

Editorial

CHRIS THURMAN

By now, all South African readers of this journal – and most international readers too – have heard of (and probably had enough of) the controversy surrounding “The Spear”, the painting that got Brett Murray into trouble for ostensibly depicting President Jacob Zuma’s genitals. Along with thousands of others, I weighed in on the debate; my contribution was to foreground how flawed assumptions about the operation of mimesis in works of art had resulted in a misunderstanding of the so-called ‘portrait’. Most of my article addressed this problem, pointing to Murray’s own previous invocation of René Magritte’s 1928 painting, “*La Trahison des Images*” (The Treachery of Images), which famously includes the words “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*” (This is not a pipe) below a picture of a pipe. Thus, I suggested, “if Murray is simply using the penis as a metonym for a series of already-current critiques of the president” – given that sex and sexuality are central to many of those critiques – “Magritte’s warning should hover over ‘The Spear’ like an invisible subtitle: This is not Zuma’s pipe. It is not even a mimetic representation of Zuma’s pipe. It’s a provocative placement of a symbol.” (Thurman 9)

Towards the end of the article, I invoked Hamlet’s ideas about the mimetic function of theatre and went on to compare Zuma to Claudius:

It is telling that the ANC and the prudish moral high-grounders who wag their fingers at Murray seem to think that a painting always functions like a documentary photograph of the real. In their defence, Shakespeare said something similar – or rather, Hamlet, his creation, did: the purpose of art, affirms Hamlet, is to “hold the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure”.

Hamlet’s idea, of course, is to catch out his uncle Claudius, who has usurped the throne by killing Hamlet’s father. So the meta-theatrical prince devises a plan to have the murder acted out in front of the murderer: “guilty creatures sitting at a play”, he says, cannot tolerate it when their sins are portrayed to them by actors, and so they “proclaim their malefactions” – they are forced to confess. As expected, Claudius betrays himself through his outraged response to Hamlet’s play. He falls into the trap of mimesis, confusing the work of art for the real world, precisely because it aggravates his guilty conscience.

Jacob Zuma and his allies, through their over-reaction to Murray’s art, are in fact acknowledging that there is some merit in its critique. Claudius calls off Hamlet’s play; Zuma wanted “The Spear” removed from the gallery; two ‘free radicals’ pre-empted any court decision by defacing the painting. But although Zuma and his supporters have pretended to be offended by the artist, or may even have convinced themselves they are truly offended, like King Claudius they will soon privately admit: “O, my offence is rank – it smells to heaven!”

(Thurman 9)

It intrigued me that the sub-editors at *Business Day* chose to run the article under a headline that was based on these final few paragraphs: “As in Hamlet, Zuma betrays himself in his moral outrage”. Consequently, it was this aspect of the piece that was emphasised when it was quoted elsewhere.

I felt a little awkward about this; after all, I wrote the article not to promote Shakespeare but to comment on an episode in South African political life. As someone who is skeptical about the phenomenon of ‘universal Shakespeare’, I feel I should resist any easy or reductive assertions about the ‘relevance’ or ‘applicability’ of Shakespeare’s plays to places and times far removed

from those in which they were written. And yet, and yet ... *it works!* Claudius and Zuma *are* a good match – just as there are parallels between the Zuma of 2008 and Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, or between Thabo Mbeki and Coriolanus, or between Julius Malema and Jack Cade in *Henry VI*. For over three centuries, actors, directors, writers and teachers have been using Shakespeare’s work to shed light on, explain, subvert or add nuance to their own particular social or political context.

Do we need Shakespeare to do this? Not necessarily. Can only Shakespeare do it? Certainly not. But can he do it? Again and again, the answer is yes. However tainted the ‘global spread’ of Shakespeare might be – however imbricated his status as poet and playwright might be in colonisation and neo-colonialism and hegemonic power structures – the fact is that his work has become a rich, useful, common reference point, a way of exploring both our history and our current dilemmas. Equally importantly, stagings and readings of Shakespeare’s plays can remind us of how complex that “our” can be: “we” are all simultaneously local and global subjects, immersed in our particular geographies and cultures and histories but finding ourselves inserted into the geographies and cultures and histories of others, just as they are inserted into ours. I am reminded of this each time a volume of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* is prepared for publication, and Volume 24 has been no different.

The cover shows an image from this year’s Maynardville Open-Air Theatre production of *The Comedy of Errors*, a welcome selection precisely because it is so unusual. How, one might ask, did the production’s eclectic “kung fu” design (the aesthetic equivalent of ‘Asian Fusion’ cuisine, perhaps) come about? Moreover, how could it be related to South African audiences? Director Matthew Wild’s programme note explains:

Ephesus must be a location in which the foreign characters perceive a great deal of danger, mystery, magic and ‘otherness’. It is a mercantile city, where profit and business seem to be high in the minds of most of the inhabitants. A great deal of the play’s comedy revolves around the repeated beating of servants, a potentially unpalatable source of amusement for modern audiences ... Any company tackling the play must seek an effective balance of broad comedy and deeper feelings; of slapstick and sincerity; of high-energy farce and gentler human comedy ... The ideas that we wanted to express about this play lead me to classic 1970s Hong Kong martial arts films. Here is a genre in which the tone may switch very rapidly from slapstick to genuine danger to romance; a dramatic language in which fighting may be the source of elegant, balletic comedy; a treasure-trove of vividly imagined, exotic locales; a genre in which quests to find lost family members often launch a taut narrative; a world in which Shakespeare’s gender politics make sense; and, most crucially, a cultural reference which resonates strongly with a wide cross-section of South Africans – from youngsters attending schools in leafy suburbs surrounding Maynardville to township-dwellers who fell in love with these films in community halls in the 1980s ... Our Ephesus is thus a Never Never Land Chinatown, composed of irreverent Asian clichés, signs and symbols, consciously avoiding any sense of geographical or cultural veracity.

(Wild 2-3)

Given this heterogeneous ‘mash-up’, it is not surprising that some audience members were bewildered by the dense network of (over-)signification in the Maynardville *Comedy*; or that others felt an opportunity had been missed to confront specifically South African anxieties around ‘foreignness’ and ‘belonging’ – the terrain of Volume 23 of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, and a theme applied to contemporary London in Dominic Cooke’s National Theatre production late last year (which Wild acknowledges); or that others still thought the recent conferral of ‘black’ racial identity on Chinese South Africans raised ethical dimensions ignored by the production. But, in defence of Wild and his company, it must be said that no single performance or interpretation of a Shakespearean play can be all things to all people. It falls to scholars and critics to elaborate upon these resonances.

This is a challenge taken up with aplomb by the reviewers and essayists in Volume 24. Colette Gordon, Lisa Cagnacci and Donald Powers consider the most recent work of three South African companies – Abrahamse Meyer Productions, The Isango Ensemble and The

Mechanicals – that have established themselves as renovators of ‘canonical’ works: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Venus and Adonis* and *King Lear* respectively. Isabel Bradley and Geoffrey Haresnape offer their takes on alternative (operatic and filmic) renditions of ‘Shakespeare’, if not of Shakespeare’s work *per se*. Nicholas Collins, Laurence Wright, Brian Pearce and Victor Houliston assess four recent Shakespeare-related publications.

The volume begins with an account by Natasha Distiller of a workshop she organised at the Institute for the Humanities in Africa (HUMA) at the University of Cape Town in August 2011, “in order to brainstorm some key theoretical and institutional issues in current early modern scholarship, from a South African perspective”. Distiller writes:

We were interested in exploring questions about South Africa’s place in the international field, as well as thinking about the current state of that field. How useful has postcolonialism as a framework been for making space for South African inputs? What are the implications, if any, of cosmopolitanism for the contributions of African scholars and perspectives? Are there things South Africa can offer the international Shakespeare arena that can teach it something? Can we develop an approach and an archive that will make students from Anglo-America want to come here for an education they can’t get elsewhere? Can we construct a local incarnation of Renaissance studies that will speak to and interest South African students?

Clues to the answers to each of these questions (the latter three, one hopes, in the affirmative) can be found in the three substantial articles that follow: Brian Willan’s use of archival material to investigate the circulation of Shakespeare’s work amongst black South Africans in the nineteenth century, Isidore Diala’s exposition of Nigerian playwright Esiaba Irobi’s reconstitution of *The Tempest* in *Sycorax*, and Andrew Foley’s close reading of the end of *Hamlet* in order to re-evaluate the end(s) towards which Hamlet strives.

WORKS CITED

- Thurman, Chris. “As in Hamlet, Zuma betrays himself in his moral outrage”. *Business Day* (24 May 2012): 9.
 Wild, Matthew. “Director’s Note”. Programme for *The Comedy of Errors* (Maynardville Open-Air Theatre, Cape Town, January-February 2012): 2-3.