wrote, “ceremonies” should not be “omitted to strangers” (213).⁵

Bacon also observed that “all states that are liberal of naturalization towards strangers are fit for empire” (150).⁶ Perhaps in the African context, early post-apartheid South Africa enjoyed a kind of imperial presence, which meant that the country could, in the words of the constitution, “belong to all who live in it”. As R.W. Johnson noted, in prosperity “South Africans were remarkably tolerant” of a “vast foreign influx” (429), readily acknowledging, with Montaigne, that “*Chaque homme porte la forme entière de la humain condition*” (each man bears the entire form of the human condition; 3.2). But in the less prosperous times of early 2008, when “immigration control had broken down completely” (Johnson 429) and “protests against poor service delivery had become endemic in many townships”, some South Africans turned on “the immigrants and the unwanted extra competition they provided” (430).⁷ Perhaps hospitality can only be offered from a position of economic security. In hard times we are inclined to think with Montaigne that “*Il se trouve plus de différence de tel homme à tel homme que de tel animal à tel homme*” (there is more difference between one man and another than between a man and a beast; 2.12). Only from a position of transcendence or privilege is Bacon’s sense of global humanity accessible: “If a man be gracious and courteous to strangers, it shows he is a citizen of the world, and that his heart is not cut off from other lands, but a continent that joins to them” (98).⁸

NOTES

1. It may be inclusive to the point of amorphousness, but these are some of the possibilities put forward in the invitation to contribute: Codes and invented languages, Diaspora, The Foreign, Gender, Gypsies, Homelessness, Hospitality, Masterless Men, Neologism, The Outcast, The Outlaw, The Strange and the Stranger, The Uncanny, The Wanderer, Witches.

2. See, for instance, Appiah (2006), Ong (1999) and Seabright (2002).

3. Among the police stations I have visited are Berea (KwaZulu-Natal), Parkview (Gauteng) and Walmer (Eastern Cape).

4. The Safety and Security Sectoral Bargaining Council made the donations in 2005.

5. See “Of Ceremonies and Respects” in *The Essays*, ed. John Pitcher (1985).

6. See “Of the True Greatness of Kingdoms and Estates”, *ibid.*

7. Xenophobia seems not to have been confined to the working-class. Siphon Hlongwane, for one, has observed it in middle-class black South Africans (2011).

8. See “Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature”, *op.cit.*

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CHRIS THURMAN

Earlier this year I came across a review (by *The Spectator's* Lloyd Evans) of a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Romeo and Juliet* that had clearly irked the reviewer. Evans disparages director Rupert Goold for “spectacular irrelevance” (84) in terms of the set, staging and effects but also criticises attempts to contrive relevance – or at least contemporary resonance – through, for instance, the use of regional British accents and anachronistic costuming. Trying to make the play “accessible” (“a new word for ‘provincial’, formerly a vice but now an obligation”), notes Evans, the RSC has made things more difficult for “those who have no previous experience of Shakespeare”: such novices in fact “want the production conveyed directly and authentically, not burdened with add-ons and hotshot flourishes from alien traditions”. So his objections, Evans claims, are not just the “sensitivities of a purist” or “fuddy-duddy”. Instead, he affirms, newcomers to Shakespeare, recent initiates and seasoned aficionados alike constitute a collective whose credo is “Nothing interests us in Shakespeare more than Shakespeare.”

Not having seen the production in question, it's hard to ascertain whether or not Goold's directorial choices were in fact distractions and detractions from Shakespeare's play. Still, it seems to me that Evans's concluding declaration is problematic. I don't think there is such a thing as “us” when it comes to Shakespeare's audiences and readers. ‘We’ are a heterogeneous mixture of different ages, language backgrounds, nationalities, genders, ethnicities and so on. One of the joys of literature and theatre is that each reader/audience member reads/sees, in effect, a *different* text/play. In the case of Shakespeare, the effects of such invigorating discrepancies are more acute, because Shakespeare-as-signifier ‘means’ something to everyone even before the first page is turned or the lights go up. ‘We’ bring so many different assumptions and prejudices – ‘our’ world views and ideologies – to an encounter with Shakespeare that any director, performer, teacher, scholar or other mediator must strike a balance between the autonomy of the play-text and the ineluctable worlds that have existed (in the sixteenth century and subsequently) and still do exist (in the twenty-first century) outside of that text.

What “interests us in Shakespeare” is *both* Shakespeare and ‘ourselves’: if that is a narcissistic formulation, it is nonetheless justifiable.

This is not new terrain, of course. It is simply a new take on an old debate – one that has previously been presented more eloquently in the pages of this journal (2005) by David Schalkwyk as that “between historicism and presentism”. I have, however, had it continually in mind while working with guest editor Tony Voss on the current volume. Tony's proposal to solicit contributions on the theme of “banishment, xenophobia, home and exile” has resulted in a ‘bumper edition’ of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* that achieves, I hope, precisely the balance described above. In addition to those research articles that Tony has brought together (which straddle early modern Europe and present-day South Africa), there are numerous book/theatre reviews and review essays that I have been pleased to ‘commission’ from scholars whose Shakespearean interests are wide-ranging.

I have also been challenged to think anew about “what interests us in Shakespeare” by numerous striking photographic images of recent Shakespeare-related productions on South Africa's stages, a handful of which have found their way onto the cover of Volume 23. A few

months ago, in the preamble to a review of *Richard III* (directed by Fred Abrahamse – a production that receives a more extensive treatment in these pages from Marc Maufort), I wrote the following:

Shakespeare remains well ensconced in South African high school and university curricula but the twin knock-on effects of this literary Bardolatry are, arguably, detrimental to Shakespeare-in-performance. Firstly, many people who encounter Shakespeare in the classroom find his work either impenetrable or dull. Secondly, those plays that are dramatised are typically school set works, put on stage by university drama departments for audiences predominantly composed of learners and teachers.

There is no doubt that the latter phenomenon offers educational benefits (it changes the perception many young people have of Shakespeare for the better, and it provides actors-in-training with an opportunity to fulfill a thespian rite of passage). It provides some much-needed revenue to the universities and professional directors staging these productions. And, at the very least, it reminds people that Shakespeare was primarily a man of the theatre. But it also means that the same plays are recycled year by year, and that fully professional productions are rare.

The dearth of Shakespeare on South Africa's stages is easily understood. Exported from England to all corners of the Empire, Shakespeare has been associated with the false assertions of British/European 'cultural superiority' made by apologists for the colonial project. Despite many examples of adaptation and appropriation of Shakespeare by black South African artists and writers, he has been placed on the wrong (white) side of this country's history.

There are also logistical obstacles: it takes a large cast and a big budget to put on a full-scale Shakespeare. With the exception of annual 'institutions' such as the Maynardville open-air season in Cape Town and of occasional international co-productions, bums on seats are not guaranteed and producers are reluctant to take the financial risk involved. So we're left, mostly, with student and 'am dram' productions.

(Thurman 87)

I have since had occasion to question some of these assertions. What, after all, constitutes a 'Shakespearean production'? On the cover of this volume, there are photographs of two dance performances: The SA Ballet Theatre's *Romeo and Juliet* and P.J. Sabbagha's *I think it's Hamlet*. These use Shakespeare towards ostensibly very different ends: in the 'period' ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, the characters and plot are more or less the same as those in the play even though spoken text is replaced by physical expression; in the contemporary dance piece *I think it's Hamlet*, there are no such clearly recognisable characters or plot – instead there are obscure thematic parallels and textual allusions to Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*. It is tempting to suggest that *Romeo and Juliet* is the more 'faithful' adaptation. But are they so different after all? Both use Shakespeare as a vehicle, a means to a separate narrative or dramatic or hermeneutical end; in both, Shakespeare is secondary, dance primary. Yet both form part of the phenomenon of 'South African Shakespeare' / 'Shakespeare in South Africa'.

The other photographs also represent counter-claims to those I made in the extract quoted above. The circus world of Roy Sargeant's *Taming of the Shrew* was neither 'typical' of Maynardville nor a high school set text. (Interestingly, it has been re-introduced to a couple of university undergraduate curricula – the play does, after all, speak to the pathology of sexual violence and abuse in South Africa, as Sandra Young's review suggests). Other productions that *did* have school-going audiences in mind also managed to avoid replicating the pattern I described: witness three distinctive versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A production by Cape Town repertory theatre company The Mechanicals was enthusiastically received for its 'dark' rendering of that 'comic' play (Simon van Schalkwyk's review presents a more nuanced take). Two productions of the same play by students from the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Johannesburg, directed by Greg Homann and Dorothy Ann Gould/Sylvaine Strike respectively, offered bold South African appropriations of 'the woods outside Athens'. Gould and Strike let the events of the faerie world play out under the branches of a

giant baobab tree, while Homann identified the alternately magical and decrepit inner city of Johannesburg as the perfect setting for an anti-pastoral vision of the play. Of course, when it comes to the actors in student productions, Theseus's words are salutary: "The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them." (5.1.205)

So: a "dearth of Shakespeare on South Africa's stages"? Perhaps it's not as bad as I once thought. Other southern African Shakespearean appropriations and adaptations, from *The Tempest* (Craig Higginson's novel *Last Summer*) to *Hamlet* (Robin Malan's *Lord Hamlet*, Two Gents Productions' *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* and The Framework's multiple site-specific *Hamlets*) are also explored in this volume, alongside those articles and essays that are 'international' in their scope.

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