

Editorial

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The image on the cover of volume 25 of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* is a still from Sara Blecher's award-winning film *Otelo Burning*. Readers who are unfamiliar with the film's provenance may be interested to read Blecher's account of how a "true story" (about the surfing and swimming culture that grew out of Lamontville, a township south of Durban) became "fictionalized" via Shakespeare:

We layered Othello's story into it so it becomes a story of betrayal and greed. We wanted to make a story about what's going on in South Africa now, but how do you do that? With a historic story ... Basically we just used the structure of [*Othello*] to tell ... a story about a guy who is really good at surfing and he's really making it and his best friend betrays him. So our lead female character's name is Dezi. Our lead character's name is Otelo. It's like a township version of Othello. They say there are seven stories in the world and we needed a structure to put our story around so that's what we did.

(Blecher in Young n.p.)

I found myself returning again and again to this explanation while preparing for "Shakespeare in Tatters", a recent conference (hosted by the Centro Shakespeariano at the University of Ferrara, Italy) on fragmented references to Shakespeare's works in film and television. With my perpetual unease about the complex role of Shakespeare in South Africa's various cultural and sociopolitical spaces, my initial reaction was to distrust this conformity to an archetypal, recognisable, 'universal' narrative. This is a familiar process: Shakespeare authorises the 'local' narrative, providing a 'stamp of approval' – ensuring that the film-makers would reproduce one of the "seven stories in the world", which would in turn guarantee audience buy-in.

I also fretted about the problem of historicity; what does it mean to call either *Othello* or *Otelo Burning* "historic"? A number of South African Shakespeare scholars have spent a great deal of energy over the last two decades trying to show that we should not shy away from Shakespeare's sometimes-vexed, sometimes-awkward history in the country, because to do so is in effect to accept a conservative, anglophile, neo-colonial version of 'The Bard' that undermines the radical potential of the plays. Easy recourse to some notion that Shakespeare *is* history – the assumption of familiarity with a static Shakespeare, with a canon of plays that contain fixed 'themes', because of their place on educational curricula, rather than an engagement with the plays as dynamic works of art – is, one feels, precisely what this scholarship resists. So I was uncomfortable with the idea that "layering Othello" onto/into a South African story somehow validates that story.

From another perspective, however, *Otelo Burning* achieves something important for *Othello* – and for Shakespeare – in South Africa. The risk with a play like *Othello* is that, in a country obsessed with race, we cling to it as a politically 'relevant' play (where "politics" is taken to mean the politics of race, sometimes to the exclusion of other political dynamics). I thought about the way *Othello* has been taught and performed and invoked because of, and sometimes only in terms of, that obvious link. Arguably, this has constrained the reception of *Othello* to the point where 'race fatigue' has set in. New generations of theatre practitioners and audiences – as well as students and teachers – are seeking alternative ways of making the play 'relevant' and 'current'. A recent production of *Othello* at the POPart theatre in Johannesburg (one of many productions of the play pitched at school audiences – *Othello* is once again a Grade 12 set work this year) was marketed by steering away from race and focusing on another social issue:

... with the recent tragedy of the killing of Reeva Steenkamp and so many other violent acts against women the play seems like the right choice speaking as a warning to men to beware of jealousy and not to act rashly. When director, Denel Honeyball, heard the news about Reeva Steenkamp's murder, she could not help draw parallels: an admired hero who had overcome the odds to be respected, but perhaps with some deep seated insecurity about his own adequacy; a beautiful heroine who was rumoured to have been unfaithful and suffered an untimely death on a day of romance just as Desdemona dies on her wedding sheets.

(Honeyball n.p.)

It may be worth noting that the Oscar Pistorius-Othello parallel was remarked upon by John Carlin (n.p.) the day after the killing.

Otelo Burning is very much about the politics of late-apartheid South Africa; its immediate context is internecine 'black-on-black' violence (between the African National Congress / United Democratic Front and the Inkatha Freedom Party, and between 'comrades' and 'collaborators'/informers). By adopting and adapting *Othello* for *Otelo Burning*, Blecher also shows that – while race is always in the background, and sometimes comes to the fore – Shakespeare's play is not only about race. Blecher affirms that the film is ultimately about "what happens when you get freedom. What happens to a country?" (in Young n.p.) Despite the formal dismantling of apartheid, South Africans have continued to see tragedies like that of *Otelo* unfold daily. The challenge facing post-apartheid South Africa may be to establish a "normal" society but, Blecher suggests, there is still no remedy for "normal human emotions" or for the consequences of "greed and jealousy and betrayal". If this is the case, then perhaps "historic" or 'universal' Shakespeare – albeit fragmented and in tatters – can be put to good use. And this may, in turn, be unexpectedly liberating for Shakespeare's plays.

This paradox is not exclusively a South African one, as the various presentations at "Shakespeare in Tatters" reminded me. But insofar as one of the key questions raised at the conference was, "What constitutes 'Shakespeare'?", I inevitably asked myself further questions. Is *Otelo Burning* 'South African Shakespeare'? What constitutes 'South African Shakespeare', or 'Shakespeare in South/southern Africa'? More specifically, what are the implications of the possible answers to the latter question for a journal such as *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*? What is 'appropriate' material for this journal? One might insist on a South/southern African connection – if not in subject matter, then in authorial identity or institutional affiliation. Alternatively, eschewing parochialism, one might simply reformulate the ancient African-Roman playwright Terence's dictum (*Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto*) into a declaration that "I am a Shakespearean, therefore nothing Shakespearean is alien to me".

The material collected in volume 25 of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* strikes a compromise between these two positions. The articles in the first section, by Janet Suzman, Ronan Paterson, Sarah Roberts, Peter Titlestad and Laurence Wright, were first delivered as papers at the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa's "Staging Shakespeare: Direction, Design and Reception" conference, held in Grahamstown last year (see Wright's overview for more about this productive and thought-provoking gathering). Two articles in the second section also emphasise performance: Derrick Higginbotham's focus is the recent staging in Cape Town of *Cardenio*, Shakespeare's 'lost' play, working from Gregory Doran's "reimagined" version of the text; Brian Pearce revivifies the neglected Shakespearean tradition at Springfield College in KwaZulu-Natal. Eugenie Freed's article addresses the tension between theatre and text as it emerges in Shakespeare's narrative poems and sonnets. Geoffrey Haresnape's essay discerns some unexpected parallels between Shakespeare's plays and the Black Consciousness philosophy of Steve Biko. Bhekizizwe Peterson and Tony Voss contribute astute reviews of new books, and the volume closes with an obituary honouring Bruce Mann.

WORKS CITED

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CORRECTION

On page 74 of volume 24, the footnote to Nicholas Collins's review of *This Earthly Stage* (ed. Brett D. Hirsch and Christopher Wortham) is incorrectly attributed. The wording of the footnote is, in fact, a reproduction of Hirsch's footnote in *This Earthly Stage*.