

Lions and Hinds: We're very disturbed

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All's Well That Ends Well: directed by Geoffrey Hyland. Little Theatre (University of Cape Town). March-April 2016.

Geoffrey Hyland's *All's Well That Ends Well* was performed by senior students in the University of Cape Town (UCT) Drama Department at the Little Theatre on the Hiddingh Campus, which I had never previously visited. Near the entrance there were notice boards offering information about the cast and also a review of the production published in the *Cape Argus* by Theresa Smith, in which Smith contends that "given the fraught atmosphere on UCT campus, it turns out that *All's Well That Ends Well* is a perfect platform for the students to voice their feelings in a creative, rather than destructive way".¹ I read these lines before and after attending the performance, and again when I went back for a second viewing. They left a bad taste in my mouth. The platitudinous contention that to create is an innately more positive act than to destroy is careless at best at a moment when student protests – some of which have used destruction as a tactic for conveying the levels of anger amongst the protesters – have stirred up complicated conversations around the role of art in society. Any amount of reflection on the subject produces several refutations: for example, that destruction and creation do not exist in binary opposition; that something may be destroyed in order to make way for the creation of something new; that destruction itself may be an act of creation, converting that which is whole, old and static into that which is new, chaotic and fluid. To offer a relevant example, it may be argued that to create a statue that glorifies the evil actions of an evil man is a worse thing to do than to destroy said statue.

There is something more insidious about Smith's cliché than its banality. In implying that creativity's best attribute is its capacity to contain and moderate young peoples' anger, it offers a world view in which art cannot be a force for justice and change. Instead, art becomes a social placebo, smoothing over the cracks in the world rather than throwing a spotlight on them. In this regard, Smith's review puts me in mind of other responses to the protests published around the

1. Theresa Smith, Review of *All's Well That Ends Well*. *Cape Argus*, 22 March 2016.

2. Kenneth Hughes, "Letter to the editor: Appeasing the UCT Taliban". *Daily Maverick*, 22 April 2016. Online:
<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-04-22-letter-to-the-editor-appeasing-the-uct-taliban/>

time of the production. Kenneth Hughes, a senior lecturer in the UCT Mathematics Department, wrote an article that appeared on the *Daily Maverick* website (on 22 April) expressing outrage over the “UCT Taliban” and their critiques of potentially offensive artworks on campus, conjuring memories of certain American presidential candidates whose references to terrorism serve as a dog-whistle to their racist support base. On the subject of inclusion, Hughes asks, “Does anybody really want to include Philistines and fascists?”, placing himself in opposition to fascism while dismissing marginalised student activists as uncultured barbarians.² And, like Smith, Hughes presents art as a therapeutic means of controlling young people’s anger:

I suppose it is just possible that there are indeed students whose personalities are so hypersensitive that they tremble at the thought of encountering a colonialist. But if so, they must be deeply psychologically disturbed. They will need therapy: for it is clear that it is the students, not the pictures, which are at fault. And one should note that one of the most common forms of therapy for people afflicted with disabling phobias is desensitization, through repeated exposure to the disturbing object. In that case, hiding the pictures is going to be denying colonophobes the opportunity to heal.

After saying this, Hughes clarifies that “we believe it is not a psychological condition which is involved here at all, but a matter of ideology: the ideology of the peculiar and bizarre student movement called Rhodes Must Fall”.

I proffer these particular extracts for two reasons. Firstly, they encapsulate the tone of Hughes’ article and that of the many writers who share his point of view, summed up in a response by Mohammed Jameel Abdulla as one of “paternalistic arrogance”.³ Secondly, as a psychologically disabled student, the section of Hughes’ article from which I have quoted seems to me to be a useful demonstration of the oft-overlooked but nonetheless key role that ableism plays in perpetuating the marginalisation of all vulnerable communities. In Hughes’ view, either students are objecting to the artworks on purely ideological grounds – in which case they are lying about the power of such artworks to hurt and upset them – or, if they are genuinely hurt and upset by the artworks, then they are psychologically disabled. And psychologically disabled people should not be allowed to speak. Anything we might have to say must be motivated by our disabilities, and must therefore be illogical, hysterical, and dismissed without further thought. We must not be listened to; we must be “healed”, forcibly if necessary, until we are quiet again. There is nothing particularly novel in Hughes’ suggestion. Pathologising rebellion and silencing those who are “disturbed” are rhetorical tactics with an extensive lineage in Western culture. What is worth noting is the fact that the appearance of such offhand bigotry in an article written by a senior faculty member at UCT speaks volumes about how far the institution still has to go in terms of meeting its transformative goals.

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I mention all this because it is necessary to understand the context out of which Hyland’s *All’s Well That Ends Well* emerged, and in which it was performed. Like many other tertiary institutions in South Africa, UCT is experiencing upheavals relating to ongoing demands for substantive change on the part of poor, black, disabled, LGBTQIA and female students, and an equally fervent backlash from the Kenneth Hughes of this world. Amidst all this, Hyland chose to produce a play that engages deeply with issues of bigotry and marginalisation, in which disability, race, gender and economic disempowerment all come under scrutiny. In the quiet desperation of Naledi Majola’s Helena – “He is so above me” (1.1.85) – audiences could see the impact of a lifetime’s exposure to a world of privilege that she is unable to access. In Bertram’s

3. Mohammed Jameel Abdulla, “Letter to the editor from a ‘Taliban’ at UCT”. *Daily Maverick*, 28 April 2016. Online: <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-04-28-letter-to-the-editor-from-a-taliban-at-uct/>
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patronising smile and the infantilising kiss he planted on Helena's forehead, Hyland showed that subtle psychological acts of oppression can be every bit as devastating as physical brutality. The production also arrived at a moment of historical significance, at the junction of a resurgence of anti-colonialist student activism and the four hundredth anniversary of the death of perhaps the foremost cultural representative of a colonial power. The production was clearly aware of this awkward confluence, and worked to promote a critical, anti-oppressive reading of the text while still remaining true to the story – a task at which it was partially successful.

In addition, the production also coincided with the sixtieth anniversary of Shakespearean performances at Cape Town's Maynardville Open-Air Theatre, and it is thus difficult to avoid comparisons between Hyland's *All's Well* and Fred Abrahamse and Marcel Meyer's *Othello*, which returned to Maynardville in 2016 for the second year in a row. The latter was a generally enjoyable but, overall, mediocre production. Its highest achievement was in being accessible; its greatest failing was that it was dull. Rather than demonstrating the eternal youth and relevance of the writer and the location, *Othello* made both feel as though they were past their prime. In contrast, Hyland's *All's Well* was a daring, challenging production designed to show off to best effect the competence of its young cast.

The choice of play in itself showed a willingness to take risks; *All's Well* is one of Shakespeare's less popular 'problem plays', and towards the end there is a troubling scene which cannot be excised without radically altering the plot. A contemporary theatregoer who is invested in the disruption of patriarchy and rape culture – the sort of theatregoer Hyland seemed to be trying to appeal to – may find this scene objectionable. So Hyland is to be commended for his boldness. The bulk of praise, however, must go to the cast. Considering what a grim, discomfiting bit of business the text is at times, the amount of energy they maintained throughout the performance might well be what saved it from coming apart at the seams. Although *All's Well* wears the skin of a saccharine love story, at its heart it is a morbid, darkly comic excavation of men's hatred for women. The central plot concerns Helena, a poor physician's daughter in love with Bertram (played by Tristan de Beer), a young nobleman. After curing the King of France of a life-threatening ailment, Helena is invited to choose any member of his court for a husband. Upon her choosing Bertram, he flees to the wars in Italy with his friend Parolles, telling Helena that he will only consider her his wife after his child is in her belly and his family ring is on her finger. The plot thereafter concerns Helena's efforts to meet his conditions, aided by a crafty widow and her daughter Diana, a young Florentine whom Bertram tries to seduce. Meanwhile, Parolles is disgraced when his fellow soldiers expose him for a coward. In the end, Helena wins Bertram back by appearing before him and showing him her pregnancy, the result of her swapping places with Diana in the typical early modern 'bed trick'.

This short summation reveals one of the challenges facing the director: the audience needs to be invested in Helena's quest to win Bertram's love, and there is no point in the story at which Bertram falls in love with her. Her victory at the end is more about bringing him to heel than winning his heart. Another challenge lies in the fact that pivotal events happen off-stage. Helena's cure, the king's recovery from his illness and the bed-trick itself are left to the imagination, only their effects shown to the audience. As a result, the plot is somewhat hard to follow. Despite these obstacles, the charisma of the lead actors – Majola in particular – kept one invested in the story. Hyland's heroine was so witty and compelling that when we reached the second act and she disappeared for large stretches of time, I found myself missing her, even though the performances being offered by the rest of the cast were all absorbing. Another who should be singled out for special mention is Tazme Pillay as the King of France. A wispy young man who almost disappeared in his regal robes, Pillay still managed to convey kingly authority and seething frustration at the incompetence and duplicity of those surrounding him. In the first act, Pillay portrayed a disabled man with a degenerative condition causing him severe mobility impairment. He moved about with the aid of two crutches and sitting down was a laborious process which he bore with gritted teeth. While Pillay clearly conveyed the difficulty of the king's situation, he didn't reduce him to a one-note figure of tragedy. Any pity we might have felt towards him was tempered by his occasional lapses into tyrannical behavior, reminding us of

his uncontested power; he lost his patience and bellowed at recalcitrant subjects, arranged marriages on a whim, and threatened to execute those who didn't keep their promises.

Hyland gave him two nurses who stood silently on either side of him throughout the first act (Laura-Lee Mostert and Nicola Moerman, who doubled as the widow and Diana respectively in the second act). The addition of these two characters added a new dimension to the king and his disability. Though they were his social inferiors, they showed that they were on intimate terms with him through subtle gestures, and though they were voiceless, they had their own opinions on the goings-on at his court. There was one lovely moment when the king's address to his young courtiers becomes ribald: both nurses turned around in perfect unison and went to stand several feet away with their noses held primly in the air. Most interesting was the amount of power they were shown to wield. They assisted the king in standing and sitting down, carried around a cushion and various other necessary supplies, and massaged his hands and feet when requested. But we were not invited to view these women as symbols of saintly self-sacrifice, as abled caretakers are so often portrayed in mainstream media. Hyland's production was at pains to show that when a person holds power – social, physical or economic – over another person, that power is likely to be abused. Because of this, the silent nurses encourage speculation. On the one hand, they remind us of the traditional categorising of the work they do as women's labor (and therefore often devalued). On the other hand, they remind us of the vulnerability of disabled individuals who live in a society built on the supremacy of the abled and the subjugation of the disabled, and who are reliant upon the care offered by representatives of the abled community. Although the nurses seemed loyal to the king, they prompted the audience to reflect on how different his situation would be if he were not so supremely powerful. Would he be afforded the same level of autonomy, comfort, dignity, aid and respect? Likely not.

Although Majola and Pillay drew my eye, every member of the cast seemed to be giving it their all. Luke Buys as Lavatch the clown was simultaneously amusing and unsettling, with a comically phallic fake nose and an undeniable aura of creepiness, giving the audience a scare in his first appearance when he lurched out of a box zombie-style. Lulu Read as the Countess of Rousillon gave a convincing portrayal of a mother heartbroken and bewildered at the actions of a son she loves but cannot understand. Their performances were made all the more vivid by the judicious restraint shown in every other element of the production – muted black and grey costumes, infrequent stabs of slightly disquieting music, and a set comprised solely of eight crates and a smoke machine. Through this minimalism, Hyland created an atmosphere of solemnity that emphasised the humour of the play's funny moments. When the courtiers were presenting themselves to Helena as potential suitors, they did so by striking a series of ludicrous poses, showing off their biceps and thrusting out their chests like pouter pigeons.

At the heart of the production, though, was the way sexism and racism operate in a romantic context. The fact that Helena was played by a black woman and Bertram by a white man introduced another layer of complexity into their textual relationship. Helena's subordinate status was tied into a recognisably South African lattice of oppressions in which a dominant culture of anti-blackness sustains and exacerbates endemic poverty. Her exclusion from the games of romance and seduction enjoyed by Bertram spoke to the way black womanhood remains at the bottom of the hierarchy of desirability created by contemporary Western culture. This served to make her devotion to the contemptible young nobleman all the more painful to watch. De Beer did an admirable job in rendering his Bertram as supremely comfortable in his role as a romantic alpha predator. Consequently, Helena's comment that "the hind that would be mated by the lion must die for love" (1.1.92) felt like a matter-of-fact assessment of the danger of her infatuation rather than a mere lovelorn sigh.

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Beyond the relationship between the heroine and her love interest, there were other, less obvious ways in which the production examined love and power. In the text, the opening scene is a rather dull exchange between Bertram and his mother in which exposition is unloaded on the audience in great chunks. Hyland chose to open with an amorous encounter between Lavatch and a

giggling maid. The interactions between these two characters were the only points in the play at which sex was portrayed as a mutually beneficial exchange between equals. It was therefore fitting that their tryst be interrupted by Bertram, a man whose understanding of sex is rooted in a conviction of his own unearned superiority. He glared at them until both ran off before drawing his sword and practicing graceful thrusts and lunges, demonstrating his preference for martial pursuits over romance and love, his romanticised ideas about combat, and his overall self-absorption – all before a single word had been said. It was a well-crafted scene, showing Hyland's aptitude for identifying the essence of the text and leaving aside what is superfluous. Another addition of Hyland's was the production's concerted effort to subvert the male gaze. All five women in the play remained fully dressed at all times, while the soldiers spent an extended period of time lounging about shirtless and polishing their swords. Moreover, there was an emphasis placed on female solidarity: Bertram's mother supporting Helena over her son, Diana supporting Helena over her wooer, and Diana's mother supporting her daughter and Helena when they appeared before the king. All of this I find commendable, and evidence of Hyland's desire to shape *All's Well* into what may be termed a feminist play. Even so, at this point I must lay out one major criticism. I feel that any rendition of *All's Well* that wants to engage with gender issues in a meaningful way needs to make some effort to confront the fact that the resolution to the play's central dilemma and the victory of its heroine are both achieved by a rape.

It is irrelevant that the rape is unseen, that it does not involve force, that the victim is a man, and that it occurs between a married couple. Many rapes are perpetrated by someone who is well-known to the victim, and are enacted in such a way as to avoid the use of force. The encounter between Helena and Bertram is clearly nonconsensual; the former knowingly uses deception to gain access to the body of someone who has not granted her that access. But in Hyland's production there was no acknowledgement of Bertram's rape as a rape. The moment Helena revealed her pregnancy, clad in a glorious flowing red dress to the awe of the court, was an unambiguously positive moment of triumph, after which she and her repentant husband departed together in newfound marital harmony. Perhaps I would find it easier to overlook this if Hyland had not made it apparent that he wanted his audience to consider his play in light of contemporary gender politics. The advertisement for the production on the Drama Department's website claimed that the play "remains relevant to our contemporary experience, and features some of Shakespeare's strongest female characters".⁴ A theatregoer could not be expected to treat Hyland's *All's Well* as a contribution to an ongoing discourse about "our contemporary experiences" and at the same time to gloss over his failure to deal with the rape that exists at the heart of this play. In contemporary South Africa, rape is endemic; many victims are men; many rapes do not involve force. To ask a South African audience to consider a rape as something other than a rape – as nothing more than the clever trick of a brave woman – is, to my mind, an error. I am reminded of Roy Sargeant's *The Merchant of Venice* at Maynardville in 2008. The director engaged with the play's anti-Semitism by setting it in Nazi Germany, undermining any illusions we had as to the heroic status of the Christian protagonists. It was an effective way of remaining true to the text while encouraging the audience away from complacent acceptance of Shylock's downfall as a 'happy ending'. Something similar was required here.

As it was, the ending scene suggested that there was something important missing from the play's depiction of rape culture. When I watched *All's Well* for the second time, I picked up on certain undertones pervading the play's comedic subplot that reinforced this impression. Bertram's friend Parolles is a coward and a braggart who is accused by others as being obsessed with his clothes. Nelson Menell's bearded, boisterous portrayal of the character imbued him with a limp wrist, a tendency to flirt with everyone on stage, and a hint of unrequited love in his interactions with Bertram – possibly inspired by a moment in the text where Parolles addresses

4. Drama Department, University of Cape Town, "*All's Well That Ends Well*". Online: <http://www.drama.uct.ac.za/drama/events/2016AllsWell>

his friend as “sweetheart” (2.3.264). Menell avoided descending into caricature by showing the character’s emotional complexity underneath the façade. For all his extroversion, Menell’s Parolles was an outsider, desperately eager to fit in with the other soldiers and promising to retrieve their lost drum as a means of proving himself. When he realised he couldn’t go through with it, his failed attempts to work up the pluck to inflict an injury on his body as a mark of valor were both funny and oddly sweet. It was hard not to like him, if only because he received such disproportionate disdain from the other men for what seemed comparatively minor character flaws, given how revolting Bertram is. Parolles is a cocksure misogynist – like every other man in the play. He makes crude comments about virginity to Helena, and he also encourages Bertram to abandon the marriage he was forced into. To put that in context, it should be recalled that the king vows to have Helena executed if her promised cure does not work. This is not a play in which there are many shining examples of moral uprightness.

It was while watching Parolles being tricked by the other soldiers in the second performance that I was reminded of the discomfort I experienced during the revelation of Helena’s pregnancy in the first. Pretending to be enemy soldiers, Parolles’ erstwhile comrades kidnap him, blindfold him, and threaten to torture him as a means of finding out whether he will betray them under pressure. In Hyland’s production, the scene was highly sexualised. Clothed only in his pants, Parolles all but sobbed with terror as he was restrained by a dozen men grasping various parts of his body, while his nipples were tweaked and his chest and groin were prodded with spoons. When Parolles had shamed himself with his unmanly pleas for mercy, his captors pulled down his pants and departed grinning, leaving him naked and alone on stage. Having already sat through the play once, and knowing that the final scene was going to portray a man’s being raped as a necessary part of a woman’s journey to self-empowerment, I had difficulty grasping how the director intended me to receive this prolonged depiction of sexualised violence. Was it supposed to be funny? Was it a demonstration of the depths to which men will sink when removed from women’s company, or of the vulnerability of queer men in straight male-dominated social groups? Or were we supposed to be rooting for the soldiers and their clever joke? I don’t know. Perhaps that is the point. Male-on-male sexual violence escapes scrutiny if it is presented as a prank, a harmless joke – ‘boys will be boys’. But I was led away from this positive interpretation of the scene as a subtle piece of social commentary by the memory of that final moment when Helena’s own trick was revealed. When I consider Parolles’ sexualised torture alongside Bertram’s unacknowledged rape, I cannot help but notice that in both cases the perpetrators escape chastisement while the victims are forced to amend their errant ways. And the fact that Bertram’s redemption is only possible once Parolles has been removed from his former position of influence suggests that Bertram’s flaws are not attributable to the supremacy of white heterosexual manhood in society, but are instead due to the abnormal men who lure gullible boys away from their wives.

I have previously referred to Abrahamse and Meyer’s *Othello* as “meat and potatoes Shakespeare”.⁵ Hyland’s *All’s Well* is an elegantly sufficient portion of smoked salmon risotto, deep within which someone has concealed the sickly Cadbury egg of a Mills and Boon novel. As in many such books, we find the conviction that sexy, masculine misogynists like Bertram must be brought to heel by the love of a powerful woman. Women cannot be rapists, and men cannot be raped. Relationships between women are straightforward and supportive, while relationships between men and women are where things get complicated, tense and interesting. And babies solve everything.

Lastly: although I am informed that the Little Theatre is wheelchair accessible, the stage upon which the audience was expected to sit for Hyland’s *All’s Well* is not. I made an inquiry by email and was told that special arrangements could be made to accommodate a wheelchair user.

5. See Tara Leverton, “Back to Basics: Abrahamse and Meyer’s Digestible *Othello*”. *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 27 (2015): 47.

That people with limited mobility could only attend this production after requesting special arrangements seems particularly regrettable given the prominence of disability in the story. Once the decision was made to place the audience on stage, someone should have made sure that the stage was accessible to all theatergoers. That said, the amount of time I have spent dwelling on the flaws of this production should be taken as an indication of the comparative ease of writing criticism rather than writing words of praise, and not as an indictment of the production's quality. It was good. At times, it was extremely good. Rather than leaving me with the impression that the play had done its social duty by allowing students "to voice their feelings in a creative, rather than destructive way", it reminded me of the power of young actors to challenge, provoke and disturb.

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