

Editorial: “Decolonising Shakespeare?” Contestations and Re-imaginings for a Post-liberation South Africa

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In 2015 South Africans experienced a seminal moment in student politics and social movements, as previously marginalised discourses around the renewed call for Afrocentrism and the decolonisation of institutions, knowledge practices and public discourse gained new prominence. It began with the toppling of Rhodes iconography at the University of Cape Town, which quickly led to the pulling down and defacing of colonial statues situated on other South African university campuses and in South African city squares.¹ The #RhodesMustFall movement saw university students and state police go head to head in ways that were reminiscent of June 16 and the anti-apartheid student uprisings in 1976. This 2015 movement evolved into the 2016 #FeesMustFall campaign which prompted the shutdown of university campuses across the country. Campuses had become war zones. Invoking the 1994 era political promises of free education, students called on institutions of higher learning to re-think, re-imagine and revise outdated colonial systems of learning, a rallying cry under the term ‘decolonise’.

While this moment in educational politics cannot be said to have evolved in the same way on each South African university campus, for us at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) – a campus with a primarily black student body – it was a moment of confronting the intersection of race and class and financial access. The campus was shut down for over 8 weeks in 2016 at the height of teaching delivery time and we, as academic staff, became accustomed (again) to the daily smell of tear gas, to the sound of gun shots, and to the very visible presence of not only the police but also the hired private security company MI7 whose riot shields, AK47 rifles, and stun batons were highly visible when walking around campus. The aggressive presence of armed police and security for hire became yet another reminder that this ‘rainbow’ was, more truthfully, a nation in conflict.

At the same time, 2016 was significant for another reason in Shakespeare studies. On the global stage, 2016 marked the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death. How should a South African Drama programme respond to these two key aspects of this moment? As the Speech and Drama Department of the then University of Natal under the initial leadership of Prof Elizabeth Sneddon, Shakespeare and canonical theatre was conceived as “the tool of thought invested by man for the purpose of achieving a civilized way of life”.² However, in its vital post-94 re-curriculation, Drama and Performances Studies at UKZN has severed any major teaching relationship to Shakespeare; he appears now as a small section in a third-level module on “Postmodernism and Performance”, where students encounter a filmic interpretation of a Shakespearean text as a type of theatrical dialectic, and as the practical component of a section on Theatre in Education at level 2. However, in performance, Shakespeare’s work has had more staying power. During the years 2001 to 2010 his plays were staged annually by colleagues Mervyn McMurtry and Tamar Meskin who ran a sponsored Shakespeare Schools festival that attracted over 20 000 school learners from across the province. Performed at the Open Air Theatre, Shakespeare’s plays were made accessible and relevant to enthusiastic young South African audiences. The Shakespearean legacy of this Drama programme also includes Welcome Msomi’s *uMabatha*. The original poster sits in our graduate seminar room alongside the production’s archival material. Into this confluence of memory, history, politics and the call for educational decolonisation, we decided to set up a two-day colloquium at UKZN (30 September and 1 October 2016) to open up a space to talk, to talk back, to talk anew, and to talk beyond this phenomenon identified as Shakespeare. Our intention was to embrace contestation, and re-imagine what it might mean to “decolonise Shakespeare”. This special issue of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* is a collection of some of the colloquium papers. We invite you to engage with this

1 For further analysis and discussion see, for example, “#RhodesMustFall,” Mail & Guardian, N.D. <https://mg.co.za/tag/rhodesmustfall> (accessed 29 September 2017).

2 Elizabeth Sneddon, “The power of the spoken word”, *Natal Education Department Bulletin* 28 (1981): p.12, in Lynn Dalrymple, *Explorations in drama, theatre and education: A critique of Theatre Studies in South Africa* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Natal, Durban South Africa 1987), p.20.

collection of articles and writings in the context of this moment (our moment) in South African history, at a time when student activism has reawakened this country. The imperatives of this moment have put education, theatre-making and scholarship under intense scrutiny. They have therefore guided us as editors in what should be included in this special issue and what voices and insights need to be reflected here.

Of significance to us is the interdisciplinary engagement of scholars and practitioners around the same subject matter. This collection of papers therefore offers an intersection of perspectives across theatre practice, literary study and dramaturgy. Furthermore, we recognise that the imperatives of this moment impact how we relate to Shakespeare, as a political and cultural icon, as an Elizabethan playwright / poet and as a million-dollar industry. This requires what pedagogue Paulo Freire refers to as praxis: reflection and action for the purposes of transformation.³ This was in part the motivation for the conference and the rationale behind the explicit valuing of research that was practice-led and autoethnographic.⁴ We have therefore included a section that expressly looks at actors, directors and designers who used the occasion of this colloquium to interrogate a self-study of Shakespeare's related works created or performed.

The relevance of this inclusion is further borne out by Francis Harding's observation that performance in Africa, and throughout the world, "makes visible the unseen and makes present that which is in the past or in the future, manipulating space and time and challenging social and natural order".⁵ What results from the inclusion of these reflections is a rich tapestry of attempts to revision in performance and in action our relationship to this iconic figure who has been so closely associated with the colonial canon in South Africa. We think particularly of Ayanda Khala-Piri's paper, "Transformation's *Tempest*: Miranda as a student of higher education in South Africa" in which the Miranda of her *Tempest* somehow turns into a contemporary Sarafina, as imagined by Mbongeni Ngema, who is caught up in the #FeesMustFall movement. It is a layered and evocative reflection on the author's own "double bind" as a young black female academic.⁶ Pumelela Nqelenga, whose striking image distinguishes our cover, reflects on her experience of playing Iago as a black queer woman in *Moor*, directed by Jess Harrison at the National Arts Festival 2013. She describes the process as one of decolonising her own body in the performance space and of acknowledging the interpretative lens it offers. Her insights into the experience of performing in this bold adaptation shed light on the racial and patriarchal complexities of the play itself and of the context of theatre-making in post-apartheid South Africa. Tamar Meskin, too, sets out "reimagining Shakespeare on a post-colonial stage" by reflecting on the crucial element of *play* "and its companion, creativity", in her work as a director of *The Past is Prologue*. For Meskin, playfulness creates the possibility of freedom and the crossing of entrenched boundaries. An emphasis on play in her work with students creates the liberties necessary "to re-invigorate, re-animate, and re-imagine" Shakespeare "for our time and space". Deborah Lutge's reflection "'*Much Ado about...*' Multiple directorial readings across histories and cultures" describes and analyses four interpretations of the same text (*Much Ado about Nothing*) for the Folkwang Shakespearean Festival in Essen-Werden in 2016. Lutge's descriptions make these plays come to life and give insight into the endless interpretations of a "living" Shakespeare whose directors are inspired by their own contexts.

Alongside these autoethnographic reflections, literary scholar Chris Thurman begins this special collection by suggesting that if scholars and theatre-makers seek to decolonise Shakespeare, we need to find "new names". Venturing beyond the vocabulary that has previously been employed in the field of Shakespeare studies, he evocatively describes Shakespeare as an experience, a phenomenon or a meaning constituted in the moment of interaction between actor(s) and each audience member. Thurman argues that this might be a way of resisting the slide into universality that plagues the field and suggests rather that "Shakespeare is the means and not the end". For Noxolo Matete, the experience of playing Paulina from *The Winter's Tale* as a black South African woman involves embodying the discomfiting complexities of the decolonial imperative. In a compelling and theoretically nuanced reflection on

3 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1996), p.33.

4 Stacey Holman-Jones, "Autoethnography: Making the personal political", *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*, eds. N.K Denzin and Y.S Lincoln (Thousand Oaks California: Sage, 2005), pp.763–793.

5 Francis Harding, *The performance arts of Africa* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.2.

6 Gayatri Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

the actor's stage presence, Matete gives voice to the ambivalence involved in performing an accented Shakespeare and in resisting the racist colonial inheritance that demands 'authenticity' from black performers. She invites us to imagine, instead, a black female Paulina on a South African stage as generating solidarity with the decolonial project.

Reflecting on the politics of the personal, too, Thys Heydenrych describes in fascinating detail his *Hamlet* adaptation which asks us to imagine the possibility of Hamlet and Horatio as lovers. Working with the original, Heydenrych reframes the play, offering an alternative reading that unsettles the heteronormativity of traditional interpretative frameworks. Sarah Roberts looks to the innovations and collaborative creative process inherent in contemporary theatre, and specifically to the 'afterlife' of *Romeo and Juliet* in *West Side Story*, for a "model of 'decolonized' theatre-making". Roberts draws on the insights of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Moving the Centre* in arguing that what may register simply as 'cultural exchange' reflects the tension between imperial hegemonies and new world modes of resistance. Chandré Botha and Chris Broodryk's essay reflects on examples of filmic appropriations of *Romeo and Juliet*, by Franco Zeffirelli (1968), Baz Luhrmann (1996) and Minky Schlesinger's *Gugu and Andile* (2009) to consider the critical perspectives on gendered relations of power that emerge in postcolonial scenes of imagining.

The reviewers bring to our attention some of the compelling theatre-making already visible on South African stages. Dilip Menon considers the impact of the Insurrections Ensemble's operetta, *The Storming*, a linguistically and musically diverse interweaving of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête*, whose innovations allow us to imagine the haunting cries of the dispossessed and subjugated as ongoing. Molly Brown offers a review of Myer Taub's University of Pretoria student production *Deoriolanus*. Brown looks at the chameleon-like nature of the Shakespearean text and the intriguing theatrical link made by Taub to the political turbulence currently rocking South African universities. In this production, Brown argues, the actors and director deconstruct not only Shakespeare's text, but theatrical conventions themselves, using the shadowy remnants of the play to voice the rage, distrust, hope and uncertainty triggered by the #FeesMustFall protests. Finally, Marie-Heleen Coetzee offers a review of the play text *The Robben Island Shakespeare* by Matthew Hahn. She concludes that far from being a performance documentary account of Shakespeare's relationship to the anti-apartheid activist Robben Island prisoners, the play encourages renewed understandings of the entanglement of complex histories and contexts that form part of any potential decolonising agenda.

Ngũgĩ writes that "written words can also sing".⁷ Part of the journey of this special issue has been to find the link between artist, theatre-maker, scholar and activist – to find the song of the written word that speaks truth to the ongoing endeavour to see if Shakespeare could be dislodged from the colonial canon and renewed for a new stage, a new moment, in contemporary South Africa. We are delighted, as an editorial team, to have been given this space to reflect on this moment of meaning-making. The colloquium also was privileged to host two iconic figures in the world of Africa's Shakespeare. First, a keynote address was given by Welcome Msomi. While much has been written about *uMabatha*, the delight of listening to Msomi's performative narrative of his journey to making the production, felt like another kind of song being sung. His return to the UKZN Drama programme for the colloquium was also a moment of exhuming buried history and an opportunity to decolonise in other ways. Msomi's address was also supported by a special session with Surinarayan "Sonny" Venkatrathnam whose "Robben Island Bible" (*The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*) and its relationship to Robben Island prisoners like Nelson Mandela, Ahmed Kathrada and Oliver Tambo is the stuff of legend. In a situated interview and reflection, Devaksha Moodley offers an account of Sonny's presentation at the colloquium, and beyond this, as we all sat listening to a man whose political and personal life intersected with the icons of our struggle history and with Shakespeare. We hope this special issue reflects something of the layered complexity we began to recognise in that space, as we listened to Sonny's account and encountered, with him and his comrades, a Shakespeare that had been dislodged from the strictures of the colonial and apartheid imaginary and reimagined for a new moment.

7 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Dreams in a Time of War: a Childhood Memoir* (London: Random House, 2010), p.47.

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