

A Future-oriented History of Shakespeare in South Africa

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REVIEW: Adele Seeff, *South Africa's Shakespeare and the Drama of Language and Identity* (London/New York/Shanghai: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Adele Seeff's new book provides an extensive and necessary discussion of Shakespeare in South Africa, with a particular focus on performance and language. Her study of individual performances is not exhaustive; this would be impossible, given its considerable historical scope. Seeff's timeline starts in 1801, with the African Theatre's inaugural production of *I Henry IV* (the first known stage performance of Shakespeare in southern Africa). The book concludes with a case study of *Shakespeare in Mzansi*, a 2008 SABC television mini-series.

Filling in the more than two hundred years between these productions, Seeff structures her book around two general historical chapters, followed by three case studies. The first chapter centres on the African Theatre in Cape Town (1801-1839). This is followed by a chapter spanning the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, focusing on the "Shakespeare diaspora" – that is, the circulation of Shakespeare's texts in South Africa, following the trend of an increasingly globalised movement of people, goods and ideas. These first two chapters lay the groundwork for historically informed discussions of three key productions in the period covering the latter half of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first century. One chapter is dedicated to each of these case studies: Andre Brink's 1970 translation of *A Comedy of Errors* (*Kinkels in die Kabel*); Janet Suzman's *Othello*, staged in 1987 and starring John Kani; and *Shakespeare in Mzansi*, broadcast in 2008.

This is an ambitious undertaking. It offers the opportunity for an historically comprehensive work, with all the insights (both general and detailed) this might provide. It also meets a need in scholarship: the closest rival to Seeff's work in terms of scope is Rohan Quince's excellent book, *Shakespeare in South Africa: Stage productions during the apartheid era* (2002), which covers the period between 1946 and 1993. On the other hand, the parameters of Seeff's book pose the challenge of maintaining coherence and meaningful analysis despite the sprawling and unruly nature of such a long timeline, spanning such a tumultuous history as that of colonial and postcolonial South Africa. Nevertheless, Seeff manages this task well, and her success is due in large part to her focus on linguistic practices and the ideologies which they underpin: the "language and identity" of the book's title. This is a unifying theme which lends coherence to her analyses, while simultaneously tracing and making room for some of the many ideological and contextual changes which take place across three centuries. Seeff's overarching concern



is with Shakespearean performance as a site for analysis which demonstrates how, in a multiethnic and multilingual society, language is used to serve “ideological linguistic programs” (2) of different groups.

In her Introduction, Seeff frames the history of Shakespeare in South Africa according to various appropriations of the Shakespeare text, and the linguistic processes involved in such appropriations. This history shows language operating both as a tool in “suppressing linguistic diversity”, as well as a site “of resistance and ... empowerment” (11). Therefore, Seeff argues, “Shakespeare’s texts operate ... not simply as a matter of transmission, but as agents of exchange and interchange, determined by conditions at the local level and subject to numerous others seeking to establish political identities.” (2) Establishing the centrality of language and its ideological implications to her study, Seeff also recognises the “overlapping subfields” which this involves, including “performance studies, early modern diaspora, South African studies, women’s studies, critical race studies, and sociolinguistics” (12).

The African Theatre – the site of “the first formal production of Shakespeare in southern Africa” (15) – offers, according to Seeff, an “under-theorized framework for understanding imperial-colonial relationships” (45). The chapter works towards filling this theoretical gap, suggesting that the African Theatre can be interpreted as both mirroring its diverse, heteroglossic community in the Cape Colony, and prefiguring the linguistic and ideological divisions which would become so characteristic of future South Africa society. Within this context, Shakespeare becomes a signifier of British national identity, a connection signalled by the choice of *I Henry IV* as the Theatre’s inaugural production. Performed at the African Theatre, situated in the Cape Colony, Shakespeare “allowed soldiers of the large British garrison and its relatively small expatriate community of English government agents and merchants to hear and perform ‘home’ in a cross-cultural, polyglot society” (3). Through her discussion of the different language groups vying for their place in the settlement and on the stage, Seeff shows that the position of English (and by extension, Shakespeare) was not uncontested. In 1801, British power had not yet become entrenched, and was constantly jostling against other European ethnic and language groups – French, German, Portuguese, Dutch. Seeff’s detailed consideration of archival material traces productions and the activity of theatre groups (representing various languages) on the stage of African Theatre through processes which eventually led to an opposition between English and Dutch nationalisms as main competitors for dominance. This, indeed, “helps remind scholars ... that Britain’s efforts at empire building were incremental” (45).

Seeff’s work here offers a solid contribution to understanding early nineteenth-century cultural power dynamics between European settler groups at the Cape. She then discusses the Shakespeare diaspora in South Africa: that is, the expansion in the reach of the Shakespearean text, both geographically – moving with Anglophone theatre from the Cape towards the east and the interior – and in the use of Shakespeare in the service of different language groups: English, Afrikaans and Setswana. This discussion benefits from the apt idea of the diaspora, which is useful in connecting the many threads contained within this section of the book. This wealth of information could, perhaps, have benefitted from further structuring, either into more than one chapter, or into clear subsections. As it is, the chapter contains rich and detailed discussions of a variety of elements. However, this variety is so pronounced that a clearer delineation of elements might have better underscored the value of each.

The first part of the chapter constitutes an important piece of theatre history, focusing on how, with the deployment of a more formalised Anglicisation policy by the English colonial government and an increased movement of English nationalism along global routes, “[exporting] Shakespeare ... became a thriving theatrical enterprise” (47). Seeff demonstrates this extensively through several points of discussion: the influence of Anglo-American blackface burlesque on theatre practice in southern Africa; the advent of cinema and the Shakespeare industry in local, colonial schools; the role and work of actor-managers and their impact on theatre; and how the discovery of diamonds and gold in the interior eventually led to a thriving Anglophone theatre industry (Shakespeare in tow) in Johannesburg. The next part of the chapter moves on to Shakespeare texts as deployed in service of the Afrikaans language and Afrikaner nationalism. Included in Seeff’s discussion here is the development of Afrikaans literary and national consciousness, the subsequent development of Afrikaans theatre, and finally, the first production of an Afrikaans translation of Shakespeare (*Hamlet*) in 1947 in Johannesburg, just prior to the electoral victory of the National Party in 1948. Lastly, Seeff discusses the translation of Shakespeare into Setswana by Sol Plaatje, representing the last language ‘vector’ of the chapter. Plaatje’s translations of Shakespeare

– Seeff highlights *Diphosho-phosho (A Comedy of Errors)* – show an attempt to preserve and promote Setswana, and Tswana culture generally. Seeff sees Plaatje as a figure who, in his engagement with Shakespeare, illustrates many of the themes of her book as a whole: as a multilingual South African, he uses language to promote a particular South African identity. His translation of *A Comedy of Errors* is a precursor to André Brink’s translation of the same play, and like the makers of *Shakespeare in Mzansi*, Plaatje seeks “to read contemporary culture through Shakespeare’s lens, [locating] his own Setswana cultural crisis in Shakespeare’s engagement with early modern historical change and crisis” (96).

Seeff’s commentary on both the 1947 Afrikaans translation of *Hamlet* and Plaatje’s *Diphosho-phosho* show the value of her focus on language and linguistic practice in her approach to South African Shakespeare/s, bearing out her claim that language is a central element in appropriating Shakespeare for ideological, national projects. The fruitfulness suggested by these discussions is fully realised in Seeff’s last three chapters, each of which is dedicated to a case study: two from the apartheid era (*Kinkels in die Kabel* and *Othello*) and one produced in democratic South Africa (*Shakespeare in Mzansi*). In these chapters, Seeff’s connections between historical context, language, ideology, drama and identity take centre stage in productive, enlightening analyses of Shakespeare in performance.

Seeff reads Brink’s *Kinkels in die Kabel (A Comedy of Errors)* as a politically radical text. Brink’s translation, she argues, critiques apartheid policy through presenting a utopian vision of the marginalised Cape Coloured community, accompanied by a translation of Shakespeare’s text into Kaaps, a Cape Coloured dialect of Afrikaans. Seeff shows that this utopian vision carried especial resonance in the context of forced removals enacted by the apartheid government in neighbourhoods such as District Six in the 1960s and early 1970s. Added to this is the fact that the Cape Carnival (a traditional celebration of emancipation from slavery, which features in Brink’s translation) had been banned since 1967. Brink’s celebration of Cape Coloured language and identity, and his representation of Carnival, was therefore performed “in a vacuum of loss” (121). Furthermore, Seeff argues, the themes of *A Comedy of Errors* are particularly suited to the separation and division experienced in the wake of such loss. She then goes on to unpack the linguistic strategies used by Brink in presenting the Kaaps dialect of Afrikaans in his translation, and lastly *Kinkels in die Kabel* is situated “within the traditions of comedy, farce, burlesque, and political satire” (135). In this last part of the chapter, Seeff spends some time exploring the fact that, in 1970, *Kinkels in die Kabel* was performed by actors in blackface, discussing “possible valences attached to this use of blackface burlesque” (135).

In the next chapter Seeff looks at Suzman’s *Othello*, in which the director wanted to present a “microcosm of South Africa” (150), tapping into the language hierarchies that characterised the period. In the production, language and accents were used to signal ideology and class status. Iago was identified with Eugene Terre’Blanche, white Afrikaner supremacist, while Desdemona (and all other characters who share her class status) spoke in white South African English accents. Seeff spends some time discussing these identifications, but her main focus lies specifically with John Kani’s performance as Othello and his portrayal of the character as a Xhosa poet. Her discussion of Kani’s interpretation of the role is based on an understanding of Othello’s performative identity, as constructed through storytelling. Seeff argues that the storytelling became central to Kani’s performance, whose “familiarity with the oral tradition of Xhosa storytellers and poets most certainly influenced his performance of the key narratives within the arc of Othello’s development” (149). Seeff’s detailed analysis of the production, usefully informed by the 1988 video recording of the performance, shows how performance and language are intricately linked, with particular success in this instance due in no small part to Kani’s “lilting, virtuosic performance firmly located within [Xhosa] cultural tradition” (163).

The final case study is *Shakespeare in Mzansi*, a television series commissioned by the public broadcaster (SABC). One of the key features of the series is its multilingualism. This last chapter therefore provides a suitable counterpoint to the first chapter on the African Theatre, which demonstrated how different groups within the Cape Colony’s “linguistically diverse settlement” remained “steadfastly univocal” (3-4). *Shakespeare in Mzansi* was produced in a context where, post-1994, nine indigenous languages were included in South Africa’s official languages. This shift in policy envisioned a more inclusive linguistic landscape, in which languages which had suffered marginalisation under colonial and apartheid legislation could be recuperated. Thus, Seeff argues that the programmes which constituted *Shakespeare in Mzansi* “reclaim multilingualism in the face of centuries of separatist, ideologically

driven language policy” (187). The series boasted revisionings of several Shakespeare plays: in this chapter, Seeff chooses to focus specifically on *Entabeni* and *Death of a Queen* (both versions of *Macbeth*). *Entabeni* uses a mix of isiXhosa and isiZulu, while *Death of a Queen* uses Setswana, Sepedi, Sesotho and Tshivenda. Use of English is limited, and not ascribed according to race. As in her chapters on *Kinkels in die Kabel* and *Othello*, Seeff discusses both *Entabeni* and *Death of a Queen* in detail, following several threads of analyses. In both cases, she strives to show how “the relationship of fractured historical pasts to a contested present seep through the characters’ discourse” (188), and how “multilingualism, translation, and code-switching” are used by actors, writers and directors to create uniquely South African appropriations of Shakespearean texts.

Seeff’s analyses contain many rewarding byways which a review such as this cannot do justice to; these byways, and the main arguments they flow from, provide fertile ground for future studies of Shakespeare in South Africa. In the Afterword, Seeff suggests that one of the conditions for the survival of Shakespeare in South Africa is that literary theory must work to offer new routes into Shakespeare studies for both students and academics. It is the work of theorists and other writers in the field to propose “what claims can be made for the ethical study or staging of Shakespeare’s texts” in South Africa (230). Seeff’s book is a valuable contribution to anyone wishing to pursue such lines of enquiry; it provides a wealth of historical and theoretical points of departure which may inform and shape our understanding of Shakespeare in South Africa for many years to come.

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