

# *Titus Andronicus*: South Africa's Shakespeare

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## ABSTRACT

One of the more interesting examples of the global circulation of texts and productions is the Antony Sher-Gregory Doran 1995 production of *Titus Andronicus* at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg. Gregory Doran, an English actor/director with experience at the Royal Shakespeare Company, made the decision to direct the play with Antony Sher as Titus during a visit by the Royal National Theatre's Studio in September 1994, just months after the first democratic elections in post-apartheid South Africa. In this paper, I argue that Doran, who cast his production as a conflict between extreme right-wing Afrikaners and *tsotsis* (black township gangsters) in a post-apartheid South Africa, set off a debate in the metropolitan center/colonial/postcolonial arena that had its origins in the earliest introduction of formal theater to the Colony in 1801 and in key historical/political events of nineteenth and twentieth-century South Africa.

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One of the more interesting examples of the global circulation of texts and productions is the Antony Sher-Gregory Doran 1995 production of *Titus Andronicus* at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg.<sup>1</sup> The production opened March 27, almost a year after the first democratic elections ever held in South Africa on April 27, 1994, elections that brought an official end to apartheid with the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president. The end of apartheid also ushered in the "New South Africa," a slippery term minted in 1990 by then-President F. W. de Klerk, the last pro-apartheid Nationalist party president, in his speech announcing the release of Mandela from prison. It is not insignificant that Doran directed the play at the Market Theatre, a theater founded in 1976 by Barney Simon during one of the most repressive periods of the apartheid regime with the mission of playing to desegregated audiences.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Gregory Doran, an English actor/director with experience at the Royal Shakespeare Company, made the decision to direct *Titus Andronicus* and to cast his partner, Antony Sher, as Titus during a two-week visit to the Market Theatre by the Royal National Theatre's Studio in September 1994, just months after the elections in post-apartheid South Africa. A troupe of British actors, including Sir Ian McKellan, arrived for two weeks of actors'

workshops and classes at the Market Theatre. That visit represented a complicated homecoming for the English-speaking, South-African born, British-naturalized actor Antony Sher. Sher had played his small part in the anti-apartheid struggle, burning his South African passport when he was granted British citizenship, joining protest marches, endorsing the Cultural Boycott imposed on South Africa, voting in London in the 1994 South African elections, and, finally, reclaiming his South African passport for use on this particular journey. Positioned as always and inexorably "other" (in his own words, "trebly a member of three minorities — white, gay, and Jewish"), Sher, by virtue of the personal history he brought to the role of Titus, was to find himself at the center of a post-colonial knot which he never fully understood, but to which his several identities almost certainly contributed. Sher's father was born Jewish, but was raised as an Afrikaner; Afrikaans was his first language, and he spoke English with an Afrikaans accent. That Doran imagined Sher saluting the "New South Africa" in Titus's opening speech, "Cometh Andronicus, bound with laurel boughs, / To resalute his country with tears, / Tears of true joy for his return to Rome" is to grasp at once the unintentional act of imperialism that the production was to embody (*Titus Andronicus* 1.1.77-79).<sup>3</sup>

What is the currency of Shakespeare's cultural capital and legacy in a post-apartheid South Africa? In 1995, Doran and Sher might have thought that they could produce performance art which would hold a mirror up to South African society at that pivotal historic moment. To Doran, the world of the play was a striking reflection of Africa with its cycles of violence, its savagery, and its search for justice. However, the project, as they described it, and the production, as it was received by South African audiences at the Market Theatre, rehearsed some of the complexities and contradictions inherent in making Shakespeare relevant for "our" times.

In this paper, I examine the production as Doran and Sher conceived it — what they thought they were doing — and then explore audience and critical responses to the staging. I consider some of the historical foundations — political and theatrical — for these responses in order to investigate some of the freight Shakespeare carried, and continues to carry, on the South African stage. Finally, I locate both Shakespeare as a body of texts and the English language in a wider historical and educational milieu in order to evaluate further Doran and Sher's unanticipated failure to translate their production of *Titus Andronicus* for a "New South Africa." Shakespeare has played, and continues to play, an important role for South Africans, but Doran's cultural mistaking of a fractured South Africa for "Africa" led him to a unitary vision of his audience and their modes of reception.

Why direct *Titus Andronicus* in 1995 post-apartheid Johannesburg? In answer to the specific question posed by Sher, "Why would *Titus Andronicus* work in an African context?" Doran responded, "I suppose because of the violence. It can seem so gratuitous, just a gory melodrama . . . but not here somehow. . . . And . . . it's got Shakespeare's *other* great black part"

(Sher and Doran 1996, 5). I have not seen the production or the videotape (the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford owns the only known extant copy), but we have all experienced what one may term the aesthetic of violence and dismemberment in the play — whether on the page, on the stage, or on film. Perhaps Doran's own distance from the violence which had become, over the past quarter of a century, increasingly a condition of South African life, particularly in the city of Johannesburg, allowed him the luxury of reflecting that "it was fascinating to be doing a play in which a fiercely contested election threatens to topple into chaos, here in South Africa" (Sher and Doran 1996, 112).

In this paper, I argue that Doran, who cast his production as a conflict between extreme right-wing Afrikaner nationalists — the Romans — and *tsotsis* (black township gangsters) — the Goths — in a post-apartheid South Africa, set off a debate in the metropolitan center/colonial/post-colonial arena that had its origins in two historical contexts: key historical/political events of nineteenth and twentieth-century South Africa and the earliest introduction of formal theater — and Shakespeare — to the Colony in 1801.<sup>4</sup> Here, I will not offer an analysis of historical events at the macro level; rather, I will explore the nexus of intractable conflicts which were mapped onto this controversial production. In the ensuing controversy, the particular adaptation and appropriation of Shakespeare's text became the locus for competing claims on representations of Shakespeare, claims that were themselves rooted in a colonial/post-colonial past.

South African theater critics took exception to the choice of play, to the production elements of "tourist trendiness" (*The Sunday Times*, 2 April, 1995), and to the dialogue spoken in heavy South African accents. It should be noted for those unfamiliar with South Africa's multiethnic, multilingual history that not all South African accents are created equal. All, however, depending on the listener, have very particular valences. A heavy guttural Afrikaans accent might evoke in a British-descended South African listener memories of a rural, uncultured trekker Boer.<sup>5</sup> Many English-speaking white South Africans mock their own intonation and enunciation and would happily replace both with British Broadcasting Corporation standard English.<sup>6</sup> Black-accented English might remind a Dutch-descended Afrikaner of his deep reluctance to share political power in a land he once claimed as his own. All accents employed in the production flagged class and race identities in stereotypical ways for the listener.

Furthermore, the production was accused of being "too relevant." "*Titus* topples into the 'relevant' pit," ran the *Weekly Mail and Guardian* headline for March 31, 1995. A bitter exchange ensued in the South African press, with Sher joining battle in radio interviews and in the press to excoriate South Africa for the "demise of serious theatre." Sher, who had originally imagined that he might like to return permanently to the "New South Africa," in his editorial on the Opinion page of the *Johannesburg Star*, April 26, 1995, claimed that he felt "very lucky to be

getting on a plane and going home where the run [for *Titus Andronicus* at the National Theatre] is sold out. . . . It's taken this bruising homecoming to realize how lucky I am. I don't say that with any smugness. The demise of serious theatre in Johannesburg is very painful to witness" (Sher 1995). He went on to explain the relatively small audiences the production had drawn at the Market Theatre as a kind of "cultural indifference." This he blamed on the Cultural Boycott instituted in 1968 by a United Nations Resolution that urged artists to isolate South Africa and reject all offers to perform there. Soon after Mandela's release from prison in 1990, the Cultural Boycott crumbled. Sher, ignoring his own part in the Cultural Boycott, castigated Johannesburg audiences for their unresponsiveness and for being out of the step with the rest of the world in recognizing and honoring the Market Theatre's international stature. The Market Theatre was acclaimed world-wide as a cultural institution where black and white South Africans had gathered to make theater in spite of the vicissitudes of repressive national regimes and the follies of a Censorship Board.<sup>7</sup>

Why were Johannesburg audiences so indifferent to the *Titus* production? The Johannesburg weekly, *The Sunday Times* of April 30, 1995 was quick to blame Sher for the institution and success of the Cultural Boycott. "Sher," wrote Jeremy Brooks, "was among the score of Hampstead 'luvvies' who decided over their glasses of Muscadet that 'something must be done about South Africa.' For people like Sher to bleat about the present state of theatre and art is ironic" (Brooks 1995). And on May 21, 1995, Julius Levin, writing for *The Sunday Times*, congratulated audiences for "taking a stand and refusing to be put down by cultural colonisers. . . . Who does Antony Sher think he is anyway telling us how moribund and terminal South African theatre patrons are? British actors practised their apartheid on us. What makes them believe we can't spurn them in turn?" (Levin 1995).

These were all white commentators. Black commentators, on the other hand, reacted quite differently. The reviewer for *The Sowetan*, April 13, 1995, Victor Metsoamere, agreed with Doran that the "violence identified the play as a timely choice" but, in a move that distanced the critic from the production's setting, he compared its "deadly vengeance" to bloodbaths in Burundi, Rwanda, and Sarajevo (Metsoamere 1995). One may perhaps speculate that Metsoamere had attended the previous night's performance, which had been bought out by the Anglican Church Society of Soweto. Their involvement, once they had "tuned in to the language," was total (Sher and Doran 1996, 212-13). They commented on the action throughout, shouting at the characters on stage. Their identification with Aaron was disrupted only at the moment when he chopped off Titus's hand, but they shrieked their solidarity with him at "Tell the empress from me I am of age / To keep mine own, excuse it how she can" (4.2.106-107).

The controversy aired in the Johannesburg media reveals some of the ways this production unwittingly revived historical animosities among two, at least, of South Africa's ethnic groups —

British- and Dutch-descended colonizers — and stirred the fears each of those groups harbored about the other and about the black South Africans whose land they had occupied and then partitioned off for themselves. Deeply ambiguous feelings about the Afrikaans language and about "black-accented" English fanned the flames of this legacy of animosity. Anti-British feeling also fed the rage of white South Africans at the 1968 Cultural Boycott that British artists, Sher included, had endorsed. Sher served as a lightning rod for nascent homophobia ("the Hampstead luvvies" cited above) and for overt anti-British sentiment. Expatriate South African Sher may have thought that he was negotiating a "homecoming" in 1994-95 by way of this very South African adaptation of a play by "our Immortal Bard." He found himself instead speaking in the language of the metropolitan center to an audience, in this instance, engaged in rejecting the "privilege" of Britishness in this ambiguous post-colonial moment. One reviewer, writing on the front page of the Johannesburg daily, *The Star*, on April 26, 1995, referred to Sher's homecoming as having been transformed from the "triumphant return of a distinguished exile" that he had originally imagined for himself to "a wake for a dying culture."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in addition to triggering the deeply disappointed, if paradoxical, desire to see Englishness performed and the sense of colonial/post-colonial cultural inferiority in relation to the metropolitan center, much larger questions were triggered by the production: questions about the status of the English language or, to put it another way, its linguistic instability (also rooted in the Colony's infancy); questions about the legacy, capital, and currency of Shakespeare — and indeed the languages of Shakespeare — and, at this moment of transition to a democratic black regime, anxieties about national identity formation. The production failed at the Market Theatre, and neither Doran nor Sher ever grasped precisely why this was so. The production came to stand for all these unresolved and irresolvable questions, and they, in turn, served to complicate and politicize the production

At the heart of the controversy surrounding the production lay Doran's determination to hail the "New South Africa" by casting the two teams, Romans and Goths respectively, as, on the one hand, the most conservative right-wing, repressive white Afrikaners together with their characteristic almost German-accented English and the "barbarian" Goths as township *tsotsis*, with their heavily accented "black" English. Anyone reasonably familiar with the South African political history of the half century preceding the democratic elections will recognize in this directorial choice the search for a kinship group (for the Romans) suggestive of rigidity, oppression, extreme violence, both open and clandestine (extra-legal), and a moral religious conservatism often at odds with the cruelty — at times quite casual — wrought on all political dissenters, but most particularly, on the South African black population. Not a bad fit for the Romans, one might think, although there was the problem posed by one critic, who wondered how Titus could inspire pity if the play were rooted in South African militarism (*Weekly Mail*

and *Guardian* 1995).

However, anyone in the audience recalling events surrounding the Boer War between 1900 and 1902, when Boer women and children were herded into British concentration camps — and 30,000 died there — would also recall that for Boer/Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans, this ethnocide helped forge an Afrikaner identity already nascent at the time of the Great Trek that, in turn, bequeathed a legacy of hatred between the descendants of the Dutch and English colonizers. That hatred, while certainly diminished in its ferocity, would have been palpable in the largely, I would suspect, English-descended, English-speaking audience at the Market Theatre (de Reuk 1996).

Hostility between English and Dutch settlers had existed almost as long as the British administration. In the earliest performance of *The Beaux Stratagem* at the African Theatre in 1807, one of the principal actors (a Garrison officer playing Mrs. Sullen) refers to the antagonism between English and Dutch settlers. In the epilogue he wrote for that occasion, he refers to the pleasure he takes from performing before an audience composed of both English and Dutch. He hopes that it is an occasion for reconciliation: "But anything to bring you here together: I love to see you crowd one top t'other! To pass the time — the heavy hours to cheer: To harmonise John Bull with friend Mynheer: . . . And in one bond of Friendship to unite" (Frazer 1808). If there was animus in 1807 between the British and Afrikaners, and the English-speaking audience was called upon to see the AWB (Afrikaner Resistance Movement)<sup>9</sup> as representing what Heather James describes as "the crumbling heritage of Roman patriarchy," which the play at its conclusion attempts to re-integrate when Lucius takes up the leadership of Rome, what would they have made of Doran's casting of the Goths as *tsotsis*, black and colored township youth and gangsters who speak *tsotsitaal* (James 1991, 124)? Also called *flytaal* by its youthful speakers, *tsotsitaal*, a *mélange* of African languages mixed with some English and Afrikaans, developed spontaneously among youth and gangsters in the townships as their own oral register outside the conservative world of their elders.<sup>10</sup> It has not yet taken a written form, although it does emerge in post-1976 protest writing in popular literature. By casting the Goths as *tsotsitaal* speakers, Doran played on all the fears sparked by the transition to a "New South Africa" and ensured that the audience would imagine its most dystopic dimensions.

And what did the Market Theatre audiences make of the rape and mutilation of Lavinia by two *tsotsis*? Committed offstage as the text requires, it is, nonetheless, always graphic and immediate to the audience or the reader, and Shakespeare ensures that immediacy in part with the lines Chiron and Demetrius speak when they bring Lavinia back onstage in her transformed state. The Taymor film version, for example, rehearses the rape in the antics of the biker boys she cast as Chiron and Demetrius. Doran underscored the brothers' cruelty by having Chiron and Demetrius bring Lavinia back and dance her about the stage like a rag doll (Sher and Doran

1996, 75-77, 81-83, 125, 143-45). Readers who have experienced the rape that lies at the center of the novel *Disgrace*, by South African writer J. M. Coetzee, will grasp immediately the matrix of material relationships — linguistic, historical, political, and cultural — which lay at the heart of the controversy that Doran's production ignited. In that novel, Coetzee uses the physical rape of a white female farmer by her black tenant to explore colonial rapacity and expiation in relation to land appropriation. The novelist's use of political parable works to stage the impossibility of realistic representation. Doran's production, on the other hand, veered precariously between allegory and realism.<sup>11</sup>

Hearing Shakespeare spoken in black South African English aroused great frustration on the part of the critics. "Why, oh, why is every performance hobbled, mangled by the use of offensively exaggerated South African accents?" charged Digby Ricci of the *Johannesburg Weekly Mail and Guardian*, March 31, 1995. The accents of all the actors contributed to the conflagration. Even Sher's mother expressed her disappointment at not having the opportunity to hear her famous son articulate Shakespeare in BBC standard English. It would be impossible to speculate on the frustration experienced by these actors themselves who, during the rehearsal process, had participated in actors' workshops led by John Barton, then Associate Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Barton had encouraged the actors to free themselves to speak in their own voices and accents.

Critics of the production may have carped at the lost opportunity to hear Sher deliver on his "Shakespearian English" and rhythms, or the "inaudible" speech of the black South African actors. Advocates for the production may have explained the hostility to the production by a kind of "essentialism" or as a "significant act of cultural cross-fertilisation" but, in fact, no amount of shorthand can mask the anger in the exchange between critic Michael Kustow of the *British Sunday Times* and an audience member (Hees 1999, 299). Kustow writes:

By performing the play in indigenous speech . . . Sher and Doran have confronted deep cultural preconceptions in their white audiences. A rich-looking man behind me hearing me speak English-English, butts in and angrily asks why Sher is playing Titus with a broad Afrikaans accent. I say we don't know what Elizabethan English sounded like, that it was not like "refined" English now, but that it was close to its own audience's speech. My neighbour is unimpressed. "I think they're trying to make fools of us," he growls. . . . There is a great knot of post-colonial cultural reflexes in all this. (Kustow, quoted in Sher and Doran 2006, 208)

That "knot" had been there from the outset, albeit somewhat differently entangled. In addition to aggravating contemporary tensions, audience reception to the production replayed the context

and the history of Shakespeare's initial arrival in South Africa. Ever since the introduction of formal theater to the Cape Colony at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the 1801 construction of the African Theatre, colonial relations between the metropole and the colony embodied a sense of inferiority in relation to London and its visiting troupe of British actors. High praise was always accorded to performances by actors visiting on their way to India or New South Wales. As early as 1818, British actors visiting from Liverpool had been accorded great deference.<sup>12</sup> The colonist/settler view of Shakespeare was that it was "too mighty" for amateurs to perform it well. On December 12, 1829 a Mr. H. Booth, a visiting professional actor from London, was praised in *The South African Commercial Advertiser*, for his "judicious and effective" performance as Othello. And in 1832 at the Cape Colony, critics voiced their skepticism about the ability of "amateurs" to perform *The Merchant of Venice*: "Shakespeare is too mighty, too difficult to be often successfully handled by Amateur actors; and experience has long ago demonstrated that light Pieces are best suited to the capacity of the generality of the performers, and the taste of the audience" (Anonymous 1832).

I have argued elsewhere that the construction in 1801 of the first purpose-built theater in Africa, the African Theatre at the foot of Table Mountain at the Cape Colony, was part of an early Anglicizing project that was resisted by local conditions.<sup>13</sup> How much English was spoken at the Cape in the early nineteenth century? A settler population of French, German, Dutch, and the newly arrived British administration and their British Garrison soldiers shared the stage at the African Theatre, each in turn playing a repertoire in their native tongue that followed the tastes of distant metropolitan centers in Europe and London. No indigenous African drama was ever performed there. African drama had over a century to wait for its audiences. Shakespeare as metonym of British culture arrived in 1801 with the inaugural production at the African Theatre — *Henry IV, Part One* — well in advance of much English being spoken at all. In this multiethnic, multilingual setting, Shakespeare was resisted. The linguistic instability of English in a multilingual setting was part of that resistance.

Within the drama of turbulent national identity formation that now dominates South African politics, the cultural, political, and educational uses to which Shakespeare's texts might be put in a democratic South Africa play a relatively minor role. But for theater and cultural historians, and even historians of education and education's role in constituting Shakespeare(s), the topic is fascinating and relevant because its themes and issues are part of a long history of debate as to what precisely occurred when Shakespeare met Africa.

In the case of visiting actor Sher, audiences, expecting Britishness, received instead Afrikaans accents and the reminder that they had not, in any meaningful way, put behind them or integrated a "tribe" of people who, after their rise to political power in South Africa in 1948, had implemented one of the most pernicious political systems of modern times. With Doran's casting

of the Goths as both black and mixed-race colored *tsotsis*, audiences received a chilling reminder of the 1976 township riots together with the awareness that, to build the "New South Africa," they would be required to reshape their own identities as members of a multilingual, multicultural society. Furthermore, Doran in his indifference to, ignorance of, or simple misreading of South African history, cross-cast the Goths. Tamora was white.<sup>14</sup> However, in a grim recognition of one of the more appalling cruelties of apartheid's classification system, both Chiron and Demetrius were colored actors — one quite light-skinned (light enough to "pass") and one darker-skinned.<sup>15</sup> Doran justified this casting choice by arguing that Tamora's preference for black men (Aaron) might have resulted in *mestizo* sons. That this, aside from other considerations, would rob Aaron and his exchanges with Chiron and Demetrius of some of their power (and here I am thinking of Aaron's Black Power speeches in 4.2) did not occur to Doran, who had selected the play in part because it has "the other great black part." (Doran had jokingly offered the role of Aaron to Sher, adding that the director would then "have to reverse it all — everyone else black, him white" [Sher and Doran 1996, 7].) Surrounded by other black South African actors, his fellow Goths, it must have been a challenge for this Aaron to maintain his star status, but it is a tribute to actor Sello Maake ka Ncube that he was able to do so. Thus did Doran's production unwittingly "enter the turbulent waters of colonialism and apartheid" (Coetzee 1992, 3). Small wonder then that one South African critic referred to Doran and Sher as "opportunistic Eurocentric outsiders who became entangled in a cultural minefield that blew up in their faces" (Matshikiza 1997).

So whose Shakespeare was this? What is the currency of Shakespeare's cultural capital and legacy in contemporary South Africa? While there have been intense Afrikaner struggles against British imperialism and black revolt against Afrikaner-dominated white repression, at particular moments Shakespeare has been eagerly appropriated by excluded groups in their search for cultural and political identity. The boom in both Afrikaans and black theater in the 1980s was triggered by productions in translation decades earlier: an Afrikaans *Hamlet* in 1947 and *Umabatha*, the Zulu *Macbeth*, in 1970.

What place do Shakespeare's texts hold for South Africans? Their educational use is revealing. During the Afrikaner nationalist era, Shakespeare's role in "Bantu Education" was as a universal standard of the meaning and beauty of the English language.<sup>16</sup> This has now been replaced by a national debate about how, or if, Shakespeare's texts should be taught in a post-apartheid New South Africa, how they should be edited and packaged for educational consumption by students whose first language is not English, and whether or not these texts represent cultural capital that has any currency today. In 2007, an Africa-News website advertised a volume series that will teach Shakespeare as a gateway in an African context. Instead of "trying to Africanise Shakespeare, we encourage learners to be inspired by their

enjoyment of Shakespeare, to read works by African writers that raise similar issues or develop similar situations."<sup>17</sup> A cursory glance at South African university websites reveals old colonial and post-colonial relations with the metropole refracted through the transition to a new democracy.<sup>18</sup> In his particular Australian context, Michael Neill talks about figuring out *how* to teach the texts, not *whether* to teach them at all (Neill 1998).

In the South African context, the debate oscillates between poles that are far apart. On the one hand, there is the "cultural despotism that maintains that English is the *only* literature, that Shakespeare is the highest form of literature, and that large doses of Shakespeare unremittingly administered will sensitize, civilize, and humanize the whole population according to an unalterable vision of what civilization is" (Sherman 1991, 70). On the other hand, there is this firsthand account from Barney Simon of a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* in the township of Sebokeng. He notes that it was a

really devastated area, I mean it's devastated now but then it was like hell; our landmark was a petrol station and you couldn't tell which petrol station was which, they were totally gutted. There were these pumps stripped, you just had this colored interior wire, the school [there were no purpose-built theaters in any of the townships as of 1998] itself was half-burnt out and on a truly windy, dust-blasted plain. And my hope was that we'd be able to do slide-shows showing what Elizabethan England was like so that you covered the whole context, but there were no curtains so you couldn't show any slides. The performance happened for kids many of whom didn't have books. So these were the circumstances we went out into, and what was wonderful on this particular occasion was the discussion afterwards: the girl, a very fiery young woman who played Juliet, said O.K. whose fault is the tragedy? . . . One young man, he might have been a student leader, said the problem is the parents who didn't know how to trust or forgive. . . . So these were quite extraordinary events. (Simon, quoted in Davis and Fuchs 1996, 233)

Clearly, Sher's rumination that serious theater was dead in Johannesburg and that "cultural indifference" had kept audiences away is contradicted by the description of this township performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. In spite of the fact that in 1995 there was still not a single purpose-built theater in any black township, community and church halls and other temporary spaces, both in the townships and rural areas, had been home to an astonishingly rich range of theatrical fare since the 1920s.<sup>19</sup> With his own cultural mistranslation, Sher effectively erased a vital tradition of indigenous South African theater, focusing instead on white "Town" theater.

Theater is always about language and the crucial function of language as a medium of power. In South Africa, language or, more accurately, choice of language has always been a site

of contestation. Language has been used as a political tool, as an instrument of cultural and political oppression. Over the past century, white minority governments have used language policy in schools as a weapon of control. For the past twenty years — that is in the years leading up to and immediately following a democratic South Africa — the debate has centered on which language in the competing discourses of power to choose to write in, or to work in. Today there are eleven official languages. All South Africans, in Mongane Wally Serote's poem, *Come and Hope With Me*, are exhorted to "delight in the orchestra of our many languages" (Serote 1998, 183). Yet many South Africans, regardless of their first language, write of English as a unifying force, of "needing to appropriate English (even if it is a colonial language) in order to express an African sensibility," as teacher and writer Es'kia Mphahlele describes it (Mphahlele 1984, 104). "I associate the question of multilingualism with the multicultural nature of our county," says black poet Mongane Wally Serote (Serote 1998, 183). The need for this recognition — so obvious to a contemporary observer — was there from the moment that Britain established a presence at the small Cape settlement where the story of formal South African theater begins, when Shakespeare arrived in advance of very much English being spoken at all.<sup>20</sup>

Resistance to the cultural authority of Shakespeare is one strand of the story of how theater was introduced to the Cape Colony. Anti-British feeling told only one side of the story in the case of the Doran-Sher production. Wanting to hear Shakespeare performed in BBC standard English, which one critic termed "essentializing Shakespeare," had its roots, too, in the history of Shakespeare production. The very first Shakespeare ever performed at the Cape would have been performed by the British garrison soldiers! The other side of the anti-British feeling was the two-century-old desire for British Shakespeare to sound British. It is plausible that the historical amateur/professional dichotomy played out in 1995 as well. Why produce Shakespeare if you are going to cast amateurish actors? That the black actors who were cast in the play had professional acting experience did not affect their reception by critics and audiences alike.

In the particular case of Doran-Sher production of *Titus Andronicus* at the Market Theatre, only one of many possible Shakespeares would have been acceptable. The Shakespeare that audiences were offered was not. To quote Michael Echeruo's conclusion to a complicated argument about Shakespeare's cultural legacy in contemporary Africa, "I do not care for a trans-national universal Shakespeare. . . [We] should re-think Shakespeare's status in (South) African life. We should find the strength to relegate him to his proper place in the cultural economy of Africa; so we can read Shakespeare, if we like to, but never again celebrate him on this continent as if he were one of our own" (Echeruo 1994, 14). Sher, who as an expatriate South African, valued all things British well enough to have established his own life in England, failed to recognize South Africa in one of its guises as a post-colonial setting. However, it is well known to theorists that the processes of abrogation and appropriation are both simultaneous and

conflicting in post-colonial settings.<sup>21</sup>

Texts function in complex and contradictory ways in culture, and never more so than in a country with such a fragmented society. It is not enough to implement multi-racial casting, whether colorblind, conceptual, or societal.<sup>22</sup> The call is for a fusion of languages, for a "use of English that is filled with the African idiomatic expressions. It is used in a way that inspires us, in that we are inspired basically by our own cultural roots, by our heritage, and our languages are different and the word order is different" (Maponya 1998, 186). There is a demand for "artists from the underprivileged who will have a new sense of the self-consciousness, self-identity, self-definition, self-determination, and self-criticism needed to achieve a position of equity with white arts practitioners" (253). There is a need for a theater that "has no dramatic text that acts as a referent for the performance text" (Mda 1998, 264). To put it another way, South Africa needs to develop its own syncretic modes of drama.

What, then, is the future of Shakespeare's texts in the "New South Africa?" Perhaps, the answer lies in the vexed term, "appropriation." Following Jonathan Bate, one might consider freeing transumptive texts from their parent (original?) text and allowing them the authority of originals in their own right (Bate 1989, 1-9). The version of the York Mystery Cycle I saw several years ago in South Africa effectively exploited its travel through time and across multivarious societies.<sup>23</sup> Multi-racially cast, the production was spoken in several languages: Zulu, Afrikaans, and English. The vitality of the performance spoke to the energy unleashed by the fusion of several traditions at once without the enervating act of privileging one over any other. If such dramatic fusion de-stabilizes what we still like to think of as a stable text, then so much the better. Shakespeare wrote *Titus Andronicus* over four hundred years ago when colonial ventures, for England, were just beginning. For the Netherlands, Spain, or Portugal these ventures into a wider world were already old news. South Africa, arguably five times colonized, is finally free to claim its own Shakespeare in the continuing dialogue among nationalisms that Shakespeare set in motion for the stage and that stretches across the arc of modern colonial and post-colonial times.

## NOTES

1. The production transferred that same year to a small theater in Leeds, the West Yorkshire Playhouse, then to the Cottesloe at the National Theatre, London, and, finally, to a small theater in Almagro, Spain, the Teatro Municipal. In Britain, the production played to packed houses and received rave reviews. At the Teatro Municipal where the curtain rose at 11:00 p.m., audiences — non-English speakers — were small.
2. See Benson 1997; Davis and Fuchs 1996; Fuchs 1990; and Tompkins 1995. Margaret Mervis writes of Barney Simon, "[He] was a man whose contribution to the revitalisation of theatre

in South Africa involved a willingness to experiment and jettison clichéd techniques of Western theatre practice" (Mervis 1998, 144).

3. All quotations are from the Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series edition of *Titus Andronicus*. See Bate 1995.
4. It did not escape critical attention that Antony Sher's conception of Titus was based on the leader of the white supremacist paramilitary party, Eugene Terreblanche. Terreblanche and his party, the Afrikaner Resistance Movement, came to prominence in the early 1980s, vowing to fight for the survival of the white tribe of Africa. Destined to become little more than a paragraph in subsequent histories of the liberation struggle in South Africa, Terreblanche, with his black-clad inner circle, the Iron Guard, his guerilla war campaign in crowded urban areas, and his inflammatory rhetoric, managed to instill fears of a right-wing white militant backlash as the 1994 elections approached. Segregated black townships were constantly plagued by violent street crime, allegedly committed by gangs of young unemployed thugs, dubbed *tsotsis*.
5. This stereotype goes back to the earliest British travel literature. See Barrow 1801-1804; Latrobe 1818; Lichenstein 1928-1930; and Percival 1804.
6. As recently as 2002, it was possible to find an advertisement for elocution lessons to eradicate any trace of an Afrikaans accent in a region where the predominant language would have been Afrikaans. The earliest reference I could find to elocution lessons is an 1845 advertisement in *The Cape of Good Hope Almanac* placed by a Mr. A. N. E. Changuion. His Seminary for boys on Loop Street offered Elocution, Geography, History, Arithmetic, Penmanship, and "Dutch as an Auxiliary for the purposes of Translation and Explanation." English had, by 1845, been the official language for nearly two decades at the Cape Colony.
7. The Board consisted of clergymen and military personnel who regularly closed down theatrical performances on grounds of obscenity, blasphemy, and inciting South Africans against Afrikanerdom. See Appendix I 1996.
8. Sher can be seen as an outsider/insider figure working at a border zone between cultures and identities that often are defined by linguistic markers; these are sites of intercultural contact and potential antagonism. A border figure in South African theatrical practice might move easily between two or three linguistic or cultural identities in his or her creative production to claim community in any one of several cultures. But Sher had lost the ability to negotiate among the cultural groups; he had lost their languages.
9. Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging is the white supremacist neo-Nazi political group led by self-proclaimed General Eugene Terreblanche.
10. See Gready 1990 and Maake 1991.
11. For a different view of this production, see Thurman 2006. Thurman argues that "the

production was neither reduced to an allegory of apartheid nor intended as a parable showing the path to peace and reconciliation" (31).

12. "At the conclusion of the Season, on Saturday evening, the hurry of business prevented Mr. Cooke from expressing his and the Ladies grateful acknowledgements for the encouragement they had met with since their arrival at the Cape: He therefore takes the earliest opportunity of publicly returning thanks to the Amateur Company for their kind exertions, and to the Inhabitants of the Town and its Vicinity, for their liberal support" (Anonymous 1818). Mr. Cooke had played Othello in the earliest performance of that play at the Cape.
13. See Seeff 2004.
14. For a fascinating discussion on Tamora's whiteness as raced, see Royster 2000. Her question, "To what cultural anxieties might the sexual misdeeds of Tamora and Aaron have been responding?" (432), and her interest in "passing" in the play, offer yet another gloss on the Doran-Sher production.
15. See Wicomb 1998.
16. The role of language during the apartheid era reflected both apartheid ideology and Bantu Education's philosophy that black South African children be instructed in the language of their particular tribe and on little beyond their immediate geographic environment. This segregation by language use carried over to white South African children who received "mother tongue" instruction in schools segregated according to first language use in their family: Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking.
17. See Houliston 2007.
18. The University of Cape Town, historically known to be "liberal" in the South African context, has retained, in its English Department, a small place for Shakespeare within its curriculum of South African studies and literatures, and courses on the historic role of English in South Africa. On the other hand, Rhodes University in Grahamstown, the destination of a group of British missionaries in 1820, offers a curriculum that has changed little in the past fifty years.
19. See Mda 1996 and Peterson 1990.
20. The Cape changed hands three times during the revolutionary war against France and their republican allies. The British replaced the Dutch in 1799 until 1803 when the Dutch re-occupied it, and they recaptured it in 1806 and took formal possession of the Cape in 1813.
21. See Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989, 38-77.
22. See de Marinis 1985.
23. For a useful discussion of syncretic and hybrid theater in postcolonial India, see Sandten 2005.

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