

**Zeitgeists and other ghosts: A reflection on the 2016 colloquium
“Decolonising Shakespeare?” Contestations and re-imaginings for
a post-liberation South Africa.**

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I fall into Shakespearean theatre and scholarship haphazardly as a slightly resistant feminist academic and theatre maker; one who – like most South Africans who grew up and went to school during the apartheid era – feels slightly dubious around the (then) loaded and forced educative consumption of the Bard’s writing. At the same time, though, I recall watching theatre productions meant for scholars of *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and, the (then) risqué presentation of *Othello*, and falling a little bit in love with the words, the stories, the sword fights and the sheer theatricality. I suppose I have what many of us feel, a slight push-pull towards this thing we call “Shakespeare”. It seems to me that we cannot really separate the actual textual analysis, the staging and performances from the lived conditions of who and what we are. This counts, I suppose, for all histories and rememberings of encountering Shakespeare. I like to think of Shakespeare as part of the weird ‘shared memory’ of apartheid school English literary education that we all seem to have as South Africans, and in this way, perhaps, easily dismissible in a postcolonial endeavour, but perhaps also part of a collective encounter with colonised/racist education systems that makes Shakespeare less of who he is/might be and more of an ‘experience’ that we navigate.

This dialectic with history, literature and theatre, this push-pull, this shared encounter, this navigation, all coalesce into a revision of so much that touches off contemporary questions around post-coloniality, feminisms, critical race and identity studies and, indeed, the very politics of current theatre making and study. As we all ardently work to grab hold of the zeitgeist of our age and “decolonise our minds” (Wa Thiong’o: 1981), our education systems, our theatre spaces and theatre choices, Shakespeare (the shared experience) seems like a very good place to continue to take up the war on racism, sexism and classism.

When the 400-year anniversary of William Shakespeare's death was added to the mix, this thinking gave rise to a small and intimate colloquium that aimed to pierce a small portion of the heart (and mind) around the current call to "decolonise". Hosted by the Drama and Performance Studies Programme in the School of the Arts, College of Humanities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, this colloquium began by situating itself firmly within "theatre studies" but as the call went out for papers, the delight of a cross-over from literary studies and theatre studies started to happen and, I believe, became one of the strengths of the colloquium. For me, it allowed for the meeting of some extraordinary scholarship from both disciplines that has (and can) only but strengthen the ongoing engagement of Shakespeare as an 'experience' navigated by contemporary literary and theatrical scholars, and critical engaged theatre makers. The choice of two key-note speakers also echoed this meeting of disciplines: Welcome Msomi opening the colloquium with a carefully narrated and interrogated re-view and re-remembering of his seminal theatre production *"UMABATHA: A Zulu Macbeth"* (first performed in 1970/1), and Chris Thurman who hails from the English Department at the University of the Witwatersrand speaking on *"Shakespeare: We Need New Names"*.

Titled, *"Decolonising Shakespeare?" Contestations and re-imaginings for a post-liberation South Africa*, the colloquium presented 11 carefully selected scholarly papers that ranged from re-visions of reading Shakespeare, queering Shakespeare, interrogating the gendered and racial profiling of performing Shakespeare, to auto-ethnographic accounts of directing, acting, reading/studying and engaging with Shakespeare. The colloquium was attended by 31 scholars and theatre makers.

Part of the colloquium was also engaging this 'commonality' called Shakespeare with a rare and wonderful narrative presentation by anti-apartheid activist and Robben Island prisoner Sonny Venkatrathnam, whose "Robben Island Bible" (a copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*) is at the centre of a story about how the Bard's plays were read and debated for many hours by the political prisoners (and now icons) of the South African liberation movement, such as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Saths Cooper, Strini Moodley and Ahmed Kathrada.

The now famous "bible" was on display for all colloquium guests and Mr. Venkatrathnam's visit and presentation made me (dare I say all of us present?) remember yet another version of history and South Africa's liberation struggle, offering a much-needed reminder that cultural artifacts in the form of what we read, write, make theatre about, and what we study, have resonance only in the manner in which they are used, abused, re-used and re-imagined – and perhaps, in the end, this is the practice of decolonising ... to fight the vagaries of leaving the body out of history; the black body, the female body, the queer body, the resistant body, the African body ... and finally, the critical reading and theatre making body.

The colloquium ran parallel to and in conjunction with a KZN student and community theatre festival hosted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Drama and Performance

Studies Programme (Howard College Campus) and took the provocative title of “#SHAKESPEAREMUSTFALL?”. Hosted at the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre, this festival included theatre performances from AFDA (Durban), Durban University of Technology, and the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s Edgewood Campus and Howard College’s Drama and Performance Studies Programme.

Most of the colloquium papers are being edited and reviewed for a special edition of the journal *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, which will come out at the end of 2017.