

Strong Precursors: Shakespeare in southern Africa and *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, then and now

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In January this year, South African academics and practitioners in the fields of literary studies, linguistics and education mourned the death of Stanley Ridge (1942–2018). Over the course of his thirty-year career at the University of the Western Cape – and a productive decade as emeritus professor – Stan was not only an esteemed teacher and a respected scholar, but also a cherished mentor to young researchers, writers, educationists and activists. He worked tirelessly in and through key institutions, including the National English Literary Museum, the National Language Body and the English Academy.

Stan was ideally placed to review *ISEA, 1964–2014: A South African Research Institute Serving People* (2016), a collection of essays about the development of the Institute for the Study of English in Africa edited by current director Monica Hendricks. The history of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa (SSOSA) is closely connected to that of the ISEA, and I knew that readers of this journal would be interested in Laurence Wright’s chapter on the Society – along with other material in the book charting the development of “English studies” during the period in question. So I asked Stan if he would act as a reviewer; characteristically, he agreed to do it without delay. But a short time later he passed away.

Re-reading Wright’s essay in this context, I became overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude and admiration – mixed with a substantial measure of humility and perhaps even a hint of shame – as I thought about the work of ‘those who came before’ (and, in some instances, ‘those who have gone before us’). There are a number of figures who, like Stanley Ridge, dedicated themselves to furthering cultural and educational causes such as the Shakespeare Society. As a young Shakespearean, it was I suppose necessary for me in some Freudian sense to distance myself from the work of academics and ‘amateurs’ alike through organisations like SSOSA – not to dismiss it, but perhaps to view it with a certain amount of scepticism, or at least to imagine myself as one who might have been sympatico with critics of the Society at the time of its founding in the torrid final years of apartheid.

Such critics were acknowledged by Guy Butler in his editorial for the first volume of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, published the year after SOSSA was established:

Some believe this is neither the time nor the place to be founding a society to encourage the appreciation of a dramatist who was born in a foreign land over four hundred years ago, and whose works are written in an archaic form of English. South Africa has more urgent matters to attend to.

It certainly has; but that does not mean that long-term interests must be neglected. There are occasions when urgent matters may properly benefit from our attending to matters of permanent importance.¹

I have returned to these words again and again over the years, adopting a default position of circumspection, hesitant to embrace the ‘universalist’ assumptions that seem to be expressed in Butler’s closing assertion. The Oedipal complex (it is probably not inappropriate to continue with a psychoanalytic paradigm) informing my cautious approach to ‘institutional Shakespeare’ in South Africa was further complicated because Butler was the subject of my doctoral thesis, which entailed a protracted process of wrestling with my white English South African identity.

1 Guy Butler, “Editorial”, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 1 (1987): v.

Yet the four focal points around which Butler structures his editorial – topics covered by the articles in that first volume, and areas of interest to the early members of the Shakespeare Society – express precisely my own investment in South African Shakespeare: Shakespeare in Education (pointing out that there will be “no sacred cows” when it comes to educational syllabi in an envisaged post-apartheid South Africa, and that Shakespeare’s place on the curriculum should not be taken for granted); Shakespeare in Translation (from Plaatje to Nyerere and beyond); Shakespeare in Performance (“The acting profession is a tough one and would not remain addicted to a poetic dramatist who did not appeal to the public”); and Shakespeare without Words (adaptation and appropriation by musicians, dancers and visual artists).² This is the work that the current SSOSA executive committee has supported since its election. But, lest those of us on the committee should think that we are pioneering uncharted territory, it should be affirmed that this is precisely the work that the Society undertook to support when it was founded.

Engaging substantially with Wright’s account, then, I came to the conclusion that it ought to be republished in the pages of this journal – not just because reading it was such a salutary experience for me as the journal’s editor, but because it is a reminder to all of us who are connected to the study, performance and teaching of Shakespeare’s work that the Society circa 1986 and the Society circa 2018 may differ in historical context and (to some degree) in vision, but they have in common a shared set of emphases. Shakespeare-in-education, then and now, means exploring the how and why (and if) of Shakespeare on the school syllabus; it means helping teachers and learners by meeting them ‘where they’re at’. Shakespeare-in-performance means promoting the work of actors and directors putting Shakespeare on stage or screen, not simply for the sake of promulgating Shakespeare’s work but as a means of expanding South Africans’ access to theatre and the performing arts more generally. And Shakespeare-in-translation (whether that means linguistic translation or translation into other forms of creative expression) means, for example, foregrounding African languages rather than simply celebrating English as global lingua franca.

The inclusion of Wright’s history of SSOSA in this volume results in other pleasing points of continuity. Wright mentions, for example, the initiation of the Shakespeare birthday lecture series in 1996. Strictly speaking, the text of each annual lecture should appear in *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* the following year; under my editorship, I am sorry to say, the custom has been more honoured in the breach than in the observance.³ Hopefully, the publication in this volume of Malvern van Wyk Smith’s excellent 2017 lecture on the “drama and architecture” of Shakespeare’s sonnets signifies the re-establishment of that practice. A further key form of continuity in the activities of the Shakespeare Society is the triennial congress, which typically overlaps with an academic conference. Some of the papers presented at the last conference, in Grahamstown/Makhanda in 2016, appeared as articles in volume 29 (2017); it is gratifying that the present volume includes another, in Eugenie Freed’s astute reading of *Measure for Measure* via King James I’s *Basilikon Doron* and *The True Law of Free Monarchies*. The next triennial congress will be held in Cape Town in May 2019. It will be comprised of “Making Shakespeare” (a platform for theatre makers), “my shakespeare” (a series of workshops for teachers) and the academic conference “Shakespeare and Social Justice: Scholarship and performance in an unequal world”. This promises to be a watershed event, and readers of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* can look forward to the publication of numerous articles based on papers delivered at the conference.

SSOSA was also involved in the organising of “Moving Shakespeare”, a colloquium at the Market Theatre Foundation in Newtown in October 2017 made possible by the combined efforts of the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (CISA) at the University of the Witwatersrand, the Wits School of Arts and the School of Literature, Language and Media. At this two-day gathering of theatre makers, dancers, choreographers and scholars – which included talks, screenings, workshops and performances – participants explored and reflected on the ways in which Shakespeare ‘moves’. Sandra Young delivered the keynote lecture, on Vishal Bardwaj’s film *Haider*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* set in

2 *Ibid.*: iv–v.

3 Here I am contributing to the venerable practice of “mangling Shakespeare” – but readers may be interested to explore the treatment of these famous lines from *Hamlet* (1.4.17-18) in Adam Hooks’ appositely pedantic piece, “Mangling Shakespeare”, *Anchora*, January 2012 (online: <http://www.adamghooks.net/2012/01/mangling-shakespeare.html>).

Kashmir.⁴ This starting-point – thinking about Shakespeare’s movement across the Indian Ocean and, more broadly, the Global South – was a response to the visit to South Africa of Indian Kathakali dancer, actor and playwright Arjun Raina. “Moving Shakespeare” culminated in a performance of Raina’s *The Magic Hour*, an ongoing project centred around his work with Kathakali and Shakespeare (it has previously been adapted and performed in India, Germany, Japan, France, Russia and Australia). Raina was joined by Odissi dance specialist Lillian Warrum for an evening of music, dance and theatre in which Indian classical dance forms met Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

The Magic Hour offered a second point of departure for “Moving Shakespeare” – that is, the consideration of Shakespeare’s work as expressed in and through movement and dance. There were also opportunities to address movement *within* Shakespeare’s plays, in terms of the dynamics between performers and characters – experiments in ‘moving parts’ and extemporaneous ensemble work. Mark Hawkins, Sunnyboy Motaung, Oscar Buthelezi and their colleagues from Moving Into Dance Mophatong (MIDM) performed and discussed aspects of their collaboration with Raina as part of his residency at the Nirox Foundation. Sarah Roberts and Nicola Pilkington workshopped a scene from *Much Ado About Nothing* with students from the Wits School of Arts and the Market Theatre Laboratory. Pilkington also discussed the touring production of *Coriolanus* she co-directed in 2016 with cast members Sanelisiwe Yekani and William Harding. The collaborative spirit, the strong orientation towards performance and the richness of “Shakespeare without words” (in Butler’s terms) enjoyed by all the participants is captured in Liane Loots’ article on “Encountering Dancing Shakespeare/s”, which was first presented as a paper at the colloquium.

The fifth article in volume 31 is Kirsten Dey’s analysis of Petrarchism ‘gone wrong’: Shakespeare’s critique of the idealising force of Petrarchism that results in the fusion of sexual desire and sexual violence. One cannot but read this article (and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus*) in the context of gender-based violence, rape and sexual assault today – a global problem, undoubtedly, but one that is experienced at the scale of an epidemic in South Africa. The ways in which Shakespeare’s work may be positioned relative to national political, social and economic contexts is both a ‘presentist’ and an ‘historicist’ concern, as is evident in Marguerite de Waal’s review of Adele Seeff’s *South Africa’s Shakespeare and the Drama of Language and Identity*. Seeff’s book covers over two centuries of Shakespeare-in-SA and is a welcome new addition to the field. In a different vein, Tony Voss’ timely revisiting of Gabriel Egan’s *Shakespeare and Marx* – it is ten years since the global financial crisis of 2008, and fifteen since the book was published – frames his comments by referring to “the ongoing prominence of Marxist or pseudo-Marxist discourse and socio-economic analysis” in a country such as South Africa.

Finally, one may ask, what of the much-touted focus on performance? Is this journal practising what its editor preaches? Perhaps not enough. There is, at least, a happy symmetry: the volume opens with Loots’ response to dancing Shakespeare/s, and it closes with Sandra Young’s insightful review of a significant production of *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Maynardville Open-Air Theatre in Cape Town. My only defence here is that volume 31 offers quality – Young gives one a fine sense of the production, expanding on existing critical approaches to this problematic play – rather than quantity. The reasons for the dearth of reviews of other productions are twofold: a shortage of reviewers, and a limited range of new Shakespearean work on South Africa’s stages.

This is not to say that there are no interesting or exciting things afoot when it comes to performed Shakespeare. Since the publication of the special issue of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* on “Decolonising Shakespeare” (volume 30) at the end of 2017, apart from the Maynardville *Shrew*, I have seen a pared-down but compelling production of *Antony and Cleopatra* (directed by Neka da Costa for the National Children’s Theatre) that toured schools countrywide; Fred Abrahamse and Marcel Meyer’s visually impressive *Macbeth*, which made the play vivid for school learners and adult audience members alike; and a fascinating collaboration between visiting American director Christopher D. Betts and the Kwasha! Theatre Company – alumni of the Market Theatre Laboratory – in which *A Comedy of Errors* became *ErrorS A Comedy*, a mash-up of Shakespeare’s play and the thematically resonant

4 Subsequently published as “Beyond Indigenisation: *Hamlet*, *Haider*, and the pain of the Kashmiri people”, *Shakespeare* 14.4 (2018): 374-389.

family-reuniting TV series *Khumbul'ekhaya* that constantly questioned the place of Shakespeare in the repertoire of young black South African theatre makers even as the cast performed their adaptation. Each of these productions deserves more than a passing mention in an overlong sentence. That they and other new Shakespearean phenomena in South Africa should receive substantial appraisal in the pages of this journal is (to mangle *Hamlet* once more) a consummation devoutly to be wished.

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