

Hamlet in England, *Hamlet* in Exile: What's Hecuba to him, or *Kupenga* to them?

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At the end of 2010, while London audiences flocked to see 'a Hamlet for our age' in Nicholas Hytner's modern dress production (a catalogue of modern-dress 'innovations': media-savvy dictators, busy apparatchiks, surveillance, rioting, silenced dissidents, suited extras with conspicuous earpieces, all assembled on the National Theatre's grand stage) a smaller audience gathered at London's Oval Theatre to watch *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* (*The Madness of Hamlet*), an eighty-minute two-man version after the 'bad quarto', performed in English and Shona. The production, which was warmly received in its first run, raises a number of questions touching the themes of this issue: questions about exile and expatriation, as well as *xenophilia* – in the international theatre's embrace of foreigners (*xenos*) who tend to be guests, performing between two worlds.

Hamlet makes short work of banishment and exile, even more so in this compressed version. But the members of the company behind *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet*, Two Gents Productions, bring a general awareness of exile to their performances on British and international stages. German born director-dramaturge Arne Pohlmeier and Zimbabwean émigré performers Denton Chikura and Tonderai Munyevu, resident in London, spent a month together in Zimbabwe researching and developing the show.¹ This is usual practice for the London-based "cross cultural theatre company"² who cite experiences of migration and displacement alongside Shakespeare as their main source of creativity (Two Gents Productions n.p.). In 2011, the company's first non-Shakespearean project, *Magetsi*, presents exiles abroad with stories of Zimbabweans at home. *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* is no less complexly positioned in evoking a (Shona) Zimbabwean Shakespeare at home in London.

Zimbabwean theatre offers a paradigm for meditations on political conflict, succession, forced exile and problems of memory, issues at the heart of *Hamlet*. Though far from overtly political (and further still from drawing the political parallels encouraged by, for instance, Janet Suzman's 2007 *Hamlet* for the RSC Complete Works),³ *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* resonates within this context. Where the state exercises control of media, of course, all theatre becomes political. London-based Two Gents works effectively on the fringes of this constrained experience, with greater liberty (and reduced access to Zimbabwean experience). But this production creates a resonant sounding board for thinking about the violence of succession and the cultural trauma of rupture with the past.

The show cheerfully disappoints expectations of seeing *Hamlet* comfortably 'set' in Zimbabwe, making the country and its history available for modern dress reinterpretations, or offering 'authentically' infused spectacle (doing for Shona culture what *Umabatha* did, superficially, for Zulu historical pageantry). Instead it turns the gaze on its audiences and their position. Programme notes locate the action on the cusp of colonial rule: "1888, Bulawayo, the race for Zimbabwe is on ..." One imagines Fortinbras recast as Cecil Rhodes, moving across Hamlet's ancestral lands on the advantage of his dubious concession. But the staging does little to support the illusion of a stable historical setting. The actors appear in orange boiler suits on a bare stage, using stylised gestures, minimal props and improvised lines to tell the story of Hamlet's madness, with a pared-down, playful style that evokes the 1980s moment of *Woza Albert* more than 1880s Zimbabwe. Metatheatrical gestures and improvised asides further focus the performance on the present. Drawing heavily on 'township' theatre, the production feels urgent and contemporary.

This enables the company to present a *Hamlet* rooted in traditional beliefs and practices, without rendering these inert or ineffectual on stage. In their Shona version, Hamlet is a tribal prince, struggling to honour his family and his ancestral obligations (with the distractions of a corrupt uncle, meddling witchdoctors and, apparently, a pregnant girlfriend). This works as an interesting African recontextualisation of the play's religious and social preoccupations, one that speaks also to Ndebele traditions. But social practices of ritual, music, song, celebration, mourning and storytelling are so thoroughly woven into the production that they constitute both its represented world *and* a large part of its theatrical language. This is very different from ethnological display in performance or 'ritual' as a theatrical fetish, or, still worse, Shakespeare played for its ritualism (as in the Bridge Project's recent, painful production of *The Tempest*). On the bare stage borrowed from township theatre, Shona ritual manifests as lived social practice, and its world of customary beliefs appears vital and current.⁴

While period transpositions tend to provide a visual code for audiences nonplussed (or bored) by Shakespeare, here the 'concept' lies primarily in the Zimbabwean actors' fluid, improvisatory approach to the text. The company have gone to work on the first quarto *Hamlet* to accommodate the constraints of two-man performance and the requirements of their workshoping, collaborative rehearsal process. The quarto provides a simpler, more direct action and language and a permissive space for the players (given audiences' relative unfamiliarity with it and the popular perception of this 'bad' quarto as a bootleg version). It also provides moments of humour, as when a desultory "Ofelia" (Chikura) introduces "Corambis, my father, also known as Polonius. We are doing the first quarto, you see. It's different – but we know our lines." Here the audience laughed; "To be, or not to be, I there's the *point*" (Q1 6.1710) and "Why what a dunghill idiot slave am I?" (7.355) caused a palpable stir. But *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* creates a more layered defamiliarisation by working in narrative codes and strategies from storytelling theatre traditions, and a second significant foreign element: the Shona language.

The play opens with the actors greeting each other and conversing casually in Shona, until one performer turns to the audience, explaining "It all happened when the old king died and the queen married his brother..." This initiates an opening typical for storytelling theatre: narration followed by song, before the action is enacted. The performer (Munyevu) calls out: "The Queen!" and kneels with his hand pressed to his cheek, rolling out a mat to represent a grave. After a long silence, he breaks into a plangent traditional funeral song ("*Hatina Musha*") to which Chikura (Hamlet) adds his voice – a truly luminous moment. Proclaiming "The King" the same actor then sweeps his arms above his head and addresses the Lords in the person of Claudius.

The company have modified their rough and ready Shakespearean 'township' style for *Hamlet*, replacing reliance on costume and props with characterological gesture. By finding a distinctive posture to embody each character, and treating these as shared properties (except for Hamlet and the King, played respectively by Chikura and Munyevu), the actors are able to conjure all the characters of the play (up to a six person scene): Hamlet, hand to brow; the King, arms aloft; "Gertred", hand to cheek; Corambis, with an old man's stoop; Ofelia with a haughty adolescent strut. These gestures make their roles recognisable, yet as easily exchangeable as the toadying "Rossenraft" and "Guilderstone", whose handwagging indicates a pair of antic witchdoctors.

Hamlet's signature gesture, wiping his hand across his brow, leaves him free to use a range of gestures, notably in soliloquies, but not to develop much interior complexity, Chikura having wisely chosen to play him as an everyman observer, on the side of the audience. While Rossenraft and Guilderstone, Ofelia and Corambis play limited 'Africanised' *commedia* types (*zanni*, *inamorata*, *Pantalone*), some of the more radically schematic gestures discover unexpected eloquence in gestural constraint. The Queen's attitude of concealment hovers suggestively between mourning and shame. Losing confidence, the King's commanding, paternalistic pose (like an extreme application of Michael Chekhov's psychological gesture), begins to resemble the 'hands up!' of a cornered criminal.

The show starts slowly, initiating the audience into this language of gesture, but builds to a breakneck pace, as actors throw themselves into multiple roles. There are bravura moments of switching, notably when Chikura, playing both Hamlet and Corambis, kills Corambis behind the arras. This plays very successfully as comedy confusion, a bit of Tom and Jerry business around the makeshift screen. But its resolution is also brutal and shocking, as the actor (who has been chasing himself around the rush mat), seizes it suddenly and throws it to the ground, leaving the audience to see Corambis in the inert, lifeless, object. The speed at which things can change and metamorphose on this stage keeps the physical comedy from ever feeling too comfortable.

To swell the scene, the actors also make use of their audience. At different times, the crowd becomes the gentlemen of the watch, the players welcomed to Elsinore and Horatio, called on to mark the play. Here the intimacy of the stage is used to the full – Pohlmeier clearly has a very sound grasp of *locus* and *platea* – and the effect is each time thrilling. For the complicated business of the play within the play, which calls for a full cast plus sundry ‘players’, four audience members are taken onstage and posed, to literally stand in for Corambis, Ofelia, the Queen and the King, before whom the murder is played out in dumbshow. Deft handling makes this work, though it is a vulnerable moment for the production. In the performances I saw, the bemused volunteers, corralled into a line-up and subjected to a mimed interrogation, each shook their heads in turn as Munyevu confronted them; the ‘king’, last in line, shook his head but found the actor manipulating it into a nod. As the audience responded with laughter, the ‘real’ king materialised: Munyevu throwing his hands aloft, calling for lights, and shouting at everyone to “get off the stage!” The sequence might easily feel static and dramatically inert, a cheap bit of audience fun; but is perfectly pitched to waken a sense of guilt and complicity, and to make the audience aware of the actors’ skilled bodies onstage (in contrast with the awkwardly posed volunteers).

Using gestural language and bodies in the audience, the two actors are able to create a full cast of characters and some sophisticated theatrical effects. But they cannot produce the sense of *surveillance* that is central to the play in most modern productions. In this staging, an actor is never alone onstage: through every soliloquy his counterpart stands silent watching or listening on the sidelines (with no wings to hide in). This presence registers as supportive, rather than intrusive. A general benign sense of witness replaces spying, which is effectively impossible on this stage. *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* thus loses one of *Hamlet*’s most interesting and significant pieces of stagecraft: the King’s confession in a failed act of prayer, crucially unheard by Hamlet. In this version, they have a straight out confrontation, the King speaking his confession to Hamlet. This fits with the overall tone and perhaps within the cultural world of the play, a world of close relationships where prayer is direct and public. It also highlights the loss attendant on cultural translation.

More generally, the play loses much of its political flavour in the intimate, two-man format: confining all action within the family, forgetting Old Norway and editing out young Fortinbras. Yet the real tension here is between the living and the dead. By reinscribing the events of *Hamlet* within a culture of ancestor worship, *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* gives the ghost tremendous force. Staging reflects the basic premise of Zimbabwean traditional belief: that the dead coexist in a vital relationship with the living. The lighting is eloquent on this score: the play opens in a dim, spectral twilight; an accustomed pall hangs over Denmark. But it clears, surprisingly, with the arrival of the ghost, summoned into Horatio’s body. This produces a joyous recognition scene, expressed in a song of celebration (a counterpoint to Hamlet’s sorrowing duet with his mother). In a production where transformations of character through gesture are the norm, the spirit possession produces not a frightening, supernatural spectre, but Hamlet’s very father, every bit as real as Horatio – indeed more vivid, with his stentorian voice and flamboyant Madiba shuffle. One feels keenly his physicality and their real intimacy as Hamlet helps his old father to a seat on the rush mat. As son and ghost talk, the lights come up, ‘normality’ restored.

For modern audiences with little sense of the unresolved Reformation tensions surrounding the ghost of Hamlet’s father, traditional ancestor beliefs, with their whiff of witchcraft, provide a more obvious context for Hamlet’s ambivalence. The play evokes a world of belief where the dead are very much with us (either as ancestors, guiding the community, or as unappeased

malevolent spirits). Where death *is* a consummation, indeed a promotion, devoutly to be wished for. And where there are very real *consequences* when the dead are not respected. Audiences may miss the full significance of Hamlet's ghost in a culture of ancestor worship, where the dead ancestors embody and give moral value to the living, and withdraw their guidance if those moral values are not upheld; a culture in which the patriarch's murder by a family member and the queen's remarriage to the murderer open an irreparable rift that spells personal, familial, and communal disaster. But if audiences miss this, they can easily grasp the sense of the 'real' (living) world as a shadow, in a performance code that places the observance of 'reality' below other forms of narrative. Here, this production says, is more than is dreamt of in your mimetic theatre. Tellingly, it shines the brightest light on *liminal* moments: the world of the ancestor spirits; the world of the gravedigger, with one foot in the grave; and the world created by the players, which all emerge with lively clarity. The company have turned the gravedigger into a double role, so that this figure does not encounter the character Hamlet but oversees *Hamlet*, the action of the play. The gravediggers ground and perfect the production's oral mode in their expanded role. From the fabulist opener "it all started when ...", Shakespeare's script is cunningly worked around the deaths. Between the King's funeral and that of Ofelia, we learn 'how it all started', and then from the moment that Hamlet and Leartes engage their deadly combat – reprising the actors' handshake in a stylised *capoeira* grapple – we learn 'how they all came to their deaths'. Here Shakespeare's script is abandoned as the actors move to dispatch the characters, and it becomes clear that the gravedigger and the storyteller are one and the same.

Singing and dancing, the festive gravediggers parade the rush mat 'grave' to different stations where each death is summarily executed in mime – and lampooned in speech. We hear testimony from Laertes' soccer buddy; from "Gertie's" adult education classmate; from a politician in the King's fat-cat circle, noting how Hamlet eluded The King ("the little bugger, with skills gained from the Diaspora!"). These satirical fragments make up *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet's* weakest sequence: here the balance of irony and robust comedy falls flat. Fortunately, Hamlet's death reprises one of the play's strongest scenes: the prince who goes in search of a grave lowers himself onto the mat like the ghost of Old Hamlet, who sat down in that same place to talk with his son. Last to die are the gravediggers, who collapse in a frenzy of singing and dancing as the stage goes black. This is a play where *everybody* dies.

It is not a subtle solution to the play, but it works. The gravediggers show the actor-duo at their most workmanlike, finding the patterns that make an awkward script satisfying as narrative performance – in this case, a cascade of deaths. *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* produces a very successful instance of syncretic African theatre-making, using music, dance, mime, ritual, improvisation, audience participation and other techniques of oral storytelling theatre to create its Zimbabwean take on Shakespeare.

But this is a superficial description of what the production achieves. Its defamiliarisation of *Hamlet* goes deeper, especially by focusing attention on the *audience*, the limits of participation and issues of translation. This is clearest at the show's mid-point, when it is discovered that the players are coming to the court. Munyevu touts their arrival with gleeful relish, sharing his comments between Hamlet and the audience, building our expectations to a pitch, and when he comes to the climax: "... that *these* are the only men!" (7.260) the lights come up, this time over the audience. Chikura slack-jawed in astonishment, Munyevu grinning, look out on the crowd with open delight, leaving us to squirm in flattered confusion under this beaming gaze. Hamlet (Chikura at his most genial) shows such eager and solicitous pleasure in recognising his old friends among the crowd – singling out faces, noting changes to their appearance – that we can be half persuaded he *has* met at least some of us before.

But the illusion is broken when he begs for a speech from one of the 'players'. "Come, a taste of *your*/quality, a speech, a passionate speech!" he urges, stressing that it is the audience's turn to perform (7.290-91). The actors show yet again that they know how to use a silence to good effect. If anyone in the crowd could step in with lines from Hecuba's speech (as some tried on odd nights), it would be no good. Chikura calls for the tale of "Aeneas *ne* Dido", gently encouraging his target with a simple line of Shona poetry. Here the performers aggressively break the illusion that has absorbed linguistic difference throughout the play. The various Shona

elements – the actors’ conversational opening (quickly broken off); their transformations into new characters, explained in Shona (evident in mime); the traditional songs (framed as emotive utterances) – all ingeniously skirt the problem of translation, and leave the audience unprepared for this challenge.

Munyevu steps in and delivers an animated oral performance, first beginning with a rousing call and response taken from the *ngano* (fantastic tales) tradition. “*Kwaivepo!*” (once upon a time), “*dzefunde*” (we are in agreement), repeated several times, building the storyteller’s authority and creating the right pitch of negotiated audience readiness.⁵ Having found his moment, he launches into a virtuoso performance that captures the dramatic events of the epic tale in mime, movement and rapid shifts of tone. The performer becomes a *pantomimos* (one who imitates all), simultaneously describing and impersonating characters, in the mode of storytelling theatre. This might be seen to spoof the crude gestural codes used in *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* and their pantomime qualities, but the dumbshow provided by posed audience ‘actors’ (who cannot convincingly play the parts which they already physically resemble) underscores the obvious fact that, unlike them, here is a skilled performer. Moving energetically between characters and between extremes of emotion, the storyteller’s performance gathers such powerful momentum that these shifts, which might seem comically incomprehensible, add up to a quite breathtaking intensity. His performance ends on a keening wail, a stylised *cri de coeur*, sounding three piercing, sustained notes. And the effect is devastating.

This was the first time I had cared about Hecuba. The scene brings home two things. First, the story of the “mobled queen” is Greek (or Shona) to most of us. No longer part of a common stock of narrative, Hecuba’s lament might finally be more alive to audiences in an unknown language than in Shakespeare’s English if rewritten to convey the basic *action*, giving the actor space to work on the audience’s passion, and if the audience is made aware of their distance from Hecuba as something the actor recognises and works to bridge. This yields a shared language of improvised performance more fruitful, and in some respects more significant, than the shared Shakespearean canonical text.

To know that the speech begins “The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms/Black as his purpose, did the night resemble” is a weak thing next to the actors’ skill, or more properly their “enskillment”, as Evelyn Tribble (n.p.) terms it in her recent work on distributed cognition in Shakespeare’s theatre. *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet*’s fusion of Shakespearean and African performance traditions, notably the traditions of township theatre, is particularly successful (and significant) in promoting actor-centred approaches, which have been among the most fertile and exciting areas of recent Shakespeare scholarship. The three-man group was prominent in discussions at last year’s British Shakespeare Association Conference, and this year, while the Globe Theatre held a well-attended scholarly symposium on gesture, bringing leading scholars together to discuss gestural approaches in Shakespeare’s theatre, many of their ideas were being tested on *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet*’s London stage.

Two Gents’ Shakespearean productions are broadly typical of the collaborative, experimental, “cross cultural” strain in Zimbabwean theatre, deeply influenced by South African township theatre, but promoting a more ‘transcultural’ agenda in post-independence Zimbabwe.⁶ *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* takes its place in a new generation of township-influenced theatre, and it also indicates a future for Shakespeare that is both local and global. It would be fascinating to see how this work, destined for festival performances in Germany after its UK run, plays to Zimbabwean audiences.

It is undeniable that “[i]f intercultural theatre means to address the potential inequities involved in Western appropriations of other cultural traditions, then its adherents must conceive of a theatre that somehow engages with its own established ‘looking’ relations.” (Lo and Gilbert 48)⁷ Two Gents’ presentation of *Hamlet* to London audiences signals significant headway in this regard. *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet*’s particular fusion of Shakespeare and township theatre intelligently bears out, and perhaps extends, Peter Brook’s observation: “A true moment of theatre can only exist in the present – not yesterday, not tomorrow. And there are always people watching.” (Brook in Melbourne 27)

As it makes visible the locatedness of cross-cultural theatre, Two Gents Productions is a company to watch.

NOTES

1. The company, who claim their own distinctive 'workshopping' approach, seem to pay homage to the three-man teams behind collaborative, workshopped township theatre classics like *Woza Albert* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*.
2. This denotes a complex field. Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert's post-colonially informed model of cross-cultural theatre (2002) probably best captures the complexities, and complications, of Two Gents' Zimbabwean/UK Shakespeare productions.
3. See comments, quoted in Blair (2006), from director Janet Suzman and actor John Kani. Suzman notes: "Tyranny is also at home in Africa. There's a tyrant just north of us in Zimbabwe." (n.p.) Kani reflects on Mugabe as a latter-day Claudius: "There on our northern border is a man, once a good man, who wants to hold on to power even when it destroys both himself and his country." (n.p.)
4. Anthony Graham-White (1976) usefully distinguishes between these different applications of 'ritual' in theatre writing, and notes their limitations. On ritual in the history of performance studies and the idea of global performance, see Julie Stone Peters (2009).
5. See Mickias Musiyiwa's (2004) account of Shona *ngano*.
6. See Owen Seda's "Transculturalism in Post-Independence Zimbabwean Drama" (2004).
7. Aside from the metatheatrical interventions outlined here, *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* also incorporates post-performance audience fora. This work owes some of its insights to those discussions.

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