

# Shakespeare in Southern Africa

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***Cover images***

First page of Sol Plaatje's English typescript for "A South African's Homage"; *Coriolanus*, directed by Rohan Quince and Nicola Pilkington (National Children's Theatre, 2016); *Qaphela Caesar!*, choreographed by Jay Pather (University of Cape Town, 2015).

## Editorial: Looking at Shakespeare with new eyes

CHRIS THURMAN

In a country like South Africa, where Shakespeare is still predominantly a phenomenon of the page and the classroom, rather than the stage and the screen, productions of the plays that take audiences into innovative and challenging territory are regrettably rare. As I recently discovered, however, this can result in something like the old saw about London buses: you wait for ages for one to come, and then two arrive at the same time.

A month or so before Volume 28 of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* was published, I happened to have the opportunity of seeing *Coriolanus* at the National Children's Theatre (NCT) and *uShakes* at the POPArt Theatre, two small-cast ensemble productions in two intimate theatre spaces a few minutes' drive from one another in downtown Johannesburg. *Coriolanus* was a distinct departure from the NCT's usual fare: a touring production pitched at high school learners (the play was introduced as a Grade 12 set work for schools writing the Independent Examinations Board exams) but one that, in my view, was far more interesting than most performances of Shakespeare targeting 'adult' audiences. You can read more about it in Tanya van der Walt's review in this volume. *uShakes*, by contrast, was not a 'straight' production but rather a Shakespearean smorgasbord, extracting scenes from ten different plays and weaving them together into a South African narrative – or, rather, a set of loosely connected narratives – workshopped by Clara Vaughan and students of the Market Theatre Laboratory.

*uShakes* invited various different audience responses. Aficionados could enjoy a kind of 'How well do you know Will?' game, recognising speeches and characters, nodding with (somewhat self-satisfied) appreciation at the ways in which segues between plays were facilitated. The real test of such a production, however, is if those who do not know the material being appropriated can still follow the storylines, or interpret the messages being conveyed by the performers. Here, based on conversations with members of the audience who were in such a position, I fear that *uShakes* was a mixed success. Yet, if the achievement of the NCT *Coriolanus* was precisely the cast's ability to make Shakespeare's often-difficult text pellucid, *uShakes* seemed to undertake its experiment with other aims in mind: firstly, to allow the different plays to be mutually informing, to comment on one another; and secondly, to explore the ways in which Shakespearean speeches and character dynamics can work as and in familiar or iconic South African 'scenes'. In both these respects *uShakes* had much to offer.

What happens when Rosalind from *As You Like It* becomes Ophelia, lectured and cajoled and threatened by her brother and father as they warn her not to give herself to the young man who claims he loves her – and then morphs into Juliet, anticipating a night of sexual consummation? When she is forced to flee from would-be rapists (Chiron and Demetrius from *Titus Andronicus*), and escapes by changing costumes to look like a man? Her jocular conversation with Orlando/Hamlet/Romeo (aka 'Lucky') in the Forest of Arden suddenly has much darker undertones. Do our views of *Hamlet* change when, after Hamlet has chastised his mother in the closet scene, Emilia from *Othello* walks onstage to tell us "I do think it is their husbands' faults/If wives do fall"? What shifts occur when Beatrice and Benedict are not the Sicilian aristocrats of *Much Ado About Nothing* but are impoverished South Africans living on the streets or in a shack? What do we make of a miner who, after going "once more unto the

breach”, dies – presumably killed by police bullets? Or, switching from *Henry V* to *Coriolanus*, of a First Citizen who appears as a student leader from the #FeesMustFall protests to complain, “We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good”? (It may be noted that the NCT *Coriolanus* invoked similar ‘MustFall’ iconography.) The answers to these questions can offer new insights into the plays themselves as well as into contemporary South Africa.

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The day before I watched *Coriolanus*, I had been fitted with new glasses; their stronger prescription had a slightly disorienting effect, confusing my depth perception even as they made my vision clearer. The day before I watched *uShakes*, I heard about a very different form of perspectival rejuvenation. A writer friend of mine told me how he had been invited by a sangoma who was about to undergo *ukuthwasa* (training and initiation) to consume a substantial dose of a certain hallucinogenic substance. He did so, and was surprised to discover that, after a time, the sangoma ‘became’ Shakespeare – complete with Elizabethan ruff – and the two of them had an enlightening conversation. The next day, he happened to pull a copy of *King Lear* from a bookshelf, and felt like he was reading a text in which every sentence operated “in ten dimensions”.

I share these anecdotes because they provide some context for a theme that preoccupied me before, during and after the performances I have discussed: the imperative of looking at Shakespeare ‘with new eyes’. It is a task that seems all the more urgent in the quatercentenary year of 2016, during which (often quite banal) Bardolatry has far exceeded critical engagement with Shakespearean manifestations around the world four hundred years after his death. But this does not mean we should eschew the opportunity to look back – to revisit the past, as it were, looking with new eyes or through new lenses. So I am delighted that volume 28 of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* acknowledges a different anniversary to the one being recognised by the global Shakespeare industry this year.

2016 marks one hundred years since the publication of Israel Gollancz’s tercentenary *Book of Homage to Shakespeare*; for anyone interested in Shakespeare studies in southern Africa, the contribution of Solomon (‘Sol’) T. Plaatje to that collection is a seminal piece of text. Brian Willan’s account of the genesis and reception of Plaatje’s “Homage”, as well as his reflections on its relationship to *Native Life in South Africa* (also published in 1916) and Plaatje’s subsequent work as a translator of Shakespeare into Setswana, makes for invigorating reading indeed. In addition, the publication for the first time of both the English and Setswana typescripts of “A South African’s Homage” is a coup for this journal; thanks are due to the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington for the opportunity to do so.

Volume 28 also contains an alternative retrospective view, in John Stuttard’s narrative of the Cambridge Shakespeare Group’s tour to and around South Africa in the ‘other’ tercentennial year of 1964: a significant but largely-forgotten instance of the vexed relationship between Shakespeare and South African history. The tour was controversial because it broke the cultural boycott, but the Group’s presence also challenged and subverted the racist segregation of the apartheid state. The political circumstances could not be more different from those surrounding the NCT production of *Coriolanus* as it has travelled around the country – and yet reading Stuttard’s recollections of bundling cast, crew and props into a bus to travel long distances between performances, I couldn’t help thinking that these actors, separated by two or three generations, were nonetheless partaking of the same (almost archetypal) experience: the heirs, one is tempted to suggest, of Hamlet’s players.

The other research articles in this volume entail textual rather than performative representations of Shakespeare’s work in the form of philosophical, theoretical and historicist considerations. In “The Play’s the Thing”, Marinus van Niekerk takes what is arguably the most famous Shakespearean speech, Hamlet’s “To be or not to be”, as the starting point of a complex

meditation on presence in that play – arguing that “the play’s cohesion arises from the very elements that unravel its cohesiveness”. Chris Jeffery, in turn, asks: “What kinds of play is *Romeo and Juliet*?” The answer is that, while the play is commonly viewed as a tragic (“wonderful sad”) love-story, its main concerns are in fact best understood in terms of other literary-dramatic modes – specifically the medieval exemplum and covert political critique. Daniel Koketso revisits *The Rape of Lucrece*, applying narcissistic reactance theory to an examination of Tarquin’s sexual violence as well as to the imagery that emerges in the poem.

Finally, an essay by Tara Leverton reviews a production of *All’s Well That Ends Well* at the University of Cape Town in light of the ideological currents that have clashed on its campuses recently. The way in which the performance is contextualised and Leverton’s assessment of the production itself seem, to me, to constitute exactly the kind of writing about Shakespeare that has historically been lacking in South Africa – a dearth that this journal hopes, modestly, to try and address. Readers can look forward to more in future volumes.

**Chris Thurman** is Associate Professor in the English Department at the University of the Witwatersrand. He is the editor of *South African Essays on ‘Universal’ Shakespeare* (2014) and *Sport versus Art: A South African Contest* (2010). His other books are the monograph *Guy Butler: Reassessing a South African Literary Life* (2010); *Text Bites*, a literary anthology for high schools (2009); and *At Large: Reviewing the Arts in South Africa*, a collection of his arts journalism (2012). He writes for *Business Day* as an arts critic and political commentator.

