

Editorial

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I write these introductory words in Germany, where I am fortunate to be spending six months dipping into the archives at the University of Cologne's *Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung* (Theatre Studies Collection), watching lots of Shakespeare on stage, testing my limited ability to read German, and meeting with as many scholars and theatre practitioners as possible. This is the beginning of a collaboration that, I hope, will result in a future volume of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* dedicated to the very different – but often, in ways both surprising and predictable, similar – manifestations of Shakespeare in South Africa and Germany.

There are any number of contrasts or parallels that one might pursue: Shakespeare and multilingualism; Shakespeare and political resistance; Shakespeare and reconciliation after segregation; the legacy of totalitarian exploitation of Shakespeare as 'high culture'; the place of Shakespeare's plays in education; tensions between Shakespeare on the page, the stage and the screen. Other connections might be found in the careers of individual theatre makers (the late Dieter Reible is an interesting example), accounts of particular productions, or socio-political analyses that find common threads in addition to Shakespeare.

One such thread, which has particularly piqued my interest, is the question of representing race in and through Shakespeare's plays, whether onstage or in popular culture. In Germany, for example, performing *Othello* entails a particular engagement with a history (and even ongoing practice) of the 'blackface' convention, inflected in recent decades by the resonances between Othello's position – as a black man in a white society, a nominal Muslim in a Christian society, an 'Easterner' in a 'Western' society – and that of Turkish immigrants to Germany. In a country where Shakespeare is considered "*ganz unser*" (entirely ours), one can still find in pastry shops a chocolate-coated treat called an "Othello". This brings with it a loaded history, one distinct from that of a term such as "Coconut" in South Africa, but it seems to me that such apparently innocuous jokes, like the blackface convention itself, cannot be separated from the violating representation of the black body – and, by implication, of black identity – that has been invoked in various visual and performing arts controversies over the past few years. Here South Africans may call to mind the anger roused by Brett Murray's "The Spear" or Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B*.

The latter's cancellation, subsequent to vehement protests, prior to its opening at the Barbican Theatre in London last year forms the backdrop to Andrew Dickson's review of Bailey and his Third World Bunfight company's production of Verdi's *Macbeth* (which also provides our cover image for this volume). Dickson – whose forthcoming book on global iterations of Shakespeare, as it happens, includes chapters on Germany and South Africa – finds that this *Macbeth* and *Exhibit B* may be seen to share some uncomfortable territory. A very different *Macbeth* is the subject of Sonja Loots' review: Marthinus Basson's *macbeth.slapeloos*, which Loots judges to have been an opportunity lost in adopting/adapting Eitemal's 1965 Afrikaans translation of the play.

Othello, like *Macbeth*, is commonly prescribed as a set work for secondary school learners in South Africa. For Tara Leverton, the implications of this fact are significant in assessing Fred Abrahamse and Marcel Meyer's production of the play at Maynardville this year. Leverton's review is in productive dialogue with Geoffrey Haresnape's overview of the play's history at Maynardville: a history that, of course, includes South African incarnations of 'blackface' and raises various difficult questions about the representation of race and racial identity on stage. These are questions with which actors and directors must grapple each time they address

Shakespeare's work – not just *Othello*. As Conrad Kemp describes in his engaging insider's account of staging *Romeo and Juliet* on Broadway in 2013, that production also brought into sharp focus the impossibility of 'colour-blind' casting or of leaving one's race at the theatre-door.

Jennifer de Reuck's article on *The Dutchess of Malfi* is also written from a theatre-maker's perspective, taking as its starting-point the author's desire to direct a performance of the play "which might challenge (or at least briefly disturb) the hegemonic hold on the contemporary popular imagination that Shakespeare's plays enjoy". De Reuck's reading of Webster thus seeks to "consider his achievement at the other end of the spectrum" from the "liberal humanist critical positions" familiar in readings of Shakespeare.

Daniel Roux and Tony Voss have a more 'literary' or 'textual' starting-point – the material circulation and symbolic import of one particular text, in fact: the Robben Island 'Bible'. Voss's essay reviews two books that take this 'Bible' as their primary subject, along with another recent collection of essays by South African Shakespeareans (my connection to which, for the sake of transparency, I hereby acknowledge). Roux notes the preference of Robben Island signatories for Shakespeare's tragedies, and poses "a somewhat naive question: what drives this identification with tragedy – and Shakespeare's tragedies in particular – in the context of South African politics?" The answer is a complex one, further enriched by Roux's sophisticated reflections on the post-apartheid "case study" of Mark Gevisser's depiction of Thabo Mbeki as a Coriolanus-like figure.

John Atkinson tackles the politics of *Coriolanus* in a place and time that seem far removed from contemporary South Africa: Britain in the early nineteenth century. Yet readers may well find that Atkinson's insights into the way that William Hazlitt used his essay on the play "to advance his campaign against poets, especially those of a Tory persuasion, and to vent his spleen against those who had abandoned their rational republican ideals" resonate with aspects of Roux's article. Another form of national allegorising may be found in Josiah Nyanda's interpretation of the contest over who will succeed Robert Mugabe as Zimbabwe's president through the combined lenses of *King Lear* and *Macbeth*.

Rich pickings indeed!