

# Editorial: Aboard the *Red Dragon* in 2017

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Shortly before volume 29 of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* was published, I went to see a six-man *Hamlet* at Pieter Toerien's Montecasino Theatre, directed by Fred Abrahamse and starring Marcel Meyer in the title role. The production took its design and concept cues from the much-cited performances of the play on the deck of merchant ship the *Red Dragon* as it lay at anchor off Africa's west coast (present day Sierra Leone) in 1607 and off the east coast of the continent (near the island of Socotra) in 1608. There has, over the years, been some dispute as to whether these maritime performances actually took place or were simply the fabrication of nineteenth-century historians. It may be impossible to establish full scholarly consensus over the authenticity of entries in Captain William Keeling's journal referring to *Hamlet* – and, for what it's worth, *Richard II* – as a means of keeping his crew “from idleness and unlawful games, or sleepe”.<sup>1</sup>

The episode has nonetheless been a gift to the global Shakespeare industry, seeming to confirm that Shakespeare's work began to spread across the world while he was still alive, almost as if his elevation to the status of international icon were an inevitable process stemming from his pre-ordained universality. Some have even gone so far as to use the *Red Dragon* narrative to argue for Shakespeare's unproblematic (nay, even ‘natural’ or ‘indigenous’) presence in Africa. Yet it is significant that these performances took place not on African soil but at sea – and, more specifically, on board a ship in the service of the East India Company. Keeling's *Hamlet* is a part of the long story of Shakespeare's co-option into British imperialism; invoking it does not absolve Shakespearean scholars or theatre-makers of our complicity in the race, gender and class dynamics that are writ large in the history and current manifestations of ‘Shakespeare in (southern) Africa’.

Abrahamse and his team took the liberty of shifting the second recorded *Red Dragon* performance of *Hamlet* southward, so that their production could pitch itself as “William Shakespeare's *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*, as performed by the crew aboard the *Red Dragon*, off the East Coast of South Africa, 31 March 1608”. This device brought various advantages. The meta-theatrical aspects of *Hamlet* – most notably *Hamlet*'s advice to the players – could be foregrounded at the outset, and with the addition of some borrowed lines from the Rude Mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the cast presented themselves as a crew of six thespian sailors. The opening seemed to establish a contract according to which the audience would have to accept cuts to the text, like the absence of Fortinbras and the wartime setting, as necessities turned to virtues. It also facilitated the doubling that followed, in particular the portrayal of Gertrude and Ophelia by male actors (a strategy often employed by Abrahamse & Meyer Productions, somewhere between an ‘original staging conditions’ approach and a ‘queer Shakespeare’ aesthetic). Above all, the *Red Dragon* premise underscored the watery imagery in Shakespeare's play: from the location of Elsinore – where *Hamlet*, following the Ghost along the castle's parapets, might be tempted “toward the flood” or “to the dreadful summit of the cliff/ That beetles o'er his base into the sea” (1.4.73-75) – to the metaphysical “sea of troubles” (3.1.60); from *Hamlet*'s nautical-piratical exploits to the drowning of “mermaid-like” Ophelia (4.7.173). Applying the verbal to the physical, Abrahamse's stage design was a square

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1. Gary Taylor (ed), “The *Red Dragon* in Sierra Leone” in Ivo Kamps and Jyotsna Singh (eds), *Travel Knowledge: European ‘Discoveries in the Early Modern Period* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p.220.

deck surrounded by shallow water; various characters waded on or offstage through this water, or dangled their feet in it during moments of rest, or gazed at it like a mirror, or had their faces shoved into it as a form of torture. Yet the framing device slowly disappeared during the course of the production; apart from the background noise of rigging, costumes that hinted at ship's gear and a curious mixture of sailors' accents, we had little sense of being 'on board'.



**Marcel Meyer as Hamlet, Callum Tilbury as Gertrude and Michael Richard as Claudius**



**Jeremy Richard as Rosencrantz, Marcel Meyer as Hamlet and Matthew Baldwin as Guildenstern**

This was Abrahamse and company's prerogative, of course; one shouldn't be too pedantic about these things. Nonetheless, it seemed to me that the ways in which this production didn't quite live up to its billing – at least in terms of the *Red Dragon* and the putative African connection – offered a quiet caveat to those of us who are interested in the forms that Shakespeare takes in a South African context. Such a caution is similar to that which may be expressed regarding the celebrated "Robben Island Bible", a copy of the *Collected Works* circulated among and signed by some of the freedom fighters imprisoned on the notorious island, including one N.R. Mandela: the book may have become an almost totemic object, but it does not automatically grant us the right to ally Shakespeare with the struggle for liberation in South Africa. (I share David Schalkwyk's position as "a Shakespearean averse to the exaggeration of Shakespeare's influence or importance" when it comes to the Robben Island Bible, notwithstanding the richness and complexity of the subject.)<sup>2</sup> An historical event or figure, an archive of textual fragments, a past rich in performance, appropriation, adaptation: these are all creative and educational and scholarly starting-points. But they are not enough. We have to track them assiduously, following their traces into our contemporary moment; we have to be rigorous and self-aware – self-critical, in fact – as we think of South Africa today and tomorrow (and tomorrow, and tomorrow) if Shakespeare is to be, and remain, a 'going concern'.

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The articles appearing in this volume are based on papers delivered at the tenth triennial congress of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa (SSoSA), held in Grahamstown in July 2016. Outgoing president, Warren Snowball, organised a very successful conference (under the broad theme "Shakespeare: Religion, Psychology, Anthropology") that attracted delegates from across South Africa as well as from Germany, Britain and France. The keynote speaker was

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2. David Schalkwyk, *Hamlet's Dreams: The Robben Island Shakespeare* (London: Arden/Bloomsbury, 2012), p.13.

Peter W. Marx, Chair of Theatre and Media Studies at the University of Cologne and Director of the university's Theatre Studies Collection. His talk, weaving together scholarship about the German literary and theatrical history of the Ghost in *Hamlet* and insights into more recent 'global' renditions of the play, was a public event – part of the National Arts Festival's Think! Fest programme – and the venue was jam-packed.

Peter's participation in the conference was an extension of a formal South African-German Shakespeare studies collaboration supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (Germany) and the National Research Foundation (South Africa). Serendipitously, in this volume of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, three further German Shakespearean connections are pursued: Laura Zander's article on recent German productions of *Twelfth Night*; Colette Gordon's essay on *Romeo and Juliet: REBELLION & JOHANNESBURG* by the Berlin-based South African choreographer Jessica Nupen; and Kathleen Thorpe's review of German linguist Cornelia Bock's monograph on the translation of Shakespearean proper names into African languages. Volume 29 opens with another 'voice' that is new to *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, that of Sophie Chiari, whose article on climatology in/and Shakespeare strikes a bold and novel direction in the eco-critical field. Laurence Wright, Sarah Roberts, Geoffrey Haresnape, Tony Voss and Peter Titlestad are no strangers to these pages, but their articles likewise explore new avenues through innovative readings of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Coriolanus*, *Hamlet* and other plays.

At the SSoSA AGM a new executive committee was elected, and I am fortunate to be taking over from Warren Snowball as president. On behalf of the Society, and all those colleagues from near and far who have attended the conferences Warren has coordinated, I extend my sincere thanks to him. The members of the committee – whose names are listed on the inside cover of this volume – have undertaken some exciting initiatives that should be noted here. The first is a partnership with the Shakespeare Schools Festival (SA), whose founder and director Kseniya Filinova-Bruton has joined the SSoSA executive as Schools Liaison Officer. The Society is now offering a free "Youth Membership" to high school learners and teachers with the following benefits:

- Opportunities to meet and observe professional actors and directors at work
- Links to Literature and Drama departments at various South African universities
- Discounts on tickets to productions of Shakespeare's plays.

A second project of the Society is the launch of Shakespeare ZA <<http://shakespeare.org.za>>, a website designed to act as a virtual meeting-place for teachers, learners, theatre-makers, scholars and others interested in Shakespeare. It is a platform for sharing event information, educational resources, publications, translations and more; SSoSA has a dedicated space on the site, as does this journal. There is also a blog page, which has already hosted a handful of guest bloggers. We encourage readers of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* to visit the site and send in suggestions or new material. (Shakespeare ZA is also on Facebook. Spread the word!)

Volume 30 of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* will be appearing towards the end of 2017. It is a special volume, guest edited by Liane Loots, Sandra Young and Miranda Young, dedicated to articles emerging from the important "Decolonising Shakespeare" colloquium held at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban last year.