

MISSED CONNECTIONS:  
ANTONY SHER'S *TITUS ANDRONICUS* IN JOHANNESBURG

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This dissertation is a production history and reception study of the Market Theatre's controversial presentation of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* in 1995. Although directed by Gregory Doran, the star attraction and creative force behind this event was Antony Sher, a celebrity actor with the Royal Shakespeare Company and a luminary in the United Kingdom's South African expatriate community. Johannesburg theatre audiences initially welcomed Sher's self-described "homecoming" and the prestige his performance of Shakespeare would bestow upon that city's traditional Anglophile elite. For his part, Sher saw this event as a stepping stone towards repatriation and the beginning of a more ambitious career as a South African public intellectual. These mutual expectations were disappointed, however, when Johannesburg critics and audiences responded unfavorably to the actual staging of *Titus*, which featured South African stage accents instead of traditional Received Pronunciation. After Sher publicly countered public antipathy by writing a column accusing Johannesburgers of "philistinism," a bitter quarrel erupted on editorial pages of both South African and British newspapers. It reignited two years later with the release of Sher and Doran's apologia *Woza Shakespeare! Titus Andronicus in South Africa*. To date, this polemical work has served as the primary history of this affair.

Drawing on communitarian philosopher Michael Walzer's theory of "connected criticism," this dissertation offers an alternative reception narrative that locates the failure of this production in the rhetorical mismatch between Sher's advertized intention to celebrate the

achievement of racial “reconciliation” in that country and the aesthetic formation of “relevance,” (as theorized by Alan Sinfield) that governed Sher and Doran’s conceptual efforts to make *Titus* more accessible to a contemporary South African audience. I argue that Sher’s professional immersion in the working methods of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and belated local knowledge of controversial new African National Congress cultural policies (such as the restructuring of the English-language radio station SAfm) diminished his ability to gauge the critical force of his production concept. The result was an inadvertent act of “bait-and-switch” that subsequent rancor over Sher’s support for the apartheid-era “cultural boycott” and defensive appeals to “postcolonial Shakespeare” did little to illuminate.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: ANTONY SHER AND “CONNECTED CRITICISM

The effort to maintain some degree of commitment to a group of people and some degree of independence from that same group of people continually runs into difficulties. [ . . . ] It is important to be able to talk about the difficulties.<sup>1</sup>

Michael Walzer

Is it possible to be socially critical *and* affirmative in the same symbolic gesture? Is it, perhaps, preferable to do so? And, further, can theatre artists employ a powerful cultural artifact such as Shakespeare to fulfill such a project? These questions are central to my evaluation of Antony Sher’s efforts to stage *Titus Andronicus* at the Market Theatre, and the arguments he advanced to explain the significance of the production to the complex demographic milieu of post-apartheid Johannesburg. As the above epigraph correctly cautions the reader, these are ‘difficult’ claims to evaluate. But they are also, for the same reason, important difficulties to consider. The rhetorical situation that Walzer describes – one of divided loyalties – is an ordinary locus of social criticism. Put in theatrical terms, this is the location, not of exceptional avant-garde performance, but the ‘rule’ of popular regional, Off-Broadway and much educational theatre—institutions that function by staging compromises between social “commitment” and the expectations of its audiences.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I present two theoretical vocabularies that describe the bookends of Antony Sher’s South African errand: the American political philosopher Michael Walzer’s polemical conception of “connected criticism,” and British cultural historian Alan Sinfield’s description of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s signature aesthetic formation, i.e., what he

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<sup>1</sup> Hart, William D. *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000: 187, Appendix B.

<sup>2</sup> On the matter of the progressive potential of popular theatre, I am indebted to a recent lecture by Jill Dolan, “Feminist Theatre Criticism and the Popular: The Case of Wendy Wasserstein.” Carnegie Mellon University. Pittsburgh, Pa. 3 Apr. 2008.

calls “Royal Shakespeare.” These figures will provide me with strong definitions of two key terms that reappear frequently in this study. From Walzer, we shall derive an understanding of the rhetorical strategy of “connection” that is premised on the practice of “reiterative,” rather than revolutionary morality. I also borrow Sinfield’s description of the RSC’s “relevance” as a related maneuver of presenting Shakespeare as both a shrewd contemporary observer of the times and a fund of *timeless* moral truths that transcends the political divisions of the moment. While Sinfield represents “Royal Shakespeare” in a wholly disparaging light, my intention in this chapter is to offer sympathetic explications of “connection” and “relevance,” and to present these as morally and artistically valid constructions for Antony Sher to have adopted in his quest to produce a *Titus Andronicus* that would serve as a ideological supplement to the emergent New South Africa of the 1990s.

As a caveat, there is one sense in which both Walzer’s and Sinfield’s arguments could be summarized quite economically; to claim that one should argue like an “insider,” or that Shakespeare should be staged so as to accentuate its contemporary relevance, does not necessarily require extended analysis. What is of greater interest to me, and why Antony Sher’s *Titus Andronicus* is more worthy of our attention than it might seem at first, are the more fundamental issues that each raises: Is social change better promoted by Platonic appeals to Truth or to Aristotelian *phronesis*? Is there merit to clinging to Shakespeare as an avatar of a benevolent, universal humanism or does Walter Benjamin’s suspicion towards all “artifacts of civilization” apply to the Bard, as well? Consistent with the promise I made in the introduction to let my report occasionally crest the banks of strict narrative necessity, I have pursued my representation of Walzer into the wider field of debate over communitarian political theory and, also, Edward Said’s quarrel with Walzer over “connection” and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Viewed

from this perspective, Sher's *Titus* is an event of mere footnote-sized proportions. However, this event also has the virtue of being a concrete embodiment of these philosophical debates, and one centered on a practice (Shakespeare in the theatre) that remains a primary arena of cultural articulation and contestation.

### *Michael Walzer and Communitarian Theory*

Although communitarian social thought and rhetorical theory has become a mainstay for center-left political parties in Western Europe and North America after the watershed events of 1989, the best thinkers associated with this movement have found little resonance in the field of performance studies. A list of the most prominent “philosophical communitarians,” as Daniel Bell would specify, includes Amitai Etzioni Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, Alasdair McIntyre, Michael Walzer and, less reliably, the late Richard Rorty. Despite the fact that each of them is considered an eminent political thinker, their critical perspectives have been almost entirely absent from the field of theatre scholarship—a discipline that otherwise devotes an enormous quantity of collective attention to the political implications of performance.

As Daniel Bell has explained, what came to be known as philosophical “communitarianism” began as a critical reaction to the extraordinary popularity of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971).<sup>3</sup> While the principal theorists associated with communitarianism (the five aforementioned thinkers) have, in various ways, distanced themselves from this label, they nevertheless consistently challenged the Rawlsian claim that social justice requires the abandonment of community “goods” language and the radical adoption of an individual “rights”

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<sup>3</sup> Bell, Daniel. “Communitarianism.” In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 4 Oct. 2001: <http://www.seop.leeds.ac.uk/entries/communitarianism/> [23 Jan. 2008].

vocabulary.<sup>4</sup> Rather than embrace what they perceived as a deracinated liberalism that had little relevance to the post-1960's landscape of identity politics as it emerged in the United States and elsewhere, the communitarian project posited the attempted to chart a third way that was less absolute in its approach.

Michael Walzer also constructed his theory of “connected criticism” as part of a wave of communitarian rejoinders to Rawls' restatement of political liberalism. Defining justness as the fair distribution of “social goods,” Rawls argued that the task of political philosophy was to help democracies develop better procedures for the disinterested circulation of civic protections and economic opportunities. Later, he would call this the task of creating “public reason,” a situation in which decisions about the distribution of goods would be governed by “the methods and conclusions of science[.]”<sup>5</sup>

How can fairer distributive rules be conceptualized? Rawls' (neo-Kantian) answer took the form of a thought-experiment he called “the original position.” In a riposte to the Hobbesian portrait of the state of nature as “the war of all against all,” Rawls' philosophical anthropology claimed that the fundamental situation that humans face is scarcity and, given the opportunity, scarcity is something that people would – rationally – prefer to manage cooperatively. That people have historically *failed* to do so stems from prejudice, i.e., an irrational, if all-too real, factor that has consistently led humanity astray from its deepest aspirations of liberty and justice for all. History consists of social contracts morally compromised by prejudicial distributive arrangements. But what if, Rawls asks, we could imagine a congress of social agents gathering *before* the onset of prejudicial self-interests?

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992: 76 – 89.

<sup>5</sup> Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Columbia UP, 2005: 139.

The “original position” is just such a place. The ability to imagine it should allow political actors to produce political ideas that will benefit not just one interest group, but the common weal. The logical means to this objective (which Jürgen Habermas has also called the “ideal speech situation”<sup>6</sup>) is a principle Rawls called “the veil of ignorance.” Rawls defined it this way:

No one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like. I shall even assume that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities. The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance.<sup>7</sup>

In this hypothetical situation, correct political reasoning begins when “identity” ends.

Rawls’ redefinition of liberalism, which was perceived to have bridged the gap between “rights language” and utilitarianism, created a new paradigm for Anglo-American political philosophy that is anything but spent. Surely the fact that Rawls turned his back on identity politics and the “cultural turn” in social thought that was the main current of post-60’s scholarship in the humanities has remained a strong aspect of *A Theory of Justice*’s appeal to the heirs of Cold War liberalism. Not everyone in the field of Anglo-American political philosophy was prepared to accept the “veil of ignorance” as a useful tool for addressing what, in the 1970s, was called the issue of “pluralism.” And hence, a small, but influential backlash against Rawlsian liberalism was born: philosophical communitarians.

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<sup>6</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. “Towards a theory of communicative competence.” *Inquiry* Vol. 13, No. 1-4, 1970: 360 – 375.

<sup>7</sup> Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005: 11.

Michael Walzer and the communitarians all rejected the notion that identity could simply be ignored, or that it would be politically desirable to do so. While communitarians are specifically non-, or even anti-communist, they tend to share the belief that modernity's deracination of collective social bonds may have been ultimately responsible for the worst political behavior of the twentieth century. That the apparent social disorder identified with the New Left and radical aftershocks of Civil Rights movement is never far from the minds of some Rawlsian liberalism, the implosion of the Weimar Republic haunts the communitarian project.

Michael Sandel may have written the best summary of the broad objection to Rawls when he wrote:

To imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments such as these is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth. [ . . . ] Denied the expansive self-understandings that could shape a common life, the liberal self is left to lurch between detachment on the one hand, and entanglement on the other. Such is the fate of the unencumbered self, and its liberating promise.<sup>8</sup>

Unable to provide a positive account of communal attachment, the 'unencumbered' ideal sets the stage for the sort of *anomie* that encourages the most virulent forms of reactionary thought.

Walzer's first and most extended rejoinder to Rawls is *Spheres of Justice* (1983).<sup>9</sup> His major argument in this book is that not all "social goods" are created alike, and that the historical and cultural valences of different goods require not one set of principles, but several. These

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<sup>8</sup> Sandel, Michael. *Public Philosophy: Essays on the Morality and Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005: 167 – 8.

<sup>9</sup> Walzer, Michael. *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*. New York: Basic Books, 1983: 102.

clusters of matched goods and particular principles are the “spheres” to which the title of his study refers. His paradigmatic example is the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which he considered expressly designed to “bar any attempt at communal provision in the sphere of grace.”<sup>10</sup> Although the amendment implies that the free exercise of religion is a social good, the framers of the constitution explicitly refrained from submitting this kind of good to governmental regulation or production. As for “justice as fairness,” the First Amendment “does not distribute grace equally; indeed, it does not distribute it at all.”<sup>11</sup> This is not to deny that “the wall it raises between church and state” does not have “profound distributive effects.”<sup>12</sup> It does. But these consequences are not governed by the same principles and legal procedures that apply to distributing the burden of taxation in the United States, i.e., the sphere of financial goods.

Just as important to Walzer’s argument is the *origin* of the First Amendment. The felt imperative to divide Church and State, Walzer reminds his reader, was rooted in the traumatic memory of the English Civil War and Oliver Cromwell’s “Parliament of Saints.”<sup>13</sup> The authors of the amendment were also close readers of John Locke’s analysis of religious-civil conflict in his “A Letter Concerning Toleration,” which presented an empirical argument for religious pluralism. The main point for Walzer, then, is that during the formation of the United States, the framers of the Constitution did not attempt to create an “original position” that would place their historical experiences and philosophical tradition in brackets, but developed the country’s new laws hermeneutically, with close reference to their shared past.

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<sup>10</sup> Walzer, *Spheres*, 245.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

The omnipresence of desirable moral and political precedents in extant religious traditions and constitutional democracies led Walzer to formulate his central objection to Rawls' liberalism in a short, sharp polemical introduction to *Spheres*. In response to the putative utopianism of the "original position," Walzer objected:

My purpose in this book is to describe a society where no social good serves or can serve as a means of domination. [ . . . ] It's not my purpose to sketch a utopia located nowhere or a philosophical ideal applicable everywhere. A society of equals lies within our own reach. It is a practical possibility here and now, latent already, in our shared understanding of social goods. Our shared understandings: the vision is relevant to the social world in which it was developed; it is not relevant, or not necessarily, to all social worlds.<sup>14</sup>

"My argument," Walzer avers, "is radically particularist: I don't claim to have achieved any great distance from the social world in which I live."<sup>15</sup> Making a virtue of this 'lack' of objectivity is the central theme of all of his subsequent – and numerous – writings.

### *Connected Criticism*

After *Spheres*, Walzer's focus over several books shifted to rhetoric and the ethics of criticism. He has alternatively labeled his program for particularist rhetoric "social criticism" and

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

“connected criticism,” the second of which has been more widely circulated. In *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, he defined this strategy for political communication as the creation of “accounts [ . . . ] of some existing morality that gives us a clear and comprehensive view of the critical force of its own principles.”<sup>16</sup> It is a method that, “deprived of a yardstick” of certain and universal moral knowledge, i.e., Rawlsian liberalism, “relies upon exegesis, commentary, and historical precedent[.]”<sup>17</sup> The connected critic employs extant moral warrants and abjures the rhetoric of either theoretical invention or discovery.

Over the course of several books and essays, Walzer has defined the rhetorical operationalization of connected criticism in several related ways. A list of this evolving concept would have to include these formations:

Criticism is a feature of everyday morality.<sup>18</sup>

Insofar as we can recognize moral progress, it has less to do with the discovery or invention of new principles than with the inclusion under the old principles of previously excluded men and women.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Walzer, Michael. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987: 16.

<sup>17</sup> Walzer, *Interpretation*, 22. To the student of classical rhetoric, Walzer’s definition of connected criticism appears to mean something very similar to Aristotle’s category of *phronesis* in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. This is a term that Aristotle described as “prudent” speech and action based on knowledge of “particulars as well as universals.” (*Nicomachean Ethics*. Terence Irwin, trans. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000: 1142a). But one of the hallmarks of Walzer’s extraordinarily economic and polemical style that he is quite parsimonious in his acknowledgement of his influences.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

Social criticism works differently: we apply standards that we share with the others *to the others*, our fellow citizens, friends and enemies.<sup>20</sup>

Criticism is most powerful when it gives voice to the common complaints of the people or elucidates the values that underlie those complaints.<sup>21</sup>

Even if he has a personal version of the average values, it won't be entirely unfamiliar. So he can presume on his fellowship and express his own aspirations for the collective life in which he shares. Though he starts with himself, he speaks in the first person plural. This is what we value and want, he says, and don't yet have. This is how we mean to live and don't yet live.<sup>22</sup>

“We often criticize friends and colleagues for not living up to a set of standards that we and they profess to honor. We measure them against their own pretended ideals; we charge them with hypocrisy or bad faith.”<sup>23</sup>

Social criticism must be understood as one of the more important by-products of a larger activity—let us call it the activity of cultural elaboration and affirmation. This is the work of priests and

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<sup>20</sup> Walzer, Michael. *In the Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Basic Books, 2002: 5.

<sup>21</sup> Walzer, *Company*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 230.

<sup>23</sup> Walzer, Michael. *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*. Notre-Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1994: 42.

prophets; teachers and sages; storytellers, poets, historians, and writers generally.<sup>24</sup>

The term *phronesis* accurately describes what social scientists might call the “operationalization” of these exhortations, i.e., the Aristotelian category of “prudence” as derived from particular experiences and applied to specific instances of decision.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, an Aristotelian analysis might be pushed further, since the emphasis that Walzer places on the future-orientation of connected criticism mirrors the distinction between political, or deliberative persuasion and forensic demonstration in the *Art of Rhetoric*.<sup>26</sup> Unlike forensics, which is focused on determining the facts about past misconduct, for example, the purpose of political rhetoric is exhortation and the determination of expediency.<sup>27</sup> Deliberation, in this mode, is focused upon decision-making for collective action.

But the specific context of Walzer’s argument is more contemporary than this, and possesses more pointed theoretical valences. This is apparent in what I take to be Walzer’s most revealing statement about connected criticism (it is also one that seems to deliberately refute an Aristotelian framing of his project). The passage in question is from the first chapter of *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, and represents something like Walzer’s closing argument against John Rawls and the “original position.” Opposing what he takes to be the legislative model of Rawls’ theory, and the operation of inventing new laws and codes that it entails, Walzer counterpoises the metaphor of the judiciary. And what jurists do is *interpret* laws, not

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<sup>24</sup> Walzer, *Thick*, 40.

<sup>25</sup> Other scholars have also noted Walzer’s Aristotelianism. For example, see J. Peter Euben’s book review of *In the Company of Critics*, “Fanfare for the Common Complaints,” in the *New York Times Book Review* 8 Jan. 1989: 18.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle. *The Art of Rhetoric*. Hugh Lawson-Tancred, trans. New York: Penguin Classics, 1991: 1358b.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 1359b.

make them. “Interpretation is a judgment,” Walzer writes, and “the claim of interpretation is simply this:

That neither discovery nor invention is necessary because we already possess what they [i.e., the disconnected moral legislators] pretend to provide. [ . . . ] We do not have to discover the moral world because we have always lived there. [ . . . ] The whole thing, taken as a whole, lends itself less to abstract modeling than to thick description. Moral argument in such a setting is interpretive in character, closely resembling the work of a lawyer or judge who struggles to find meaning in a morass of conflicting laws and precedents.<sup>28</sup>

Or as Walzer concludes his judicial metaphor, “lawyers and judges are bound to the legal morass; it is their business to find meaning there, and they have no business looking elsewhere.”<sup>29</sup>

Without directly saying so, as perhaps he should have, Michael Walzer is evoking the symbolic anthropology of Clifford Geertz to accomplish two things. On the one hand, interpretation *qua* “thick description” grounds Walzer’s assertion that historical societies are constituted out of culture ‘all the way down,’ so to speak. Political philosophy that tries to theorize with deep knowledge and reference to these cultural materials will, lacking resonance, necessarily remain ‘thin,’ unconvincing and ineffective. On the other, Walzer employs the same term, interpretation, to mean not only the comparatively passive description of a culture, but on the contrary, as an active tool to *redescribe* it in such way that will it alter certain – but not all, or

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<sup>28</sup> Walzer, *Interpretation*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

even most – of its behaviors. Thus, a more accurate expression for Walzer’s adaptation of Geertz might be “thick redescription.”

### *The Metaphor of Distance*

The metaphor of “critical distance,” Walzer argues is a singularly unhelpful guide for properly evaluating the work of the connected critic. “Criticism,” Walzer writes, “requires critical distance,” if this is understood as being in opposition to some dominant practice or policy of his community. “It is not clear, though,” Walzer adds, “how much distance critical distance is”:

Where do we have to stand to be social critics? The conventional view is that we have to stand outside the circumstances of collective life. Criticism is an external activity; what makes it possible is radical detachment—and this is in two senses. First, critics must be emotionally detached, wrenched loose from the intimacy and warmth of membership: disinterested and dispassionate. Second, critics must be intellectually wrenched loose from the parochial understandings of their own society (standardly taken to be self-congratulatory. This view of the critic gains strength from the fact that it matches closely the conditions of philosophical discovery and invention and so seems to suggest that only discoverers or inventors [...] can be properly critical.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore,” Walzer noted, “radical detachment has the additional and not insignificant merit of turning the critic into a hero. For it is hard business to wrench oneself loose, either

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

emotionally or intellectually.” Thus an uncritical valorization of ‘distance’ slides into a repackaging of the Romantic artist-outcast. “Critical distance is an achievement,” Walzer concluded, “and the critic pays a price in comfort and solidarity.”<sup>31</sup>

The outrage of standing so close to a community that one can see the hypocritical operation of its own moral system in practice is also a motivation to become a critic. This is why Walzer prefers Ignazio Silone’s account of how he became radicalized to Antonio Gramsci’s description of the “organic intellectual.” The author of *The Abruzzo Trilogy*, Silone, grew up in a small mountain village of great poverty. A one-time member of the Italian Communist Party (until he was expelled by Stalin), Silone later claimed that his radicalization had less to do with an enthusiasm for Marxism, than the fact that he had “taken seriously the principles taught us by our own educators and teachers.”<sup>32</sup> The moral world of rural Abruzzo was defined by Catholic piety and feudal *noblesse oblige*—a culture rich in ‘communitarian’ sentiments.

For Silone, recalling his thought process as an adolescent, “these principles are proclaimed to be the foundations of present-day society[.]” “But,” he continued:

If one takes them seriously and uses them as a standard to test society as it is organized today, it becomes evident that there is a radical contradiction between the two. Our society in practice ignores these principles altogether [.] But for us they are a serious and sacred thing [...]. the foundations of our inner life. The way society butchers them, using them as a mask and a tool to cheat

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Walzer, *Company*, 42.

and fool the people, fills us with anger and indignation. This is how one becomes a revolutionary.<sup>33</sup>

This *rite de passage* into becoming oppositional highlights the specific irony of connected criticism, and the nature of the “distance” it seeks less to maintain than to *bridge*. This critic retains “a passionate commitment to cultural values hypocritically defended at the center, cynically disregarded at the margins.” “Antagonism,” Walzer argues, “not alienation, provides the clearest lead into the critical enterprise.”<sup>34</sup>

This distinction is important because Walzer’s critics have argued that connected criticism is synonymous with “pandering.”<sup>35</sup> As the above passage is meant to demonstrate, along with others he cites elsewhere by Randolph Bourne, Albert Camus, and George Orwell, the connected critic is very capable of using the language of outrage. Rhetorical scholarship on the “American Jeremiad” substantially reinforces Walzer’s claim on this point. Sacvan Bercovitch is not alone in writing about this favored rhetorical genre of the American Puritans. Sermons such as Jonathan Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” typically derived both their critical force from *cataplexis*, i.e., threats of imminent punishment. No matter how contemporary the pressing issue at hand, the speaker couches his moral warrant as a “crying out for a return to original conduct and zeal,” thereby both affirming the received culture and pressing for social revision in the same speech act.<sup>36</sup> Some would-be connected critics may choose to rely on flattery, but there is nothing about Walzer’s theory that must be synonymous with it.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>34</sup> Walzer, *Interpretation*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> See Said's chapter “Holding Nations and Traditions at Bay” in *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996: 25 – 45.

<sup>36</sup> Bercovitch, Sacvan. *American Jeremiad*. Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1980: 6.

*The Disconnected Critic*

The force of Walzer's rhetorical and ethical construction of “connection” becomes clearer when presented in contrast with his (rather numerous) portraits of *disconnected* critics. Walzer has ‘named names,’ and singled out his own rogue’s gallery, among whom Jean-Paul Sartre, Herbert Marcuse and Michel Foucault figure prominently.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps because he quarreled with Edward Said so many times over the years, Walzer frequently dramatizes his thoughts about critical distance against a ‘post-colonial’ backdrop. In the event, when trying to flesh out his portrait of a disconnected critic, Walzer asked his reader to imagine “an imperial judge in a backward colony”:

He stands outside, in some privileged place, where he has access to “advanced” or universal principles; and he applies these principles with an impersonal (intellectual) rigor. He has no other interest in the colony except to bring it to the bar of justice. We must grant him benevolence, I suppose; he wishes the natives well.<sup>38</sup>

This critic, as a metropolitan authority, operates in a paternalistic mode towards the peripheral community, at best.

But it was often the case that, in advanced European empires, colonial subjects also served as part of the colonial administration. The disconnected critic “is a native himself—one of the Queen’s Chinese, for example, or a westernized and Anglophile Indian, or a Parisian Marxist who happens to be Algerian.” Further:

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<sup>37</sup> Walzer, *Company*, 170; 191.

<sup>38</sup> Walzer, *Interpretation*, 37.

He has gone to school at the imperial center, at Paris or Oxford, say, and broken radically with his own parochialism. He would have preferred to stay at Paris or Oxford, but he has dutifully returned to his homeland so that he can criticize the local arrangements.<sup>39</sup>

Note, the criticism in this case is likely to take the form of a Foucauldian “knowledge” discourse, associated with metropolitan sophistication, rather than power. The audience of such a critic should expect to hear a lot about the superior views on human affairs afforded by Magdalen College or the Sorbonne.

For Walzer, the problem of relying on moral warrants perceived as foreign is that this critic’s “challenges to local practices” are likely to be in terms “incomprehensible to the natives.” If they are incomprehensible, they may not only be ineffective, they may be actively resented. And if resented, then resisted—an invitation to the colonial judge to authorize their forceful implementation. If there are truly no suitable local principles to appropriate for moral imperatives, the application of force may be just. This Walzer is prepared to concede in certain extreme cases, such as genocide.<sup>40</sup> But any enduring “understanding” on the part of such a subaltern population “waits upon conversion.” In the best-case scenario, the “primary mission” of the disconnected critic “is a missionary task: to offer a persuasive account of a new moral or physical world.” The missionary may try to be gentle, but his premise is paternalistic, not

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

<sup>40</sup> Walzer, Michael. *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*. New York: Basic Books: 2006: 69.

pluralistic. “Conversion and criticism are different activities,” Walzer insists “rather like conquest and revolution.”<sup>41</sup>

### *The Guilt-Ridden Apologist*

One temptation to which metropolitan-identified critics are highly susceptible, according to Walzer, is to try and reverse the polarities of power altogether and wholly identify with the subaltern group. This situation, which Walzer specifically equates with Jean-Paul Sartre’s militantly pro-FLN position during the crisis years of de-colonization in Algeria, can be problematic because the “distance” the critic achieves from his “own” community may lead him to be wholly *uncritical* of his adopted cause.

Walzer believed that the psychological temptation of identifying too closely with the victims of one’s own community is a “gnawing, devouring guilt.”<sup>42</sup> Walzer is not suggesting members of a perpetrator group should not have compassion, or work for the empowerment, of those it oppresses. On the contrary, as Walzer repeatedly stresses, his paradigmatic connected critic is constantly reproving his own community for their incomplete and hypocritical application of their moral system. But political opposition driven by guilt can be “as counter-productive as glee for the critical project,” according to Walzer because “it can produce a radically uncritical acceptance of the perspective of the victims, a surrender—experienced perhaps as a sacrifice—of the critic’s own judgment, the faculty most necessary to critical success.” By failing to offer any reservations about the political behavior of the victims, the guilt-ridden critic discards his bona fides of connection and risks losing the ear of his community altogether.

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<sup>41</sup> Walzer, *Interpretation*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> Walzer, *Company*, xvi.

“Of course,” Walzer adds, the opponents of any given connected critic “are always accused of “going over to the other side.” This is the major charge that such critics devote a considerable quantity of their energy refuting. But even if one’s community is perpetrating wrongs that require the social critic to side with its opposition, “as it sometimes is,” Walzer claims, “there isn’t much point in leaving your critical faculties behind. The other side needs criticism, too.”<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Walzer believed that Albert Camus got it right when he condemned indiscriminate violence on *both* the part of the French army and the FLN.<sup>44</sup>

### *The Post-Colonial Connected Critic*

To continue the colonial metaphor, Walzer has also sketched the journey of the critic who, having been tempted to identify with metropolitan prestige and power, nevertheless opts to remain connected with her home culture. Walzer asks us to consider the example of an esteemed “local judge”:

[He] earns his authority, or fails to do so, by arguing with his fellows—who, angrily and insistently, sometimes at considerable personal risk (he can be a hero too), objects, protests, and remonstrates. This critic is one of us. Perhaps he has traveled and studied abroad, but his appeal is to local or localized principles; if he has picked up new ideas on his travels, he tries to connect them to the local culture, building on his own intimate knowledge; he is not intellectually detached. Nor is he emotionally detached: he

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* Walzer: “Mostly, however, guilt-ridden critics don’t “go over”; they stay where they are. They criticize their own people, but in a wholesale way, without distinction, nuance, or restraint, as if driven by self-hate or by a desire for collective self-erasure.”

<sup>44</sup> Walzer, *Company*, 136 – 152.

does not wish the natives well, he seeks the success of their common enterprise.<sup>45</sup>

Such a critic will almost certainly operate within the terms of his community's nationalist and/or religious sentiments.

As a self-identified "Jewish intellectual" and a liberal commentator on Israeli politics, Walzer's own apologia for employing religious rhetoric, addressed to Said, is illuminating. "Said radically underestimates the significance and the dangers of religious belief in contemporary Arab politics," Walzer argued. Further, "[Said] has made no effort to engage the religious fervor of contemporary Muslim Arabs," whereas in Walzer's own estimation, his book *Exodus and Revolution*, was "at least an effort at engagement with the religious fervor of contemporary Jews."<sup>46</sup> Since connected criticism is dependent on the identity of the critic, Michael Walzer proceeded to offer his explanation as to why it was more difficult, if not impossible, for Edward Said to be a Palestinian or Arab intellectual in the same way that Walzer was a Jewish intellectual. "As a member of the Palestinian Christian minority," Walzer continued, "face to face with an increasingly militant Islam," to reject "not only [Islamic] fundamentalism but the entire religious tradition" might be a "natural, perhaps an unavoidable, course for Said—though I don't know that he has ever urged it publicly upon his Muslim comrades in the PLO." "But it isn't a natural cause for me," Walzer concluded:

Because of the way in which Judaism intersects with and partly determines the culture of the Jews. The religious tradition is a battleground, and since I am concerned about the outcome, it makes sense [for me] to join the battle. [ . . . ] The battle over the

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<sup>45</sup> Walzer, *Interpretation*, 39.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

Jewish tradition is my battle; in that sense I am a parochial intellectual.

“But it is also a *battle*,” Walzer added emphatically: “it doesn’t involve, as Said charges, “just going along with one’s own people for the sake of loyalty and ‘connectedness.’”<sup>47</sup> Addressing Jewish theology is a precondition for getting on to the battlefield.<sup>48</sup>

### *Breyten Breytenbach*

The Afrikaner painter-poet-essayist-activist Breyten Breytenbach (b. 1939) was South Africa’s clearest exemplar of connected criticism during the apartheid era, according to Walzer. Like the above examples, Breytenbach left South Africa as a young man. He settled permanently in Paris, where he became a notable participant in the intellectual and cultural life of that city during the 1960s. Sartrean existentialism and the Buddhism of his Vietnamese wife Yolande became more important to Breytenbach’s moral beliefs than the Dutch Reformed Church of his traditional Afrikaner upbringing. He became a Francophone in his everyday life. And as Walzer has emphasized, Breytenbach went through phases of shame over being an Afrikaner and, hence, his ethnic affiliation with the “local arrangements” of apartheid back home in South Africa.

Breytenbach’s disaffection with Afrikanerdom became open rebellion after his Vietnamese wife was denied a travel visa to accompany her husband to South Africa in 1969: as an Asian, Breytenbach’s marriage was in violation of the apartheid law against mixed-race marriages. A short time later, Breytenbach formed an underground resistance group called “Okhela.” Its purpose was to recruit other disaffected whites living inside South Africa and

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<sup>47</sup> Hart, 191.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Lerner has made a similar argument in *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006).

create a secret support system for the activities of the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party. Five years later, Breytenbach was arrested while visiting South Africa under an assumed identity and was sentenced to seven years in prison for espionage.

Walzer argues that, following Breytenbach's return to Paris, this Afrikaner poet's critical strategy underwent a fundamental, if little understood, transformation. Although his opinions about apartheid remained unchanged, his post-prison writings, beginning with his *Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984), initiated a series of attacks on the Leninist-subversive approach to fomenting social change. Walzer takes the following passage on the clandestine nature of Okhela from *Confessions* to be crucial:

How the means corrupt the men, how groups become a law unto themselves, so infatuated with their own analysis, so turned in upon themselves and so cornered when these analyses prove to be incorrect, that the only way out seems to be [more and more] vigorous forms of terrorism.<sup>49</sup>

These remarks, Walzer suggests, actually 'confess' that the South African government was morally right to arrest him, even if apartheid was equally wrong.

Breytenbach's "new understanding," according to Walzer, was that "if you had to work in your own community, blacks among blacks, whites among whites, then you had also to attend to the actually existing consciousness of the community and not only to the heightened consciousness of your own small group."<sup>50</sup> Breytenbach followed this thought to a position quite at odds with his Okhela years:

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<sup>49</sup> Walzer, *Company*, 215.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

Maybe we ought to settle for the slower processes; maybe we must, very paradoxically, extend our confidence to the people and whatever mass organizations the people may throw up. Ah, but that means that we have to accommodate the notion that our way . . . may be diluted or changed completely . . . since we shall be losing control over the evolution that we become part of. Isn't that what "power to the people" implies?<sup>51</sup>

The "people" in this instance were white South Africans, and the "mass organization" that defined them was the predominantly Afrikaner Nationalist Party, not the anti-war protesters John Lennon had evoked in his anthem to popular empowerment. This might have seemed counter-intuitive to members of the anti-apartheid struggle in 1984 when Breytenbach wrote those words. Yet with hindsight, we can see there was some justification for this position. The election of F.W. De Klerk five years later marked the Afrikaners' collective decision to end apartheid and initiate the negotiations that led to majority rule in South Africa.

*Breytenbach at Stellenbosch*

How did Breytenbach pursue his own brand of connected criticism in practice? One example (that has the additional benefit of casting light on Antony Sher's *Titus*) is "Fragments of a Growing Awareness of Unfinished Truths," a lecture he presented at Stellenbosch University in 1991. His introduction, of which I reproduce only about a third of its original length, is a primer in how *not* to flatter your audience:

Ladies and gentlemen, members of the police, the security police,  
National Intelligence, Military Intelligence, Civil Cooperation

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Bureau, Special Operations, Municipal security, spies, agents, infiltrators, grasses, grey shirts and grey shirts, moles, operators, hit men, handlers, car bomb artists, paymasters, Broederbonders,<sup>52</sup> [ . . . ] inner-sanctum strategists, public saints and private sinners, deeply troubled intellectuals, Total Responders, ex-torturers, [ . . . ] blue-eyed boys, moral re-armers of the National Party, federated Afrikaner culture carriers and cultured crust and cultural workers and vultures [ . . . ] and cowboys and choralists, contact cultivators, informers, closet revolutionaries, wankers and voyeurs[.]<sup>53</sup>

One can read this as an act of hostile interpellation designed to make his audience irate and defensive. But this would be to misread the overall reception Breytenbach received from Stellenbosch's student body: there and then, his introduction was greeted by applause.

The mastery of local knowledge that comes with 'connection' may explain why Breytenbach was greeted with cheers instead of hisses, or worse. Consider: He named not one, generic white police force, but *all* of the various branches; not a single type of secret policemen, but an entire spectrum of types. And perhaps most importantly, he offered a list of Afrikaner elites defined as divided and "deeply troubled." This is a speaker with an insider's grasp of his audience and who was capable of mapping the complexities of the Afrikaners' political landscape. Breytenbach also tossed in a good measure of knowing humor as well.

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<sup>52</sup> The Broederbond, or "Band of Brothers" is a semi-secret society of South Africa's Afrikaner elite. Similar in reputation to Yale University's Skull and Bones Society, and also centered upon a university (Stellenbosch), it was widely reported that the organization functioned as South Africa's true parliament during the apartheid era. The classic study on this topic is *Broederbond: The Super-Afrikaners* by Ivor Williams and Hans Strydom (Johannesburg: Corgi Books, 1980).

<sup>53</sup> See "Fragments of a Growing Awareness of Unfinished Truths." in Breyten Breytenbach's *The Memory of Birds in Times of Revolution*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996: 24.

No matter how morally offensive their political conduct is, however, the connected critic, according to Walzer, reaffirms the identity he maintains with his community. In a similar vein, Breytenbach ended his introduction by calling the audience his “companions and comrades and ex-convicts, brothers and sisters,” or, in short, “my dearly beloved fellow South Africans.”<sup>54</sup> And Breytenbach did not stop there, with a ritual nod of solidarity; he expanded his sense of connection to the point of painful confession. After jogging in the hills above Stellenbosch the previous morning, Breytenbach shared, “this rush of familiarity brings a peace and ease that I can feel only here [. . .] was the sense of being myself not forged here?”<sup>55</sup> As the land reminds him, he is still an autochthon, still native, a trope whose significance we shall discuss.

But Breytenbach also felt obliged to report that his connection to South Africa and Afrikaners had become tenuous and full of ambivalence. While re-experiencing the landscape of the western Cape brought a “rush of familiarity,” he added that it was “tinged with strangeness, even estrangement.”<sup>56</sup> Breytenbach avowed that “I am in love with this country as if it were my infatuation.” But, again, qualified that ardor by remarking: “A French philosopher said the punishment for a man who loved women is to love them still.”<sup>57</sup> Elsewhere, Breytenbach said that his sense of being an Afrikaner was “deceased,” or lingered on only as “a kind of apocryphal subconsciousness that shrivels my dreams.” Still it is not hard to miss the mournful quality of these efforts to express his alienation; nor does he offer his French citizenship as a meaningful substitute identity. Breytenbach may no longer be able to call himself an Afrikaner, but as the Stellenbosch historian Hermann Giliomee has written, his audience had already made up their

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

own opinion. Although his “intense aversion” to “the nationalist leadership and its arrogant ways threatened to spill over in a rejection of [his] Afrikaner roots,” Breytenbach was always considered to be “nothing but a full-blooded Afrikaner.”<sup>58</sup>

The purpose of Breytenbach’s speech was advice – to Afrikaners about how they should work, on the ‘cultural front,’ to speed the arrival of a post-apartheid South Africa. Yet paradoxically, after establishing his bona fides as a connected critic, Breytenbach balked. Did his estrangement, exile and collaboration with the international struggle against apartheid still give him the right to frame his critique as immanent? Or as Breytenbach expressed this “embarrassment”:

This chiaroscuro, the pine-cones and the crepuscular odors of mountain flanks mixed with that of the sea, the ancient recognition of peoples’ gestures and the smiles in their eyes – it all hurts too much. That which for so long was a known intimacy is now a close confusion. Like this the dead must feel when he rises again accidentally. It is no longer my country.<sup>59</sup>

If his connection is so attenuated by confusion and pain, if his “anchors, even the sea anchor, have ripped loose,” then Breytenbach, with obvious anguish, asked “how can I then pretend to take you in tow?”<sup>60</sup> Perhaps, he concluded, he has “nothing to say and nobody to hear that nothing.”<sup>61</sup> Unlike Walzer’s model of the post-colonial disconnected critic, prolonged distance and exposure to metropolitan culture may have empowered him with a privileged perspective on

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<sup>58</sup> Giliomee, Hermann Buhr. *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*. Charlottesville: Virginia UP, 2003: 616.

<sup>59</sup> Breytenbach, 25.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

South African politics, but have not undermined his ability to be relevant there; he cannot expect to command an Afrikaner audience, he must request the favor of one.

His parting advice to Afrikaners was to become inclusively “South African.” To accomplish this transformation, they needed to make a public display of taking responsibility for their crimes; a process that Breytenbach described as “clean[ing] out the stables of our history” and “taking responsibility for the dung[.]”<sup>62</sup> His proposed method for accomplishing this feat was more evocative than specific, but has extraordinary resonance for Antony Sher’s project with *Titus Andronicus* (to be discussed in the following chapter): “We shall have to break down the blind walls protecting (enclosing?) Afrikanerhood, or, rather, Afrikaner culture.”<sup>63</sup> In other texts, however, Breytenbach has been more specific: re-interpreting Afrikaner culture means the “bastardization” of Afrikaners’ collective genealogy to include all of its repressed and variegated, cultural and genetic, incorporations of other African peoples.

Breytenbach understood, of course, that some process of retribution would have to be carried out by any post-apartheid government against the previous regime’s most ruthless perpetrators. But Breytenbach argued that it was in the best interests of South Africa, as an emergent, multi-racial nation, to allow Afrikaners to disaffiliate themselves from the Nationalist Party and its leadership. Not because average Afrikaners and other white South Africans were ignorant of the government’s human rights abuses and were somehow innocent. “Everybody knew,” Breytenbach stated unequivocally. But there was also blood on the hands of the ANC and the Zulu-dominated Inkatha Freedom Party. Since the best thing for the average South African was to be spared more cycles of vengeance, reconciliation should be the goal of the New South Africa. “As in a Breughel painting,” Breytenbach poignantly concluded:

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

We must see to it that everybody in the procession makes it home—the halt must help the lame along, the deaf lead the blind and give to those who have no walking sticks an Ak 47 to lean on. Conciliation is not an ejaculatory prayer or a Sunday commandment; it is a complicated technique, it involves feeling one another for Africa, with unclean hands.<sup>64</sup>

This is a haunting picture that unintentionally anticipated many of the key images of Antony Sher's *Titus Andronicus* five years later; it is also a passage that demonstrates Breytenbach's power as a poet. Even as it calls for reconciliation, the procession he depicted registered a deep suspicion. Many of the physical wounds never heal, and it would have to be conducted without the comfort of neat moral binaries. In a word, it was going to be “complicated.”

Could Afrikaners, after everything they had collectively done, reasonably hope to keep South Africa their home? The enduring characteristics of the Afrikaners would have to be separable from whiteness; to fulfill their desire to secure their African identity, they were faced with the choice of making a decisive break with their European ancestry. However, rather than depicting this break as a loss to be mourned, Breytenbach presented this historical moment as the threshold of their ultimate wish-fulfillment. By de-racializing Afrikaans, their local variety of Calvinism and their love of the land, the Afrikaners could finally be recognized as African. In this future, Afrikaners were going to come in many colors.

### *Sher as Connected Critic*

Antony Sher's biography and eventual response to apartheid rule in South Africa during the waning years of National Party rule mirrors that of Breytenbach's on several points. Like

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

Breytenbach, Sher was born into the higher echelons of that country's one-time system of white privilege. Reared in Sea Point, one of Cape Town's most affluent and liberal enclaves, Sher's parents were cultivated, bi-lingual (Afrikaans and English) Jews of Lithuanian descent. Sher and Breytenbach were both positioned to reap the material dividends South Africa could offer the children of the elite.

A desire for artistic success rather than political activism led both of them to European capitals at an early age, though. As Sher describes his motivations to study acting at London's Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art, it was inextricably bound up with escaping the cultural provincialism of life in South Africa, the allure of metropolitan life "Overseas" and the promise of a fast-track to professional recognition as an artist. Sher also had a adolescent belief that his temperament was essentially British, and that the UK was his true home:

But I had my own sense of destiny, and it wasn't so much to do with fame and fortune – though of course these would be nice – as to do with identity. There are people born as men yet profoundly convinced that they're women. I had a similar sense, though about my passport rather than my gender. I believed I'd been born in the wrong country. It wasn't South Africa's politics that made me feel uncomfortable – not yet, I was still as politically naïve as can be – but the swagger, noise and *certainty* of its people. Life was simple to them, all in black and white. They had an answer for everything. Here in England, which was, after all, a much older, wiser society, people seemed to prefer questions to answers. I like this. The

population was cautious, discreet and courteous. I slipped quietly among their ranks.<sup>65</sup>

This reads, in part, as a gloss on Walzer's portrait of the uncritical, "guilt-ridden apologist." But only in part. As a passage written in the late 1990s, and after the *Titus* debacle, these remarks do reflect a fawning sort of nationalist attachment to England that easily lends itself to criticism (e.g., as if Margaret Thatcher lacked "swagger, noise and certainty.") Still, one can also see how Sher's reasons for leaving South Africa were personal and were derived from the normal psychological requirements for achieving an autonomous adult identity.

Wanting to fit in to his adopted homeland, and increasingly aware that "Londoners don't like white South Africans," Sher resolved to "lose my accent" and bury all traces of his national origins. "It fools people," he writes in his 2002 autobiography: "When they ask me where I'm from and I say here, London, they believe me."<sup>66</sup> But there is an inner toll that he has to pay:

I'm learning about South Africa, about apartheid, and I'm not liking what I learn. Can it be that we, the Shers, were part of what people here are calling an abomination, a crime against humanity? [...] I'm trying to deny being what I am – a white South African – but what am I otherwise? It's a good thing I shall turn into an actor soon, turn into other characters, because I haven't a fucking clue who Antony Sher is any more.<sup>67</sup>

Shame over the racial injustices of apartheid did not initially lead Sher to become "political" like it did for Breyten Breytenbach. Instead, it arguably pushed him to perfect the social camouflage

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<sup>65</sup> Sher, Antony. *Beside Myself*. London: Arrow, 2002: 97.

<sup>66</sup> Sher, *Beside*, 120.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

of (Fanonian) “colonial mimicry,” or the narcissistic identification of the subaltern with a metropolitan identity in which the subject attempts to 'pass' as a member of the dominant nation.<sup>68</sup> For almost 20 years, Sher would publicly disguise his South Africaness and devote himself to the project of becoming one of the great “classical” actors of his generation – an ambition that, in the British theatre culture of the 1970s and 80s, was specifically apolitical.<sup>69</sup>

Antony Sher remained quiet about his South African roots until being cast to play the role of Shylock in a 1987 RSC production of *The Merchant of Venice* directed by Bill Alexander. As Sher recounts in *Beside Myself*, this was the first production in which he consciously, and vocally, employed his South African experiences during the rehearsal process to assist him in the building of a character – in this case, the relationship of racist modes of thought and behavior to anti-Semitism.<sup>70</sup> This behind-the-scenes exploration of his lingering connection to that country, though, became the seed of a protest action that would serve as Sher’s definitive ‘coming out’ as a white South African, and the beginning of his efforts to become a connected critic.

The occasion was the celebration of Shakespeare’s birthday on April 23, 1987 – an event that has been held since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a quasi-state event in which foreign dignitaries arrive to pay their nation’s respects to both the Bard and the Crown. As it had for decades, the South African embassy planned to send its cultural attaché to Stratford to participate in the ceremony and to attend a gala performance of *Merchant*. Led by Sher, the cast asked the RSC

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<sup>68</sup> Fuss, Diana. “Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification.” *Diacritics* Vol. 24, No. 2/3, Critical Crossings (Summer – Autumn, 1994): 20 – 42.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Patterson has usefully discussed the dominance of the “interventionist strain” of British political theatre during the late 1970s and 80s associated with such playwrights as Edward Bond, David Hare, Howard Brenton and Caryl Churchill. Sher, it should be further noted, was briefly a member of the Joint Stock Theatre Company and had a featured role in Churchill’s *Cloud 9*, but quickly left this self-identified “socialist” theatre ensemble for the RSC—the phase of his acting career that Sher has, perhaps understandably, emphasized over his earlier efforts. See Michael Patterson’s *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003).

<sup>70</sup> Sher, *Beside*, 135.

leadership to ban the South African representative as a sort of domestic application of the “cultural boycott,” or, failing that, allow Sher to deliver a speech from the stage condemning apartheid. Both requests were denied. Also rejected was Sher’s direct request (via a letter) to the South African embassy to cancel their appearance at the event. Despite the intensity of the anti-apartheid sentiments gripping the RSC, a representative of Pretoria would be honorably received at the theatre.

It was then that Antony Sher sought a remedy within the performance of Shakespeare itself. As Sher writes:

Apartheid South Africa had seldom looked uglier than it did that year and feeling ran high about its official representative attending the theatre, especially since the play was *Merchant*. It seemed absurd for a symbol of repression to come and pay homage to a writer whose trademark was compassion.<sup>71</sup>

Did the presence of this universal “compassion” provide a basis for criticism? “Was there not something in Shakespeare, something in the play itself,” Sher enquired? Upon closer examination, there was.

Considering the lines about “Hath not a Jew eyes” too narrowly associated with anti-semitism to work as a barb against the racism of apartheid, Sher decided to focus his intervention on the following lines:

What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?  
You have among you many a purchased slave,  
Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,  
You use in abject and in slavish parts,

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 192.

Because you bought them: shall I say to you,  
Let them be free[.]<sup>72</sup>

If read in its entirety, Shylock's discourse is not a direct plea for the liberation of all slaves. However, taking these remarks as a coded plea for such "compassion," Sher prepared a bold theatrical maneuver. He recounts what happened next:

I took hold of one of the court attendants, played by the Coloured [and fellow South African] actor Akim Mogaji, led him to the front of the stage, pointed directly at the South African and unleashed Shylock's venom, and ours, the Company's, straight at him. I'll never forget the look of fright as he flattened himself against the seat. The magical fourth wall had suddenly shattered and someone was talking to him. And that someone was the man whose birthday he was here to celebrate.<sup>73</sup>

Sher's action made newspaper headlines the following day, and signaled the start of the actor's visible participation in anti-apartheid activities in the UK.<sup>74</sup> Among these was a celebrity benefit variety show produced at Sadder's Wells theatre called *Two Dogs and Freedom* that Sher co-produced, and which Gregory Doran directed. This was one of many such fund-raising events to support anti-apartheid causes, such as the British Defence and Aid Fund, to have occurred in London during the late 1980s, and Sher began to become a fixture at them.

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<sup>72</sup> Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. (Arden Shakespeare: Second Series.) John Russell Brown, ed. London: Arden, 1964.

<sup>73</sup> Sher, *Beside*, 193.

<sup>74</sup> De Jongh, Nicholas. "RSC Actors Call Off Strike Over SA Diplomat's Visit." *The Guardian* 23 Apr. 1988: 9.

Had Sher limited himself to this kind of political activity, it might be a stretch to identify him as any kind of “connected critic.” However, Sher embarked on a side career as a novelist during this time, and in the course of doing so, wrote several works that present a more complex representation of South African whites, and a desire to reach out to them, even as Sher remained critical of apartheid. Specifically as a South African Jew, Sher became focused upon the issue of historical trauma, and how its victims become psychologically primed to become future perpetrators. Unlike the confrontational rhetoric associated with the *Merchant* incident and *Two Dogs and Freedom*, these novels proposed a therapeutic framework for interpreting and working through Afrikaners’ attachment to apartheid.

Antony Sher saw his authority to write about Afrikaners and their collective psyche as stemming from his specific ethnic background: a South African Jew whose ancestors had chosen to assimilate themselves with Afrikaners and who had, as a group, mostly supported the racism associated with Afrikaner nationalism. Like Breytenbach’s speech at Stellenbosch, Sher’s claim to speak, however attenuated by exile and political opposition, was derived from his personal complicity associated with those family ties, and an affirmation of the African identity of his white countrymen. Unlike the radical, or post-colonial description of white South Africans as a “settler” class who had no right to claim a home in Africa, Sher believed that people like his family now belonged to that continent, and that their survival had to be integrated into a just vision for the future of South African after apartheid.

His first novel, *Middlepost* (1988), is an imaginary recreation of his grandfather’s passage to South Africa from Lithuania at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and his subsequent peregrinations as an itinerant peddler over the post Boer War landscapes of the Karoo desert in the early

1900s.<sup>75</sup> Sher thoughtfully discussed his motivations for exploring this story in an article he wrote for the *The Guardian* as a publicity piece. Entitled “South Africa’s Other Chosen People,” Sher noted that, while “there is an impressive list of South African Jews who have, in different ways, fought apartheid[,] the majority have never done so and,” he added, “my family belong to that majority.”<sup>76</sup> This fact had always troubled him, he reported, and supplied him with a moral paradox: “how, having escaped oppression on one side of the world, can you then become the oppressors on the other?” Having fled Czarist pogroms, stetls and passbooks, why had his forebears calmly accepted the imposition of a similar system of oppression on South Africa’s black majority?

Sher argued that this failure of moral imagination had its roots in a phenomenon he shared with this his family. Just as he had tried to erase his South African past after emigrating to the UK, so had his family blotted out their collective memories of Lithuania—a history the knowledge of which should have morally primed them to voice their disapproval of apartheid.<sup>77</sup> Thus the impetus to write *Middlepost* stemmed from his awareness that “before I could accuse my family of denying their own history, I would have to find out why I was doing the same thing.” Aside from the difficult truth he speaks, Sher’s confession represents an ethical stance of connection; it is a critical stance, but starting as he does with his own family, it is also a compassionate position. Furthermore, Sher presents the novel as a self-criticism. Like Walzer’s

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<sup>75</sup> Sher, Antony. *Middlepost*. New York: Random House, 1989: 105.

<sup>76</sup> Sher, Antony. “South Africa’s Chosen People.” *The Manchester Guardian Weekly* 18 Sept. 1988: 22.

<sup>77</sup> Or to quote Sher, who expresses himself very well on this point: “A piece of the puzzle was falling into place. My family couldn’t make any connection between Jewish oppression and Black oppression, because they were largely oblivious to their own history. Joel did not arrive in South Africa as a colourful immigrant with a samovar under his arm and a folksong on his lips. He was a refugee from persecution determined to forget his previous life.” (*Ibid*)

description of himself, Sher does not claim to have achieved a great quantity of critical distance from his subject.

Coming late to political activity, Sher's analysis of South African Jews and their relationship to Afrikaners lacks the overt confidence and sophistication of Breytenbach's Stellenbosch address. Yet this is no impediment to effective connected criticism and, in the case of his first novel, Sher's adoption of a *mea culpa* attitude and a tone of personal vulnerability cut against the grain of 'imperial judgment' and 'missionary narcissism.' Apartheid was inseparable from meditating on the history, moral choices and political rights of his family. If Sher cannot condone his parents' support for Nationalist Party rule at the ballot box, he must still speak as advocate for their future transformation into supporters of what would inevitably come into being: a post-apartheid South Africa. And there was still time for South African Jews to avoid the moral defeat of having patterned their voices upon "the chilling echoes of those ordinary German citizens after the war" who said of the Holocaust, "'We never knew' or 'Yes, we knew, but there was nothing we could do.'"<sup>78</sup>

The moral forgetting of South African Jews, according to Sher, had its origins in their collective decision to identify with the Afrikaners—an identification that occurred in the aftermath of the disastrous Anglo-Boer War (1899 – 1902) during which Afrikanerdom was literally decimated by the British army, including 30,000 women and children who perished from starvation and disease inside the world's first "concentration camps."<sup>79</sup> And the identification, as

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> See *Writing a Wider War: Rethinking Gender, Race, and Identity in South African War, 1899 - 1902*, Gregor Cuthbertson, ed. (Johannesburg: New Africa Books, 2003). This book particularly strong on charting the traumatic legacies of the war for peacetime South Africa in the decades that followed it.

Sher and others have noted, was mutual.<sup>80</sup> As Sher observes, “both races see themselves as chosen people holding covenants with the Lord, both have been persecuted peoples, and both were unable to claim their promised lands for much of their history.”<sup>81</sup> The similarities and tensions between Jewish and Afrikaner responses to their respective collective traumas is the major theme of *Middlepost* and Sher’s second novel, *The Indoor Boy*. As Edward Said has argued, biblical ‘chosen-ness’ can underwrite the righteous subjugation and destruction of Caananites. This is the limited interpretation that the *voortrekkers* adopted when they swore their “Vow of the Covenant” before defeating the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River in 1838 and symbolically reaffirmed thereafter.<sup>82</sup> South African Jews, while not immune to the attractions of this narrative, had access to a different understanding of being a chosen people that was tempered by centuries of oppression in Europe. In the living tradition of Jewish religion and culture, to be chosen had become more a matter of ethically responding to victimization. South African Jews had a responsibility to reiterate this formation of being chosen to their Afrikaner cousins, Sher can be read as claiming. Reframing their history in this manner would allow Afrikaners to recognize themselves as the perpetrators they had become, empathize with South Africa’s black majority, and chart a new national destiny for themselves. As a character expresses in *The Indoor Boy*, and unlike the sentiment prevailing in anti-apartheid circles in the UK, Afrikaners could still be “reformed, redeemed.”<sup>83</sup>

In the next chapter, we shall examine Antony Sher's efforts to present himself as a connected critic more closely. However, in the concluding section of this chapter, I want to

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<sup>80</sup> Du Toit, Andre. “No Chosen People: The Myth of the Calvinist Origins of Afrikaner Nationalism and Racial Ideology.” *The American Historical Review* Vol. 88, No. 4 (Oct., 1983): 920-952.

<sup>81</sup> Sher, “South Africa's,” 22.

<sup>82</sup> Thompson, Leonard. *The Political Mythology of Apartheid*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985.

<sup>83</sup> Sher, Antony. *The Indoor Boy*. London: Penguin, 1991: 110.

return to the hidden assumptions that guided Sher's public shaming of a South African consular official during a performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. Specifically what is of later significance for *Titus Andronicus* was Sher's belief that it was the "compassionate" Shakespeare himself who was railing against apartheid. Rather than reading this as a throw-away remark, the idea that Shakespeare possesses a unique authority to interrogate contemporary instances of political violence has a specific institutional pedigree: the RSC's long-standing debt to Jan Kott's seminal *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* and the Company's steady commitment to the artistic policy of "relevance."

### *Royal Shakespeare*

Beginning with an invitation to participate in a Royal National Theatre residency at Johannesburg's Market Theatre in 1994, Antony Sher faced a new challenge: how was he to merge his two public roles as a South African connected critic and a star performer of Shakespeare with the Royal Shakespeare Company? Indeed, it was the latter identity that, in terms of his particular celebrity, outshone the former. If Sher was an amateur as a novelist and social critic, he was regarded in both the UK and South Africa as an expert in the RSC's methods of performing Shakespeare - "training" that provided Sher with a fund of cultural capital whose value the actor presented as self-evident.<sup>84</sup> The full measure of the RSC's influence on Sher's work with Doran on *Titus* will be documented in the following chapters. However, it will be useful to articulate here the theatrical formation of Shakespeare that Sher attempted to fuse with his project of "connection."

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<sup>84</sup> Myerson, Jonathan, "Is Antony Sher the Greatest Living Interpreter of Shakespeare?" *The Independent* (London) 19 Feb. 2004: 16.

The concept of a “theatrical formation” is Bruce McConachie's adaptation of Raymond Williams' well-known theory of cultural formations to the specific conditions of analyzing dramatic performance and historical reception. McConachie defines it as “the mutual elaboration over time of historically specific audience groups and theatre practitioners participating in certain shared patterns of dramatic and theatrical action.”<sup>85</sup> Like other methodological tools arising from cultural materialism, McConachie’s concept is meant to excavate the social relations of theatre practices that have otherwise been presented in terms of the “ideology of the aesthetic.”<sup>86</sup> Ways of making theatre, such as genre, styles of acting, and scenic design, are related to the means by which particular societies have negotiated their competing interests, identities and desires. Thus theatrical formations are, in McConachie’s words, identifiable “groups of spectators and theatre performers [who] produce each other from inside out as artist-to-be-experienced and audiences-to-be-entertained in a given historical period.”<sup>87</sup> The task of the theatre historian reading for such formations is to classify the social composition of these two groups and to explain the expectations governing their interaction.

Of the small number of scholarly papers to have been written on Sher and Doran’s *Titus*, most have sought an ostensibly “larger,” post-colonial theoretical framework for explaining both the conception and failure of the production.<sup>88</sup> Some important insights into the performance have certainly been generated from this perspective. However, I shall be following-up on Jonathan Holmes’ helpful observation that the aesthetic thumbprint of “a post-1960s English,

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<sup>85</sup> See Bruce McConachie’s *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre & Society, 1820 – 1870*. Iowa City: Iowa UP, 1992: xi – xiii.

<sup>86</sup> McConachie, x.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, xii.

<sup>88</sup> Orkin, Martin. “‘I Am the Tusk of An Elephant:’ *Macbeth*, *Titus* and *Caesar* in Johannesburg.” In *Shakespeare and the Language of Translation*, Ton Hoenselaars, ed. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2004.

broadly RSC approach to Shakespeare”<sup>89</sup> was clearly visible on this *Titus*, as was the Company’s<sup>90</sup> “politico-theatrical rhetoric.”<sup>91</sup> This is a position that, while not denying the post-colonial dimension of Shakespeare in South Africa, asks us to parse the historicity of theatre artists’ audiences involved with greater (diachronic) precision. To glance ahead for a moment, Holmes correctly reports that Sher, along with Doran, repeatedly framed this *Titus* with reference to two seemingly contradictory ideas: relevance and authenticity. The first referred to Sher’s belief that Shakespeare possessed an urgent applicability to the New South Africa. The second evoked the more romantic notion that producing Shakespeare there would also constitute “a kind of return to origin” for *Titus* and its performances would recover “Shakespeare’s intentions.”<sup>92</sup> Holmes calls this the “fantasy” that “Elizabethan England and apartheid South Africa [have] become one,” a fiction rendered only remotely plausible “by positing the universalism and transcendence of Shakespeare.”<sup>93</sup> Holmes then traced the proximate source of this rhetoric to Janet Suzman, an older South African expatriate actor and long-time RSC stalwart who had returned to Johannesburg to direct a production of *Othello* starring John Kani at the Market Theatre in 1988. Among other statements she addressed to the press was her belief that Shakespeare “was toying with the theory of apartheid four hundred years before the actual policy

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<sup>89</sup> Holmes, Jonathan. “‘A World Elsewhere’: Shakespeare in South Africa.” *Shakespeare Survey* Vol. 55 (2002): 271 – 284.

<sup>90</sup> Holmes, 280.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 271.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 277.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 278.

was cooked up.”<sup>94</sup> Since Suzman and Sher are colleagues and close friends, there is no reason to doubt Holmes’ attribution of a strong bond of influence of the former on the latter.

Nevertheless, Holmes misses the *distal* relationship between this discourse and its institutional origins— a site of cultural authority that empowered Suzman and Sher to use this “politico-theatrical rhetoric” with public authority. Or rather, one should say Holmes stopped short of developing his own premise that the pair’s rhetoric and artistic practice was “broadly” related to the RSC. As one can discern from Alan Sinfield’s widely admired cultural materialist studies of British theatre culture, Suzman and Sher’s approach to Shakespeare in South Africa was *directly* determined by their careers at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Rather than devising their own “fantasy” about the urgent meaning *Titus* possessed for South Africa, Sher and Doran should be seen as attempting to transplant the theatrical formation Sinfield calls “Royal Shakespeare.”

### *What is Royal Shakespeare?*

The most stable feature of “Royal Shakespeare” has been the Company’s public rhetoric concerning the modern vitality of their namesake playwright. Sinfield writes that this idea can be sloganized as “Shakespeare-plus-relevance,” an artistic policy that has combined “traditional

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<sup>94</sup> Suzman, Janet. “South Africa in Othello.” In *Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century* Jonathan Bate, Jill L. Levenson and Dieter Mehl, eds. Dover: Delaware UP, 1996: 23 – 40. As the title of her Tanner lecture declares, Suzman claimed a typological authority for Shakespeare’s play that also extended to the identity of actors who have played the role of Othello. According to Suzman, however accomplished Lawrence Olivier’s Moor may have been, it could never achieve authenticity, because it was Shakespeare’s genius to have to written a part that could only be fully realized by an African actor. Or as Suzman writes, “For Olivier was, beneath the buffed black slap, irredeemably a white man, because he thought ‘white,’ and Shakespeare, surely, was interested in thinking himself into the soul of a black man.” Thus Suzman understood her directorial role vis a vis the Xhosa actor John Kani to be one of encouraging him to express “his African roots” and “release that race memory via the incomparable verse of the Chief Dead White European Male; a nice paradox.” Celia R. Daileader calls Suzman’s representation of Shakespeare’s putatively authentic understanding of black Otherness “Othellophilia.” Furthermore, Daileader claims that the RSC is both the originator of this idea and its most influential disseminator of it. Daileader, Celia R. “Casting Black Actors: Beyond Othellophilia.” In *Shakespeare and Race*, Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley W. Wells, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000: 177-202.

authority and urgent contemporaneity,” and, since Peter Hall’s tenure in Stratford, has “proved [to be] so effective.”<sup>95</sup> As other observers of the RSC have noted, this claim was given powerful impetus by Jan Kott’s influential study, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*. Kott’s thesis stated that, “by discovering in Shakespeare’s plays problems that are relevant to our own time,” post-war theatre audiences could simultaneously “find themselves near to the Elizabethans[.]”<sup>96</sup> “Twentieth-century violence,” as Sinfield explicates Kott, “has re-equipped us for the political violence of Shakespeare.”<sup>97</sup> Or as Kott himself has elaborated:

A reader or spectator in the mid-twentieth century interprets *Richard III* through his own experiences. He cannot do otherwise. And that is why he is not terrified—or rather, not amazed—at Shakespeare’s cruelty. He views the struggle for power and mutual slaughter of the characters far more calmly than did many generations of spectators and critics in the nineteenth century. More calmly, or, at any rate, more rationally. Cruel death, suffered by most dramatis personae, is not regarded today as an aesthetic necessity, or as an essential rule in tragedy in order to produce catharsis, or even as a specific characteristic of Shakespeare’s genius. Violent deaths of the principal are now regarded rather as an historical necessity, or as something altogether natural.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Sinfield, Alan. “Royal Shakespeare: Theatre and the Making of Ideology.” In *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994:183.

<sup>96</sup> Kott, Jan. *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*. New York City: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974: 7.

<sup>97</sup> Kott, 185.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

Contrary to a long tradition of representing Shakespeare as dramatic poet, post-war audiences would now approach him as a political realist. Hall, as Sinfield reports, read Kott's book in manuscript,<sup>99</sup> and established this axiom as the artistic foundation of the RSC.

Hall's enthusiasm for Kott was derived, in no small part, from the director's need to resolve the competing interests facing the RSC: on the one hand, as the former Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, the Company retained a duty to preserve the heritage of its namesake; on the other, the contemporary identity of the Company was reorganized to resemble the Berliner Ensemble. It was the latter inspiration that led Hall to loudly declare for much of the 1960s that he was "a radical," imparting an aura of radicalism that, according to Sinfield, became the successful "image of the RSC."<sup>100</sup> An emergent post-war and increasingly educated middle-class in the UK strongly identified with the Company's center-left declarations and consciously cultivated affiliations with continental trends in culture. On the other hand, as the word "Royal" in the name of the Company denotes, Hall was equally desirous of receiving state subsidy—patronage that remained tied to Stratford's traditional role as a performance archive for the authority of Shakespeare. Consequently, Sinfield asserts, the putative radicalism of the RSC, in both publicity and production, assumed a highly attenuated form.

Dramaturgically, Hall and others, such as John Barton, advanced an alternative reading of Kott. Where the Pole had imputed a Spenglerian vision of history to Shakespeare, the RSC argued that the beginning and end of the playwright's politics was the "Elizabethan World-Picture" as inventoried by E.M. Tillyard. Or as Sinfield quotes Hall:

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<sup>99</sup> Sinfield, "Royal," 185.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 183. As Sinfield quotes Hall as declaring in 1962, "I am a radical, and I could not work in the theatre if I were not. The theatre must question everything and disturb its audience."

All Shakespeare's thinking, whether religious, political, or moral, is based on a complete acceptance of this concept of order. There is a just proportion in all things: man is above beast, king is above man, and God above king. [. . . ] Revolution, whether in the individual's temperament, in the family, or in the state or the heavens, destroys the order and leads to destructive anarchy.<sup>101</sup>

In an interview conducted several years later by Ian McKellen, Barton offered the same interpretation. "Maybe we can clear our heads a little," Barton instructed, "by asking what Shakespeare's own political opinions are":

I think there is a split in Shakespeare himself. [He] has an intense vision of order, or perhaps one should say an intense fear of disorder. Again and again he shows us the consequences of order breaking down and destruction and violence taking over. [...] I'm sometimes asked about my own political views. I usually answer that they are Shakespearean in the sense that I am always acutely aware of the appalling mixture of right and wrong on both sides in most political situations. If [one] goes for that he will find that Shakespeare is neither right-wing nor left-wing in his philosophy or temperament. In political terms he is wingless.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*.

Kott had made a similar claim for Shakespeare's political views himself, of course, in the course of his well-known description of the "Grand Mechanism" in *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*.<sup>103</sup> But Kott had never called himself a "radical," either. Therefore Sinfield avers, the "radical RSC identity" must be viewed as "composed, surely, of paradoxes and surprises which suggest a more complicated and confused relationship between innovation and establishment."<sup>104</sup>

The RSC has consistently squared this rhetorical circle, according to Sinfield, by strongly defining the "relevance" it seeks to deploy *against* notions of political theatre. In fact, Sinfield argues, Hall's influential synthesis of Kott and Tillyard has evacuated the category of the political as such from their publicity and artistic practices. As Sinfield explains, from Kott the RSC collectively conflated social conflict with "something like the human condition, an unalterable given which political action cannot affect,"<sup>105</sup> and from Tillyard, a discourse of deep, English national conservatism that carried the message that "if you try to make the world better you will only sacrifice your integrity and probably make things worse."<sup>106</sup> At best, this view

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<sup>103</sup> Kott himself is clearest on this score when he describes the "Grand Mechanism" informing Shakespeare's history plays. Kott describes the circular plot of this dramaturgical template as follows: "Each of these great historical tragedies begins with a struggle for the throne, or for its consolidation. Each ends with a monarch's death and a new coronation. In each of the Histories the legitimate ruler drags behind him a long chain of crimes. He has rejected the feudal lords who helped him reach for the crown; he murders, first, his enemies, then his former allies; he executes possible successors and pretenders to the crown. But he has not been able to execute them all. From banishment a young prince returns—the son, grandson, or brother of those murdered—to defend the violated law. The rejected lords gather round him, he personifies the hope of a new order. But every step to power continues to be marked by murder, violence, treachery. And soon, when the new prince finds himself near the throne, he drags behind a chain of crimes as long as that of the until now legitimate ruler. When he assumes the crown, he will be just as hated as his predecessor. He has killed enemies, now he will kill former allies. And a new pretender appears in the name of violated justice. The wheel has turned full circle." (7.) Willard Farnham makes a related, but more scholarly, case for reading Shakespeare as a writer of "de casibus tragedies," in which a belief in Fortuna governs the rise and fall of great men. (See Farnham's *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy*. Berkeley: California UP, 1956.)

<sup>104</sup> Sinfield, "Royal," 183.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 185.

<sup>106</sup> See Chapter 1, "Theatres of War" in Alan Sinfield's *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*. Berkeley: California UP, 1992: 14.

expresses a “liberal vision” that functions as an ideological supplement to welfare-state capitalism; at its worst, it underwrites a Hobbesian view of human nature consistent with the conservative political tradition’s suspicions about the virtues of mass democracy.<sup>107</sup> Neither perspective is, to Sinfield’s taste, properly understood as “political” (although I should think “oppositional” or even “counter-hegemonic” comes closer to the critic’s true social commitments.)

Needing to fashion a coalition audience consisting of both Labour and Tory orientations, particularly after the hey-day of its counter-cultural experimentalism associated with Peter Brook, the RSC, argues Sinfield, has adopted a complex strategy of making Shakespeare for the stage, and talking about that work. Specifically, this is the routine deployment of “*imprecise radical gestures*” for an “English society [that] demanded radicalism and relevance” whilst, at the same time, expected the Company to protect the “the ineluctable status” of Shakespeare—an office that joined the RSC and its more conservative patrons in an implicit contract that “the State had a responsibility to support such work.”<sup>108</sup> Thus “Royal Shakespeare” is a theatrical formation of delicately balanced paradoxes: sometimes radical in appearance, but not in substance; appealing to left-leaning, educated professionals, but inoffensive to the entrenched ‘Bardolatry’<sup>109</sup> of the upper echelons of that country’s traditional class system; and, finally a shrine to both the post-war British welfare state and that country’s oldest symbol of national identity, the royal family. The keyword disguising as much as describing these counter-currents

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<sup>107</sup> Sinfield, *Faultlines*, 14.

<sup>108</sup> Sinfield, “Royal,” 188.

<sup>109</sup> Graham Holderness has defined “bardolatry” as an “attenuated form of relic-worship” with the “liturgical properties of a religion” that, effectively, culminate in the “worship of Shakespeare,” particularly as “a ritual [for] enacting an idealised English past.” See his chapter “Bardolatry” in *Cultural Shakespeare: Essays in the Shakespeare Myth*. Hatfield: Hertfordshire UP, 2001.

is “relevance.” It refers to the production of a “Shakespeare” that radically discloses the conflicts of modernity, but does not *propose* any course of action.

### *Rescripting Shakespeare*

According to Sinfield, this imperative found concrete expression in one of the earliest artistic policies to be adopted by the RSC: John Barton’s practice of “rescripting Shakespeare,” which Alan C. Dessen defines as “the changes made by a director in the received text in response to a received problem or to achieve some agenda [...] or ‘concept.’”<sup>110</sup> The usual “agenda” of the RSC, Sinfield asserts, “was designed to substantiate a particular view of the political relevance of the plays.”<sup>111</sup> The essentially “conservative viewpoint” associated with the RSC’s brand of “relevance” is most clearly apparent in the Company’s *The War of the Roses* (1963).

An amalgamation of the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III*, “many lines and scenes were moved around” in the service of demonstrating, as Sinfield quotes Hall, that “revolution, whether in the individual’s temperament, in the family, or in the state or the heavens, destroys the order and leads to anarchy.”<sup>112</sup> To reinforce this concept, for example, Barton subtly revised the ending of the play by inventing a speech for the newly crowned Henry composed of lines assembled from previous scenes. Barton’s textual changes were, in Sinfield’s words, “designed to yield a coherence of event and ideology which it might be thought the received text

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<sup>110</sup> Dessen, Alan C. *Rescripting Shakespeare: The Text, the Director, and Modern Productions*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002: 3.

<sup>111</sup> Sinfield, 184.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

assiduously eschews.”<sup>113</sup> As textual scholarship and folio research picked up momentum in later years, the RSC’s practice of “rescripting” became more sophisticated and embroiled in scholarly debates that served to justify more explicit leaps of conceptualization. However, Sinfield insists, more often the RSC has remained indebted to presenting Shakespeare as a political cynic and a poet of order.

As former RSC literary manager Colin Chambers has observed, younger directors during the 1980s and 1990s may have liberalized the inherent conservatism of the Hall-Barton interpretation of Shakespeare’s “wingless” politics. But they did not, Chambers insist, adopt a less conservative rhetoric on the matter of Shakespeare’s authorial intentions. Chambers explains:

[The RSC’s] promiscuity of interpretation could only be sustained, paradoxically, by the cohesion of the RSC ‘brand’ and its reliance on the importance of and care for the text, an insistence buttressed by every manipulation of and departure from it.<sup>114</sup>

Consequently, even the most radical ‘rescriptors’ publicly maintain their “grave respect for the playwright” and often claim that they are merely “liberating the hidden text” of a play by Shakespeare.<sup>115</sup> “As theatre studies increasingly embraced performance,” Chambers adds, the RSC sought to bolster the “authoritative and distinctive image” of the Company by encouraging its directors to “undertake their own research and textual emendations.”<sup>116</sup> Scholar-directors and, even, scholar-actors like Antony Sher, have been the by-product of this infusion of academic

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 185.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 122.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*.

capital into RSC's artistic plant. In turn, these hybrid figures enhance the authority of the institution. This project has served the double voice of "relevance" well, because any question of a production's contemporary political significance can always be redirected to questions about Shakespeare's authorial intentions—intentions that are best left to the authorities to interpret.

*The "Hall-Brook Convergence"*

This "politico-theatrical rhetoric" of relevance and imprecision achieved its enduring formulation with Peter Brook's 1970 *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Although this famous production was generally perceived to be an expression of the Counter Culture and the New Left,<sup>117</sup> Sinfield claims that, from a political perspective, "few people asked what it all meant." Sinfield continues:

Brook said it was 'a work of pure celebration . . . celebration of the arts of the theatre' and that 'The play is about something very mysterious, and only to be understood by the complexity of human love.' Brook's distrust of political relevance set him in principle at odds with Hall, but in effect Brook's anguished Modernist disdain for history, politics and material reality approximated to Hall's despondent argument that nothing can be done because we are animals and unable to live up to the Elizabethan World Picture. Between them they implied a sense of general violent destruction,

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<sup>117</sup> For Peter Brook's engagement with Herbert Marcuse's Freudian-Marxist theory of "liberation" complex see James A. Steintrager's essay, "Liberating Sade." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* Vol. 18, No. 2 (2005): 351-379. The point is that contrary to Sinfield insistence on a cultural materialist understanding of "the political," Brook's efforts with the RSC and subsequent work productively intersected with the New Left of the era. 'Merging' Peter Hall and Peter Brook with respect to the development of "Royal Shakespeare" is warranted; to equate Brook's project with Hall's as Sinfield appears to do is less persuasive.

proceeding both from uncontrollable political systems and from mysterious inner compulsions.<sup>118</sup>

This “Hall-Brook convergence” perfected the grammar of “relevance,” the latter contributing a bold Marcusean note to bolster the otherwise old-fashioned humanism that has been Brook’s abiding passion as an inter-culturalist theatre artist. Displacing, but not wholly eliminating, the increasingly classicist language of Hall, Brook provided subsequent RSC directors with a celebratory and utopian counter-narrative. The practice of engaging contemporary parallels in Shakespeare need not remain stuck in Kott’s darkest visions of history (perfectly realized by Brook’s own 1962 *King Lear* with Paul Scofield) but could render Marcusean gestures towards a future that transcended the politics of the “Great Mechanism.”

Sinfield’s analysis is poised to acknowledge the that RSC’s “proclamation and abrogation of the political” nevertheless underwrote a certain measure of real social criticism to the extent that “Royal Shakespeare” helped legitimate the high-tide of the counter culture.<sup>119</sup> As he admits, “the Hall-Brook convergence of the 1960s, confused as it was, grew up in direct dialogue with the political conditions of the decade.” “But since then,” he argues:

It has seemed that the mannerisms of radical relevance are being reused without even that initial purchase in social change, and without even the original analysis, limited as it was, of how they were supposed to signify. The strongest evidence of this tendency is productions which are intended to address political and historical matters, and which in some respects do that, but which at the same

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<sup>118</sup> Sinfield, 188.

<sup>119</sup> Sinfield, 195.

time make contradictory gestures towards a purportedly transcendent reality.<sup>120</sup>

At its most “opportunist,” Sinfield concludes, later iterations of the RSC have succumbed to “deploying the battery of staging devices developed during the 1960s for merely immediate effect.”<sup>121</sup>

Sinfield’s reference to “staging devices” refers to the most visible accretion to “Royal Shakespeare” since its original construction, a practice that Dennis Kennedy has called “eclectic stylization” or the relocation of Shakespeare’s plays, often with simultaneous reference to multiple times and places.<sup>122</sup> Kennedy alternately attributes its popularity, particularly among creators of “foreign Shakespeare,” to a resurgence of interest in the dramaturgy of Bertolt Brecht and the emergence of postmodernism – a movement that combined a suspicion towards the “ideal of [a] unified production” with a “delight in transtemporality.”<sup>123</sup> As for the rhetorical implications of the RSC’s employment of eclectic stylization, Kennedy argues that its staging of “transtemporality” and use of modern dress, for example, have functioned “to produce a startling immediacy” and boosted the force of Shakespeare’s “political questioning.”<sup>124</sup> Kennedy’s interpretation of the RSC, in other words, suggests that Peter Hall’s “radical” agenda for the Company remains in force.

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Kennedy, Dennis. *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-century Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001: 164.

<sup>123</sup> Kennedy, *Looking*, 144. Elsewhere, Kennedy discusses the work of German director Peter Zadek to identify a third motive for employing eclectic stylization: *epater le bourgeoisie*. Referring to his now infamous production of *Measure for Measure*, Kennedy notes that by his own admission, Zadek “discarded any responsibility to an objective analysis of the text, and decided that he was chiefly interested in provoking German audiences out of their respectful lethargy to the classics.” (*Ibid.*, 267.)

<sup>124</sup> Kennedy, Dennis. “Shakespeare Without His Language.” In *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*, James C. Bulman, ed. London and New York: Routledge, 1996: 133-148.

Kennedy may be correct in his analysis of certain, individual shows the RSC mounted. However, Chambers has argued that Sinfield's description of "Royal Shakespeare" is a better framework for interpreting the average application of eclectic stylization to the Company's exceptionally high-volume of performance. "Relevance" was the artistic and institutional imperative at the Company. Consequently, he writes, "The RSC tried to see Shakespeare's plays as new plays and regarded their geographical and chronological setting as a matter of imaginative preference rather than historical authenticity."<sup>125</sup> Instead of intending to engender a critical awareness on the part of the audience, the "house style" of eclecticism produces "an a-historicism that stressed similarities between the present and the past, placing the audience in a line of continuity within history, rather than emphasizing the differences and drawing attention to the possibilities of change."<sup>126</sup> This, of course, is exactly Sinfield's notion of the RSC's aesthetic propensity to 'abrogate' the political.

By the 1980s, this combination of Shakespeare + relevance + eclecticism had, in Chambers' estimation, declined into "a ragbag of stage clichés": Prostitutes sit with their legs wide apart, emphasized cleavage is used as if conveying historical authority, clowns speak with a 'provincial' accent, kings with Received Pronunciation, and the uneducated crowd in yokel's 'mummerset.'<sup>127</sup> "Such a 'theatricalization' of social relationships," Chambers concludes, "underpins a view that sees within history an unchanging core beyond and indifferent to class or other distinctions."<sup>128</sup> This representation of history, consistent with the ideological origins of the modern RSC in the 1960s, has now become an artistic short-hand for directors and designers,

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<sup>125</sup> Chambers, Colin. *Inside the Royal Shakespeare Company: Creativity and the Institution*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004: 119.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*.

and a pleasure approved and expected by the Company's target audience. By the time Sher and Doran arrived in Stratford, "relevance" had evolved into a reliable set of techniques whose political implications had become almost innocuous.

### *Negotiating "Connection" and "Relevance"*

All three major components of "Royal Shakespeare" I have discussed – "relevance," "rescripting," and "eclectic stylization" – constituted the primary aesthetic materials employed by Antony Sher in his effort to "connect" with South Africa through *Titus Andronicus*. Also pertinent was a fourth component of this formation, to be introduced in the next chapter: the RSC's signature approach to voice and speech training. Even though *Titus* was actually co-produced by the Royal National Theatre, I shall argue that Sher and Doran's production was an attempt to transplant ('plant' is too strong a word) the RSC flag on foreign soil. That this was also Sher's natal soil understandably gave the actor some hope that he could accomplish this feat, an optimism which was only intensified by the fact that the "Royal Shakespeare" had, by the 1980s, become a stolidly centrist cultural practice.<sup>129</sup> After his meteoric stage celebrity with the

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<sup>129</sup> There is a significant, even glaring, error of omission in Sinfield's analysis of the RSC that bears remarking upon. If "Royal Shakespeare" is a useful treatment of the Company's theatrical formation for producing Elizabethan drama, it does not encompass the whole spectrum of the RSC's identity. On the contrary, the presentation of modern and new plays has, until very recently, been an equally important activity of the RSC. The decision to produce contemporary work was a central plank of Peter Hall's "radical" vision. In turn, the RSC expanded to include a permanent presence in London where it staged a number artistically and socially challenging plays starting with *Marat/Sade* (1964). If most RSC productions of Shakespeare fell short of realizing the political urgency than the Company's slogan of "relevance" promised, one should not underestimate the dialectical role that its custody of the Bard played in subsidizing, propagating and legitimating might be thought of as the 'left hand' of the organization. One cannot accurately evaluate the ideological work of the RSC by focusing solely upon "Royal Shakespeare." One could even view the RSC's signature deployment of Shakespeare as a method for both maintaining and calibrating the Company's "connection" to its British publics, sometimes staging Shakespeare to offer social criticism, other times employing "eclectic stylization" in a populist manner of broader appeal. This balance of connection and criticism is quite visible in the career of an actor like Antony Sher, whose play credits for the Company during the 1980s, for example, display something like this pattern: Mikhail Bulgakov's *Moliere*, *King Lear* (1982); David Edgar's *Maydays*, *Tartuffe* (1983); *Richard III* (1984); Peter Barnes' *Red Noses*, (1985); *Twelfth Night* (1987); *The Merchant of Venice*, Athol Fugard's *Hello & Goodbye* (1988); Peter Flannery's *Singer* (1989). Paradoxically, this

RSC, Sher probably had his own insight into Stratford's appeal to a broad swath of the British middle-class.

But was this the same audience who attended the Market Theatre? Sher knew there were important differences. In the highly stratified society of South Africa, theatre was more of an elite entertainment. Sher himself was the child of an upper-class enclave of Cape Town; Johannesburg's northern suburbs were cut from a similar cloth. What Sher did not know, and where *Sinfield* might have been of some use to him, is that the RSC's "brand" of performing Shakespeare is freighted with extensive ideological baggage derived from a social history quite specific to post-war Britain. Rather than seeing "Royal Shakespeare" as a theatrical formation, we shall read how Sher's attitude towards the RSC was expressive of "the ideology of the aesthetic." For Sher, the RSC's approach to Shakespeare was simply "world-class" and possessed universal authority.<sup>130</sup> South African audiences would – or would *have to* – recognize this truth.

Sher would not attempt this project alone, of course. To assist him, his less famous collaborator, partner and Englishman Gregory Doran would direct *Titus*. Almost all of Doran's professional career to that point had been spent at the RSC (he remains there, as of 2008, as an Associate Artistic Director). An apt pupil of "Royal Shakespeare," his participation in this production makes my analysis of *Sinfield* almost obligatory because, as I shall demonstrate, Doran virtually quoted the discourse of this theatrical formation verbatim. Or to be more precise, in Doran's correct, student-like voice we hear what may have previously been rhetorical

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criticism of *Sinfield* possess less traction for my use of "Royal Shakespeare" in this study, since Sher and Doran's *Titus* was staged outside of this dialectically rich social context.

<sup>130</sup> Sher's indignant query, "How can the people of Johannesburg not be interested to see the Royal Shakespeare Company perform?," was carried by news outlets around the world. Pearson, Bryan. "Post-Apartheid Apathy Sparks a J-Burg Row." *Variety* 19 June 1995: 83.

improvisations by Hall and Brook *as* discourse. Sher may have intended to return to South Africa as a Walzerian “local judge,” but in Doran, he also brought in tow, if not an “imperial judge,” then a colonial administrator well-versed in the “universal principles” of producing Shakespeare. In the months leading up to the premiere of *Titus*, the subject of Chapter 2, Sher endeavored “to connect them to the local culture.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Walzer , *Interpretation*, 39.

## 2.0 Advance Publicity

For several months prior to the South African opening of *Titus Andronicus*, the Johannesburg metropolitan area was fairly deluged with advance publicity promoting both the homecoming of Antony Sher and the production's artistic debt to the Royal Shakespeare Company—the latter selling-point more closely associated with Gregory Doran.<sup>132</sup> Sher's narrative of repatriation, succinctly encapsulated in his essay for the London *Times* entitled "Homecoming," was fully consistent with the actor's refashioning of himself as a "connected critic" during the late 1980s. However, Doran's emphasis on his ties with the RSC, and on that institution's formula for creating "relevant" Shakespeare, displayed some of the more distressing tendencies of *disconnection* presented by Michael Walzer in the previous chapter. Consequently, the tensions between these two discourses created the conditions for a "perfect storm" of mutually exclusive interpretive frameworks for their prospective theatre audiences.

### *Reading Advance Publicity*

In his essay "Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance,"<sup>133</sup> theatre historian Marvin Carlson has provided a useful methodology for interpreting the various ways in which advance publicity can inform audience reception. As Carlson asserts, a reception study that remains exclusively focused on "the text and [on] the performance" at the expense of "publicity, programs, and reviews" will almost certainly fail to present a full picture of why a given

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<sup>132</sup> Although Doran was credited as the production's director, Sher reserved the title as "co-conceiver" of *Titus*. See Doran's Program Note. Market Theatre, Johannesburg: Mar. 1995.

<sup>133</sup> Carlson, Marvin. "Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance." In *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, Thomas Postlewait and Bruce McConachie, eds. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989: 82-97.

production was successful with a specific audience, or not.<sup>134</sup> Publicity and programs, Carlson specifies, are “message-bearing constructs” that “constitute for most audiences the most obvious first exposure to the possible world of the performance they are going to see.”<sup>135</sup> Rather than view these ‘messages’ as accidental emanations of the various collaborators involved in creating a theatre event, Carlson insists that one should treat them as “consciously produced [...] as devices for stimulating and channeling the desires and the interpretive strategies of the spectator.”<sup>136</sup> Theatre programs should be similarly read as “providing a certain orientation for audiences [that] unquestionably affects their reading” of the performance.<sup>137</sup>

Theatre institutions do not produce plays for all audiences and tastes. “Well aware of this dynamic,” writes Carlson, producers “attempt to conceive and to distribute their publicity so that it will be most effective in reaching the audience considered most likely to support this particular production.”<sup>138</sup> According to Carlson’s adaptation of reader-response theory, the study of reception requires the theatre historian to construct a profile of the “model reader” who, “before even entering the theatre, or even buying a ticket [...] must be targeted and sought by appropriate publicity.”<sup>139</sup> In practice, publicists and other marketing staff have a keen understanding of who

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<sup>134</sup> Carlson, 90.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

their target audiences are, who they are not, and what types of entertainment are profitable for them to promote.<sup>140</sup>

However, in instances where theatre managers propose to stage performances that challenge their target audience's expectations, Carlson notes that publicity and programs often provide them with "anticipatory suggestions" about how to read the performance in ways that would still entertain or edify them.<sup>141</sup> As an example, Carlson references the program notes director Peter Sellars writes for his often provocative reimaginations of operas and Greek tragedies:

[They] clearly are created to prepare the audience, violently if necessary, for his new reading of familiar texts. Interpretive essays by the a director or dramaturg often seek to condition audience response in an even more programmatic way, and such conditioning need not even take the form of discursive analysis.<sup>142</sup>

Sellars' deliberate preparation of his audience is evident in the directive that accompanied his 1993 production of Aeschylus's *The Persians*. Heavily adapted by collaborator Robert Auletta and reset in post-Gulf War Iraq, the director wrote: "By humanizing the enemy, Aeschylus begins to suggest that we have much to learn about ourselves through the eyes of others, and that what we think we know about others should be questioned and expanded."<sup>143</sup> In this way, Sellars

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<sup>140</sup> There is an extensive body of research into historical marketing strategies for theatre and other forms of entertainment. See: Butsch, Richard. *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.

<sup>141</sup> Carlson, 92.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

<sup>143</sup> Peter Sellar's program note was, with some revision, reprinted as the introduction to the published text of the script. Sellars, Peter and Robert Auletta. *The Persians: A Modern Version*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1993.

correctly anticipated the strong resistance of audiences to his sympathetic portrayal of Iraqis - and unflattering representation of the United States - by declaring that his intention was not to be anti-American but pro-humanist. This was a position of moral courage that he invited his critics to share.<sup>144</sup>

According to Carlson, there are extreme cases in which advance publicity fails to bridge the gap between what is presented on stage and the desires of the audience. As a result, there exists a “radical disjuncture between the horizon of expectations assumed by the production and that actually brought to the theatre by a community of readers.”<sup>145</sup> Carlson’s favorite example is the infamous case of the American premiere of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Billed in South Florida newspapers as “The Laugh *Sensation* of Two Continents,” the production, predictably, flopped.<sup>146</sup> The extreme pole of this disjuncture can be riot.

#### *Antony Sher as Publicist*

During the 1980s, Sher became an acknowledged master at self-marketing, publishing a large quantity of “message-bearing constructs” pertaining to his preparation and methods as an RSC actor. He wrote extensively about his most celebrated roles of that decade, including the Fool in *King Lear* (1982), Richard III (1985) and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* (1987). By far, the best-known of Sher’s

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<sup>144</sup> “Similarly, it might be argued that Sellars’ moral courage was no less than that of Aeschylus in bringing the unseen victims before an audience of victors. It may even be that if Sellars’s intention was to disturb and distort the unmindful, American collective memory accruing to the Gulf War, here too a case might be made that his aim was analogous to that of Aeschylus. Most critics, however, resented the imposition of a simplistic anti-Americanism onto a classic.” Favorini, Attilio. “History, Collective Memory, and Aeschylus’ Persians.” *Theatre Journal* Vol. 55, No. 1 (March 2003): 99-111.

<sup>145</sup> Carlson, 94.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

publicity-generating texts, *Year of the King* (1986),<sup>147</sup> was written in connection the most famous of these performances, his “black spider” Richard III. Recently published in a second edition, Sher’s book is now commonly taught in the curricula of actor-training programs throughout the world. Indeed, Sher’s unique celebrity as an authority on acting Shakespeare remains connected with the success of this work.

Written as a series of diary entries, the style of *Year of the King* can be described as one of “public intimacy,” the phrase that performance scholar Joseph Roach has used to describe the phenomenon of celebrity’s mixture of “ultimate unavailability” plus the “illusion of proximity” generated by such “spun-off products” as interviews, photographs, memoirs and other media.<sup>148</sup> As author of many of his own ‘products,’ the actor’s mode of address is consistently, even dangerously, confessional in nature. This is a characteristic that has won Sher many fans, but also a fair share of vocal detractors; the personal nature of his self-presentation has sometimes rendered him vulnerable to ridicule, particularly early in his acting career with the RSC.<sup>149</sup>

*Year of the King* established a template that he would recycle for later production journals. Resisting the common wisdom that an actor should “hide the work” of their preparations, Sher often recounts *all* of the research that he conducts for a role. He is wont to explain how the process of building a given character serves as a therapeutic journey for working through traumatic events that have shaped his identity. As a talented sketch artist and painter,

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<sup>147</sup> Sher, Antony. *Year of the King: An Actor’s Diary and Sketchbook*. London: Chatto & Windus/Hogarth Press, 1985.

<sup>148</sup> Roach, Joseph. *It*. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 2007: 44.  
Additional quotation: “It, on its way to celebrity, constructs itself in imaginative space inspired by the performer but ratified and amplified by the audience: having It depends on some degree on being known for having It. It, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, but not solely there. It is a resource that audiences locate and consume, but also renew. It is a public trust or utility, like the statuary on courthouses and city halls, but mobile and dynamic, like electricity.” (“It”. *Theatre Journal* Vol. 56, No. 4 (Dec. 2004): 555-568.)

<sup>149</sup> Hassel, R. Chris, Jr. “Context and Charisma: The Sher-Alexander *Richard III* and Its Reviewers.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* Vol. 36, No. 5 (1985): 630 – 643.

many of Sher's published texts also include images that trace the development of his characters from initial conception to their final realization on stage.<sup>150</sup>

In 1988, Sher deployed all of these elements (research, trauma, sketches) to serve as advance publicity for the production that signaled his "coming out" as a white South African: the role of Johnnie in Athol Fugard's *Hello & Goodbye*, produced by the RSC at the Barbican.

In a series of articles written for the *London Times*, Sher took his first baby steps out of the South African closet he had built for himself out of shame and political outrage. Much of his preparation was devoted to the problem of how to speak with an accurate South African dialect. This was no small question. *Eleven* major languages exist in South Africa, and among them are numerous sub-dialects and vernaculars based on region, class, and ethnicity or tribe. There is no such thing as a generic "South African accent." Sharpened by decades of enforced "separateness," each language also carries strong connotations and moral histories particular to each speaker. While many of these distinctions may be impossible for a foreign auditor to detect, within that country, these sounds can possess profound social implications. Language serves as a repository of memory about how any given group fit into the apartheid hierarchy of benefits and punishments; a South African's way of speaking absolutely classifies him.<sup>151</sup>

For *Hello & Goodbye*, Sher's obstacle for the vocalization of Johnnie concerned a sub-dialect of Afrikaans spoken by a group known as "poor whites": a rural and, by reputation, culturally reactionary stratum of Afrikanerdom that figures prominently in Athol Fugard's oeuvre.<sup>152</sup> Sher reported that the true impediment to mastering this dialect was not technical, but

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<sup>150</sup> For an example, see: Sher, Antony. *Characters: Paintings, Drawings, and Sketches*. London: N. Hern Books, 1989.

<sup>151</sup> Mesthrie, Rajend. *Language in South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.

<sup>152</sup> Wertheim, Albert. *The Dramatic Art of Athol Fugard: From South Africa to the World*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002: 44-51.

moral. He had to permit himself to empathetically enter into the lives of these “poor whites.” This was difficult for him to do because they were a class of people whom he had grown up despising. Therefore, the journey of discovering the voice of Johnnie required him to undergo a personal exploration – and purgation – of his own prejudices.

Sher credited Fugard’s *Notebooks* with liberating his perception of “poor whites” and allowing him to see them as “beautiful,” if “scarred” and “broken” human beings.<sup>153</sup> He expressed to the reader that his personal task in this production would be to eliminate any trace of pejorative caricature from his representation of Johnnie. “Since Athol writes from a position of love,” Sher concluded he would “not demonstrate him, not mimic him, not patronize him,” but rather, endeavor to “climb inside that mind and transplant [Johnnie] into my own brain.”<sup>154</sup> Anticipating the hostility towards Afrikaners that existed at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle, Sher used his publicity in the *Times* to encourage his audiences to look upon these white South Africans in a more sympathetic light. The actor’s process for achieving this state of magnanimity would provide a psychological framework for his public to follow. British theatre reviews tended to confirm that this was the effect of Sher’s performance.<sup>155</sup>

### *Coming Home in the Press*

The year after Antony Sher appeared in *Hello & Goodbye*, F.W. de Klerk became the State President of South Africa, rapidly setting in motion changes that would bring about the end of apartheid. In early 1990, de Klerk’s government lifted the ban on all opposition political

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<sup>153</sup> Sher, Antony. “Inside the Poor White Mind.” *The Times* 23 Aug. 1988: 12.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> Hoyle, Martin. “Hello and Goodbye.” *Financial Times* 8 Aug 1988: 13. Note: the reviews were generally lukewarm towards about the merits of Athol Fugard’s script.

parties, including the African National Congress. On February 11th, Nelson Mandela was released from twenty-seven years of imprisonment, heralding the end of white minority rule and the beginning of multi-racial democracy. Although life in the black townships witnessed historic levels of violence (primarily between supporters of the African National Congress and the Inkatha Freedom Party), the Afrikaners decision to peacefully surrender their power was hailed internationally as “the South African miracle.”<sup>156</sup> Even horrific events elsewhere on the continent, such as the Rwandan genocide of 1994, did not detract from the euphoria that surrounded what was universally extolled as the birth of the New South Africa. Nelson Mandela was sworn in as that country's first black president on May 10th, 1994.

Sher intensified his public identification as a South African during this era by writing three novels set in that country and by increasing his involvement with anti-apartheid groups in London. He also returned to visit his family in Cape Town more frequently, several times inviting his lover and fellow RSC actor Gregory Doran to accompany him. Then, in the spring of 1994, Sher and Doran were able to travel to South Africa in a professional capacity as members of a theatre entourage sent to Johannesburg by the Royal National Theatre. Headlined by the recently knighted Ian McKellen, this group of British theatre artists held a week-long residency at the Market Theatre. Aside from attending a wide array of political and cultural functions, Sher and Doran were tasked with holding a series of free acting workshops for Johannesburg's theatre community.

At the conclusion of this expedition in British public diplomacy, Antony Sher created another diary-style report that was published by the London *Times* under the title

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<sup>156</sup>  
2003.

Giliomee, Hermann Buhr. *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*. Charlottesville: Virginia UP,

“Homecoming.”<sup>157</sup> This was also his first statement about his intention to return to Johannesburg to star in a production of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, under Doran's direction. With excerpts reprinted in South African newspapers, this article was Sher’s first act of advance publicity for the show that would premiere in nine months’ time at the Market Theatre. “Homecoming” is remarkable for how consistently it seems to have served the project as a policy guideline; both Sher and Doran effectively quoted from the document during subsequent interviews and, years later, reprinted it nearly verbatim in *Woza Shakespeare!*<sup>158</sup>

If Sher’s “public intimacy” prior to 1994 betrayed an evolving attitude towards Afrikaners and the South Africa they had made, his perspective had become entirely celebratory. As Michael Walzer asserts, connection requires not only public identification with a community, but moreover, an affirmation of it. For Sher, this heightened relationship was expressed symbolically through his citizenship papers. Having ceremoniously burned his old South African passport in 1982<sup>159</sup>, Sher nervously applied for a new one in order to vote in the 1994 elections. It was approved immediately, and was to have deeper emotional consequences than the actor could have predicted.

Sher begins “Homecoming” by conveying the joy he experienced upon making use of his renewed passport:

Saturday: Joburg Airport. This is my first chance to use my new South African passport – in the New South Africa. I’m so bloody proud of it. It took years to ditch my original citizenship but in

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<sup>157</sup> Sher, Antony. “Homecoming.” *The Times* 19 Nov. 1994: [Features] 1.

<sup>158</sup> Sher, Antony and Gregory Doran. *Woza Shakespeare!* London: Methuen, 1996: 8-10.

<sup>159</sup> Sher, Antony. *Beside Myself*. London: Arrow, 2002: 57-58.

April, on the day before overseas voting in those historic elections,  
I was suddenly able to retrieve it.<sup>160</sup>

Later during his trip, Sher offered the ultimate affirmation of South Africa, writing: “I stand outside the Market, breathing the fresh, hot afternoon air. This country is starting to smell cleaner than home. Mind you, where is home now?”<sup>161</sup> The final question reflects a possibility that Sher repeatedly voiced over the next year. Would he return permanently to South Africa? From *Woza Shakespeare!* it seems apparent that he was strongly considering such a move; yet his statements to the press remained vague.<sup>162</sup> In either case, the intensity of Sher’s publicized reconnection with South Africa was palpable and must have been deeply gratifying to his Johannesburg readers.<sup>163</sup>

### *The Workshops*

The most transformative experiences that Antony Sher had during the RNT’s residency at the Market Theatre occurred during the acting workshops he conducted with Gregory Doran. “The good news,” wrote Sher, “is that the response was overwhelming. The bad news is that the whites far outnumber the blacks.”<sup>164</sup> Most of the sessions were devoted to playing Shakespeare. Since the majority of the attendees had little experience in performing Shakespeare or speaking his verse, language became the first obstacle that the South African actors encountered. As Sher

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<sup>160</sup> Sher, *Homecoming*, 16.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>162</sup> Sher and Doran, 44-45.

<sup>163</sup> “Maybe all the frustrations in the UK over the last few years have been leading to this moment. I feel very emotional, particularly when an actress from the course comes over to say goodbye. Her words have more significance than she realizes: ‘Thank you for coming home.’” Sher, *Homecoming*, 20.

<sup>164</sup> Sher, *Homecoming*, 16. [Barney Simon tells Sher why]. “Some are intimidated, some hostile . . . they’ve had so many years of white culture . . . and some simply can’t afford to come along – they’re not being paid.”

observed, “the first instinct of the local actors is to speak Shakespeare in an odd, posh English accent, making the verse very lifeless.”<sup>165</sup> To Sher’s unhappy surprise, these South Africans held Shakespeare synonymous with England.

A breakthrough moment occurred, however, when one white actor demanded, “to find a way of doing Shakespeare ‘using my own African-ness.’”<sup>166</sup> The declaration caused Sher to sit “upright, fascinated;”<sup>167</sup> suddenly confronted with a shared wish, albeit one he had repressed during the many years he spent in his South African closet. Was it possible to simultaneously be true to his African origins and a good servant of the Bard?

Sher made it clear this incident summoned complicated prejudices which, as in the obstacle of playing the “poor white” Johnnie, were formed during his Cape Town childhood. While he applauded the individual performer’s desire to personalize Shakespeare, he also admitted to being “in no position to criticize” the majority of actors who awkwardly adopted “received pronunciation” (RP) for their readings.<sup>168</sup> Sher continued:

I buried my own South African accent a quarter of a century ago, soon after I arrived in Britain, a naïve 19 year-old. Discovering that this thing called apartheid, just part of normal life back home, was actually a terrible aberration, I became so ashamed of who I was, I resolved to hide my identity.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

Therefore, Sher himself adopted an English accent while a drama student at the Douglas-Webber Academy in the late 1960s, not only as a matter of his professionalization as an actor, but as form of exorcizing personal shame as well.

Doran's response to the South African actor who wanted to use his "African-ness" was also pivotal to Sher's analysis. Referring to his training at the RSC, particularly with John Barton, Doran informed the workshop members that there was no historical warrant for employing RP when speaking Shakespeare. "Shakespeare's actors never spoke like this," Doran explained, "Their accent had rolling *r*'s and guttural *g*'s, closer to a Celtic accent – or even an Afrikaans one – than the Queen's English."<sup>170</sup> Later, Patsy Rodenburg would confirm Doran's assessment, decrying the fact that RP had become "vocal imperialism" and should actively be discarded by former subject countries of the British Empire, such as South Africa - this is a topic to which we shall soon return.

Back in their hotel room later that day, Sher reported: "Greg and I become very fired by the idea of doing Shakespeare in this country. Elizabethan and African rhythms are strangely compatible . . . the violence and beauty in both."<sup>171</sup> In order to tease out these similarities and South Africanize the performances of the local actors, the pair devised a series of new exercises to be applied to the next day's workshop. Sher described the events that ensued at length in the same article:

Greg and I experiment with a specifically South African way of playing Shakespeare, using the messenger scene from *Antony and Cleopatra*. After working on the verse-structure and the meaning

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<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

of the text, we encourage the actors to use their own accents and experiences: Cleopatra as a nouveau-riche Afrikaner or Jewish princess; the messenger as a fast-talking Cape Coloured, or down-trodden Zulu. These are only crude stepping-stones, but now the scene becomes startling and funny as written. I'm exhilarated by these sessions – liberated also – addressing all directives to myself as much as the group. Let's stop being ashamed of our voices! Listen, just listen, to the wonderful noises we can make!<sup>172</sup>

The following day, Sher and Doran pushed their 'experiment' further by having the actors work specifically on *Titus Andronicus*, "a play that Greg's passionate about" because its "hair-raising election, bizarre violence, and black-is-beautiful speeches could have been written for South Africa."<sup>173</sup> So, despite the fact that all of the black actors had dropped out of the workshops by the time they began performing scenes from *Titus* ("we find ourselves in the crazy situation of having to ask a white actor to play Aaron"), Sher wrote, "nevertheless our South African-Shakespeare experiments have now led to serious discussions with the Market about us returning to do a full production."<sup>174</sup>

The piece ended with the good news that the Market Theatre had approved *Titus*, but this was not the most significant revelation Sher offered his reading public. A new stage in his celebrity had been announced, one which promised to suture his divided loyalties to a career revolving around one of England's most sacred icons and his origins in a country more defined

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<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

by its barbarity than its contributions to ‘civilization’: “I’m going to be acting in South Africa for the first time, and in a South African voice.”<sup>175</sup> In less than a year, Sher’s personal and professional identities promised to be reconciled.

*Patsy Rodenburg and “Vocal Imperialism”*

One of the revelations that Antony Sher made years later is that voice teacher Patsy Rodenburg was also a participant in the Market Theatre workshops and, moreover, that her notion of “vocal imperialism” was central to his “experiments” with having Johannesburg actors speak Shakespeare in their natural dialects. While Sher has generally and generously acknowledged his professional gratitude to Rodenburg’s practice of voice and speech training, it can be argued that Sher and Doran consistently downplayed the extraordinary influence Rodenburg’s working methods and cultural agenda on their production of *Titus Andronicus*. Since Sher, in “Homecoming,” only mentioned Rodenburg as fellow passenger on a sight-seeing safari to a South African game reserve, it would be incorrect to claim that her theory of “vocal imperialism” was an explicit part of Sher and Doran’s advance publicity for the show. However, so directly did the pair draw on both her theories and techniques, one should see Patsy Rodenburg as the source of the “hidden transcript” behind their public rhetoric, as well as their work with the cast of *Titus*.<sup>176</sup>

Theatre scholar Ric Knowles argues that Rodenburg’s philosophy of voice and speech training represents the final statement of the RSC’s long-standing commitment to “relevant” Shakespeare. As a prolific writer, and author of such titles as *The Right to Speak* (1992), *The Need for Words* (1993) and *Speaking Shakespeare* (2002), among others, Rodenburg has

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<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996: 24.

fashioned a specific discourse of voice training and its possible relationship to the performance of social change. As Knowles explains, the “radical” energies of the RSC took a different, more esoteric path to relevance during the late 1980s. Largely ignored because of their work’s lack of visibility, and also because of a persistent gender bias associated with their function, the RSC’s vocal coaches have supplied, Knowles claims, the last link in the Company’s chain to Jan Kott.<sup>177</sup>

Incorporating the insights of another, influential Pole – Jerzy Grotowski – Cicelly Berry, long-time Head of Voice at the RSC, was the first to advance a theory of vocal training that promised to “liberate” the spiritual potential of Shakespeare, his contemporary actors and their audiences through a single speech methodology. Knowles credits Berry with initiating a new approach at the RSC that was, “in part, a reaction to what was perceived to be the classicism, racism, and elitism of earlier voice and speech training,” that was further defined against “‘proper’ accents and manners.”<sup>178</sup> Galvanized by her work on Peter Brook’s defining *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Berry called for the development of verse-speaking that discarded Received Pronunciation and sought to “free” each actor’s “natural voice.”<sup>179</sup> This was an application of Grotowski’s *via negativa* to an aspect of language instruction that had historically been the site of extraordinarily coercive practices (both literally, through the punitive regime of traditional elocutionary training, and in the Foucauldian sense, as a formation of power/knowledge where upper classes of ‘Englishness’ was manufactured and policed). Grotowski’s notion that authenticity in performance is best achieved not “from a collection of

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<sup>177</sup> Knowles, Richard Paul. “Shakespeare, Voice, and Ideology: Interrogating the Natural Voice.” In *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*, James C. Bulman, ed. London and New York: Routledge, 1996: 105.

<sup>178</sup> Knowles, 92.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

skills, but an eradication of blocks,”<sup>180</sup> was applied to Kott’s theory of “relevance” to create a synthetic premise: that it is only the actor who has freed his or her natural voice who is capable of liberating Shakespeare’s voice in all of its time-bending immediacy. Or as Knowles explicates Berry’s main argument, vocal freedom will “restore a ‘natural,’ ‘childlike’ access to ‘self,’” and a “psychological ‘depth’ that puts them in touch with something that is at once their true (individual) selves, and our common (universal) humanity.”<sup>181</sup> Audiences who then hear the symphony of these unblocked voices will be similarly, vicariously, liberated, too. Was this not the ecstasy created by Brook’s *Dream*?<sup>182</sup>

A generation younger than Berry, Knowles writes that Patsy Rodenburg’s recent popularity remains indebted to the former’s basic assumptions about speech training and its relationship to Shakespeare, but in “the cultural and political climate of the 1990s,” Rodenburg “constructed differently [...] the pressures which constrain freedom of expression.”<sup>183</sup>

Specifically of her influential training manual/manifesto *The Right to Speak*, Knowles writes:

The whole book, in fact, rests on the conflation of different senses of the word freedom,” the effect of which is to construct “freeing the natural voice” as a route to social and political liberation and empowerment. There is incipient recognition here that gender and

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<sup>180</sup> Grotowski, Jerzy. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 2002: 17.

<sup>181</sup> Knowles, 97.

<sup>182</sup> Berry published explanations of her voice and speech exercises that were designed to trigger and refine these theatre experiences in a series of books since the early 1970s, at the same time she became she became Head of Voice at the RSC. They are recounted in Berry’s seminal *Voice and the Actor*. (London: Harrap, 1973). Additionally, Ric Knowles commented: “I would argue that the influence of Berry on the RSC has been significantly more direct than that of Brook, or arguably of any other single figure, though as a voice coach (gendered female) she has been less celebrated.” (Knowles, 95.) See also: Linklater, Kristen. *Freeing Shakespeare’s Voice: The Actor’s Guide to Talking the Text*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993.

<sup>183</sup> Knowles, 104.

class distinctions are constructed, and that repression often functions hegemonically by internalizing behaviors as “natural” that are, in fact, learned.<sup>184</sup>

This hegemonizing tendency of certain clusters of gendered and classed formations of English is what Rodenburg calls “vocal imperialism. . . . the dominant forms of spoken English that are deemed right and acceptable and which have been used in the process of colonization.”<sup>185</sup> This is Received Pronunciation, a dialect of spoken English that was formed by the English upper class in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and institutionalized by Oxford, Cambridge, and that country’s “public” boarding schools.

Knowles refrains from gauging the full force of her polemic, which ultimately pursues its “imperialism” metaphor to what might be called its post-colonial conclusion. Looking more closely at *The Right to Speak*, one reads that the problem of hegemony starts, according to Rodenburg, with dialects. In her first chapter, which is entitled “Declaring Your Vocal Rights,” she asserts:

As soon as we open our mouths and speak we are judged. Just like a fingerprint a voice-print is an almost infallible form of identification.<sup>186</sup> [ . . . ] So we are instantly known to others by our own voice and dialect, and we are actually censored from having the right to speak certain things.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Rodenburg, Patsy. *The Right To Speak*. London: Methuen, 1992: 105.

<sup>186</sup> Rodenburg, *Right*, 4.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

This form of ‘censorship’ is rampant in Anglophone theatre; it also introjected as shame and self-censorship. Therefore, Rodenburg has adopted the following point of view:

It seems to me particularly demeaning and criminal, for instance, to tell anyone that their mother sound or accent is not good enough to speak great texts. I think it is commonly agreed nowadays that Shakespeare’s actors spoke in a variety of regional accents, many of them rough and broad and not the least bit elegant. So why is it that so many American actors, for example, in this day and age still mimic a so-called British voice and accent when they speak? Solid American accents, good British regional ones, are every bit as expressive as the refined ones we try to impose on any classical text. And the former two work extremely well when the text is given the right to return to its accentual roots.<sup>188</sup>

Her next book, *The Need for Words*, includes a chapter entitled “To RP or not RP,” in which Rodenburg, like Berry, explicitly calls for Received Pronunciation to be dropped as the preferred dialect for speaking Shakespeare. She goes further, however, and champions the work of Barry Rutter’s Northern Broadside theatre company, which performs Shakespeare in the strong Midlands accent presumed to have also been the natural speech of the Warwickshire-born author.<sup>189</sup> From an aesthetic perspective, though, national and regional variations of English, as typically spoken by Anglo-American whites may still be insufficient to recreate the bold orality of Shakespeare and his time.

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<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, 5-6.

<sup>189</sup> Rodenburg, Patsy. *The Need for Words: Voice and the Text*. London: Routledge, 1993: 76. Rodenburg noted elsewhere: “Some older theatre audiences, however, still gasp in horror during intervals when they react to the way ‘modern’ actors speak the great dramatic texts.” For example, during a tour of Michael Bogdanov’s English Shakespeare Company tour of *War of the Roses*, these audiences “objected to the fact that the Northumberland lords spoke in heavy Northumberland accents!”

Indeed, if one wants to hear the true sounds of ‘free’ and ‘natural’ speech, one must be prepared to cross both the color bar, and the border dividing the developed world from the underdeveloped. “I have taught in cultures that are far from being white and affluent,”

Rodenburg shared:

What always intrigues me is how close other cultures and races are to both their breath and natural support, which never need to be summoned as they do in Anglo-Saxons. These people come from all sorts of places – Southern Europe, Africa, Asia, parts of America – yet they share one similarity. They are each more firmly rooted to the earth, each more in touch with the growth of feeling. They all have a great and compelling need to speak, they take it regularly and efficiently without suffering guilt or remorse, and fit comfortably within a community of voices. Most of all these people have what we in the West lack.<sup>190</sup>

Theatre scholar Dorothy Chansky in an academic book review was not wrong to call these Rousseau-esque musings intellectually “embarrassing.”<sup>191</sup> Rodenburg’s crude primitivism, and the unacknowledged Orientalism of her binary opposition between intellectual “Anglo-Saxons” and the more emotional darker ones is, in one sense, wildly inappropriate for an author whose stated objective is to counter centuries of Eurocentric hegemony. Yet this passage also, amply, makes Knowles’ point that Rodenburg’s approach to voice training is an “ideology,” and that as

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<sup>190</sup> Rodenburg, *Right*, 158.

<sup>191</sup> Chansky, Dorothy. Untitled review of *The Right to Speak: Working with the Voice* by Patsy Rodenburg and *Freeing Shakespeare’s Voice: The Actor’s Guide to Talking the Text* by Kristin Linklater. *Theatre Journal* Vol. 45, No. 3 (Oct. 1993): 79.

such, it has been persuasive because it has attracted practitioner-adherents who reproduce these ideas, and the practices associated with them, uncritically.

The persuasive force of Rodenburg's theory of "vocal imperialism" is also bolstered by its own genealogical inheritance from "Royal Shakespeare." The logic of her argument is both derivative and supplementary. Kott argued that the violence of the first half of the twentieth century had prepared Europeans to have an authentic experience of Shakespeare; the more institutions like the RSC strove for "relevance" to the times, the more authentic their representation of Shakespeare would be. Rodenburg's post-script effectively took the position that the "truth-event" of the World War II-era had worn off by the 1980s: Western Europe had returned to its culture of bourgeois desiccation, severing their Kottian link to the Shakespearean past. The link, though, had not been lost – it had merely shifted its moorings. Therefore, to properly hear Shakespeare as he had once been heard at the RSC during the 1960s, the Bard needed to be played by anybody else but the "Anglo-Saxon" English, i.e., those now best-equipped to "free Shakespeare's voice" are not deracinated white actors from the West, but the rainbow of historically subaltern peoples from the under-developed regions of the world. After they have "enlivened and enriched" his language, it can be "ingested back into the mother tongue" where it will revivify the humanity of the imperial metropolis.<sup>192</sup>

Rodenburg's political framing of what I shall call "relevant" embodiment is also "imprecise" and self-denying. The category of the "political" is particular and divisive. As such, this category belongs to what Peter Hall derided as the incipient "anarchy" of modernity. Shakespeare, on the other hand, is universal and, correctly channeled, produces an edenic "community of voices." The sine qua non of the Bard is not the epiphenomenon of his *logos*, but

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<sup>192</sup> Rodenburg, *Right*, 107.

his recovery as a vortex of pre-modern ritual. And “ritual,” in Rodenburg’s terms, is best discussed by reference to a therapeutic discourse of ecstatic *communitas*—a language that is still favored in the sub-discipline of performance studies over a Brechtian vocabulary of faction and conflict.<sup>193</sup>

Her substitution of therapeutic for political language comes through clearly throughout *The Right to Speak* when Rodenburg describes exercises she has invented to assist the white, Western actor to overcome the pathology of being “devoiced” by a life-time of accumulated “guilt,” over personal traumas and the constant knowledge of their complicity in structures of power.<sup>194</sup> “Deep voice work” provides the afflicted actor with a “cathartic” experience – a therapy that can only be provided by a specialist like Rodenburg because of the lack of collective, cultural alternatives in the West:

Most white, Anglo-Saxon rituals have become clinical, dead and boring. Perhaps when the modern age began to question whether God was dead a spark of breath was extinguished from our lives. Rituals are about the right to fiery beliefs, whether they are pagan or deeply religious ones, and they open the vocal instrument in ways most of us would deny is possible.<sup>195</sup>

Pre-modern rituals prevent the impacting of trauma and grief which constrict character by creating communal opportunities to “open the vocal instrument,” purge disturbances of the soul, and sustain “fiery,” *eudaimonic* beliefs. Shakespeare provides the psychically stunted subject of

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<sup>193</sup> For example, see Jill Dolan's theorization of *communitas* in *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 2005.

<sup>194</sup> Rodenburg, *Right*, 168.  
“They had been frozen into silence by the outrage and all felt the deepest guilt because of it.” (*Ibid*, 89.)

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

the contemporary West with an effective analogue to this ritual process. By sympathetically confronting devoiced modern audiences with liberated voices and unfettered humanity of Shakespeare, theatre artists can, out of discord, orchestrate a “community of voices” where the contingencies of social difference are dissolved into a common humanity.<sup>196</sup>

Just how inappropriate it would be to narrowly refer to this project as “political” is made clear by Rodenburg in *The Need for Words*:

Shakespeare’s brilliance is that he seems to be able to speak to us all over those hundreds of years and across every cultural bias and barrier. He is a genius because he understands our likenesses as well as our individuality.<sup>197</sup>

“Shakespeare’s plays,” she adds, “explore with enormous compassion and variety all the great dilemmas facing human beings in conflict.”<sup>198</sup> Radiating transcendent “compassion,” the performance of Shakespeare is, finally, a sacred office in the service of a postmodern *corpus mysticum* whose best-known advocate is, after all, Peter Brook.<sup>199</sup>

The impact of these ideas on Antony Sher is not difficult to establish. Sher wrote the foreword to her *Need for Words*. In it, he credits Rodenburg with having helped him “contact” his “own voice,” particularly through exercises that required the actor to use “my original South

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<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> Rodenburg, *Need*, 106.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>199</sup> The general contours of Peter Brook’s interculturalism are well known. In one essay, Brook calls for the creation of a universal “third culture,” that he explicitly links to the “dynamism” of the “Third World.” (Brook, Peter. “The Culture of Links.” In *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, Patrice Pavis, ed. London and New York: Routledge, 1996: 65.) Critics of Brook’s cultural project are numerous. My reading of both Brook and Rodenburg, for example, has been informed by Gautum Dasgupta’s review, “‘The Mahabharata’: Peter Brook’s ‘Orientalism.’” *Performing Arts Journal* Vol. 10, No. 3 (1987): 9 – 16.

African accent.”<sup>200</sup> It was the same “deep voice work,” conducted as part of his “coming out” as a white South African, that he further employed to assist his characterization of Tamburlaine—Sher’s last major classical role for the RSC before *Titus*.<sup>201</sup> Convinced that using a South African dialect had both helped to free him from “shame,”<sup>202</sup> and that it had “worked rather well for the gustiness” of Christopher Marlowe’s shepherd-warlord, Antony Sher was a true believer in Rodenburg’s theory of “vocal imperialism,” and the therapeutic wonders it could perform on the spirit and the speaking of Elizabethan drama.

This belief can be seen to operate in the South African acting workshops, and in additional workshops in the UK that Sher organized for the cast of *Titus Andronicus*. Just as Rodenburg had helped him, an ashamed white South African, overcome a lifetime of being “devoiced” by granting him the “right to speak” in his original voice, so too would Sher lead a group of actors to work through their shame and trauma to free their voices, both personal and professional. Then, together, they would employ the occasion of performing *Titus* at the Market Theatre to vicariously liberate their audiences. Since anyone could join this “community of voices,” this was not political theatre Sher and Doran were creating and advertising; it was intended to be a multi-racial “happening.”

### *South African Previews*

Just as important for the South African reception of Sher and Doran’s production was how they and their work were represented in the Johannesburg press. The actors’ training

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<sup>200</sup> Sher, Antony. Foreward. *The Need For Words*. By Patsy Rodenburg. London and New York: Routledge, 1993: xiii.

<sup>201</sup> Nightingale, Benedict. "Savage Ruler of a Human Jungle." *The Times* 18 Oct. 1993: [Features] 14.

<sup>202</sup> Sher, *Beside*, 75.

became the subject of several in-depth articles, and was simultaneously broadcast to prepare Johannesburg theatre audiences with an alternative ‘reading strategy’ than the one liable to be dominant amongst the northern suburban elite. For example, Glenda Nevill’s on-location report of the workshops, entitled “In Step with the Bard of the Battles,” was published in South Africa’s *Sunday Times*.<sup>203</sup>

Arts preview articles in the popular press are typically and broadly affirmative in nature, which is why Nevill’s ambivalence for the production is surprising. Although her article cannot be described as hostile, her description of the workshop betrayed more than slight discomfort with Sher and Doran’s efforts to make *Titus* relevant for South Africa. This began with the depiction of the Andronici:

Omkeer! Links, regs, links, regs. Ontspaan! The rallying cry of drill sergeants is a familiar one in the African familiar one in the African veld but to stumble across those commands in the middle of London’s theatreland was an unnerving experience. [...] Six South African actors, or rather six Roman soldiers, were drilling – if the initial shambles could be described as such.<sup>204</sup>

This was an instance, Nevill observed with a touch of ironic counter-point, of the cast “soaking up the British Shakespearean tradition.”<sup>205</sup>

Nevill was also implicitly critical of their “strange experience of discussing violence with Dr. Murray Cox,” whom she identified as a psychologist practiced in work with the criminally

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<sup>203</sup> Nevill, Glenda. “In Step with the Bard of Battles.” *Sunday Times* 5 Feb. 1995: 15.

<sup>204</sup> Nevill, 15.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

insane. “Now the group of young South African actors,” she continued, “is getting the benefit of his insight into Shakespeare and violence.”<sup>206</sup> Then, after flirting with sarcasm for several paragraphs, Nevill finally editorialized:

To South Africans, violence is hardly an unknown quantity. It has always been a pervasive, malignant presence in our lives. Why then would these actors need any more lessons in bloody chaos?<sup>207</sup>

While Sher offered his own summary of Dr. Cox’s insights into the psychology of violence, Nevill answered her own question by referring to the aesthetic politics of “relevant” Shakespeare:

The Market Theatre’s production of *Titus* is being molded to suit the country, hence the SADF-type drilling of the Romans and the guerilla rituals of the Goths. But how will the audience react to its bloody moments? Will the gore strike too close to home? Perhaps one should take the advice of B Beckerman, who, in the book *Theatrical Presentation: Performing, Audience and Act*, said that “while the audience may accept any fancy thrust upon it, unless that fancy touches the audience at a subliminal level, it will not take it to heart.”<sup>208</sup>

This is an ominous note that reads like a warning addressed directly to Sher and Doran.

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<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

Though the advance publicity betrayed a nearly uniform uneasiness with the extraordinary violence of the play Sher and Doran had chosen to present at the Market Theatre, opinions were only slightly more divided about playing Shakespeare with South African accents. Indeed, in another preview for the *Sunday Times*, weekend arts writer Adam Levin declared his support for this aspect of the impending production in polemical terms.<sup>209</sup> While he admitted that “theatergoers might do a double take” upon first hearing Shakespeare spoken with “South E’ffriken” accents, he insisted that they be embraced over the usual imitated British dialect. Besides, as Levin pointed out, “no cultural plagiarism travels very well, and exporting fake English accents to London would be a little like schlepping anthracite to Newcastle.”<sup>210</sup> He continued:

Contrived as the procedure might sound, if this is affirmative accent action I’m all for it, because I too have spent far too long believing that my home-grown accent is a speech defect. [...] But that level of inadequacy is nothing compared with what I usually feel overseas. Call it a hangover from the chip-on-the-apartheid-shoulder days – I can’t help it, my accent always comes out garbled. Kinda like Sol Kerzner with a mouthful of cotton wool. Last time I was in the US I’d subdued my speech into such a pathetic whimper a teller at Burger King called her manager to translate my order.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Levin, Adam. “Tight as Andronnikus.” *Sunday Times Magazine* 19 Mar. 1995: 8.

<sup>210</sup> Levin, 8.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

With this confession, Levin clearly identifies himself with Antony Sher's story of South African shame. Both are from the generation that began to recognize apartheid as something morally aberrant, and developed a profound embarrassment in response to the stigma the rest of the world placed on that country.

Levin concluded his preview by asking Johannesburgers to be proud of the way they sound. "Genuflections to Europe and the US with every sentence one utters has enjoyed snob value for too long," he professed. If his readers were prepared to lay antiquated associations between RP and Shakespeare aside, "we could learn to treasure our rich variety of South African accents like the family silver."<sup>212</sup> Although his preview uniquely omitted quotations from Sher and Doran, Levin's views were fully consonant with their production concept for *Titus Andronicus*.

Another previewer appeared to suspend his judgment about playing Shakespeare in South African dialects and focus more favorably on Antony Sher's homecoming narrative. Writing for *The Weekly Telegraph*, David Gritten briefly noted that, during the UK workshops, "the Market actors were unhappy at the prospect of *Titus* being performed with South African accents."<sup>213</sup> However Gritten, unlike Glenda Nevill, was content to report Sher and Doran's version of the resolution to this conflict:

Then theatre director John Barton addressed them, and offered an approximation of how Elizabethan English sounded; as distant from Gielgud's English as their own. "It made them a lot happier,"

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<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> Gritten, David. "The Return of the Native." *Weekly Telegraph* 9 Feb 1995: 21.

said Sher. “Instead of imitating something they’re not, they can be themselves.”<sup>214</sup>

Actor Gys De Villiers confirmed the casts’ eventual acceptance of performing the play with local dialects in an essay of workshop diary entries he compiled for the *Sunday Times*.<sup>215</sup>

The main thread of Gritten’s preview was devoted to spotlighting Antony Sher’s impending South African debut. “‘It’s one of the most important things in my life,’ he quoted Sher as saying, “‘It’s going home. I never thought it would turn out as it has, and never saw myself working there. So all this is extraordinary for me.’”<sup>216</sup> Gritten also gave Sher the last word, letting his homecoming narrative serve as the trump card over other, at that point, still unresolved problems with the production’s funding structure:

I’ve found on recent visits that there’s enormous emotion coming out of the ground to meet me when I step off the plane. [...] I suppose it’s something to do with being South African after years of feeling ashamed.<sup>217</sup>

Given the implicit need for mutual catharsis over the shame of being a white South African, Sher predicted “it’ll be very emotional and strange to step on the stage there.”<sup>218</sup> Regardless of the

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<sup>214</sup> Gritten, 21.

<sup>215</sup> De Villiers, Gys. “Not to Praise, But to Conquer.” *Sunday Times Magazine* 12 Mar. 1995: 22. “The question of where to place the accent of characters opens up another can of worms. In South Africa accents lead to stereotyping: if you have an Afrikaans accent you are a Boer and bad. The answer is, it’s negotiable. John Barton at 2pm. Another three-hour session. He is really making us fly now and we all feel confident about implementing his advice.”

<sup>216</sup> Gritten, 21.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

specific artistic choices being developed in the UK workshops, the real interest of this production was, as the title of the article read, “The Return of the Native.”

Most of the preview coverage of the UK workshops and the Market rehearsals of *Titus* was brief and conventionally appreciative. Perhaps no journalist performed that role as frequently and enthusiastically as Barry Ronge, arts editor for *The Star*.<sup>219</sup> Ronge represented Sher’s return to South Africa as heralding a new era for theatre in Johannesburg. Looking beyond *Titus* as the anticipated “biggest splash,” he anticipated a near-term future in which a whole raft of expatriate stars would choose to make the country home again: Fiona Ramsay, Sandra Duncan, Kate Edwards and the grand dame of this cohort, Janet Suzman. If these theatre artists were to come back, Ronge speculated that Johannesburg’s network of traditional performing arts venues, such as the Civic Theatre, would recover from their post-apartheid financial stress and export new, South African-identified drama to the global marketplace in performance. According to Ronge, Sher’s arrival might be “the start of our long-awaited, almost despaired of theatrical revival.”<sup>220</sup>

With the exception of Glenda Nevill’s early, cautionary report on the UK workshops, the preponderance of the advance publicity for *Titus* was moderately-to-highly favorable; reservations about “relevant” accents were superseded by the celebratory rhetoric of Sher’s homecoming narrative. However, only a few days before the production opened, the influential *Sunday Times* published an interview between Antony Sher and journalist Guy Willoughby,

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<sup>219</sup> Ronge, Barry. “New Fare Could Mean Theatre Revival.” *The Star Tonight* 4 Jan. 1995: 2.

<sup>220</sup> Ronge, 2.

which Doran admitted went “badly.” Indeed, it was so acrimonious that Sher placed some of the blame for *Titus*’s poor reception on this preview alone.<sup>221</sup>

Innocuously entitled “A Titus of the World Stage Comes Home,”<sup>222</sup> the force of Willoughby’s organization of the interview suggested something that appeared in no other preview: that Antony Sher was not as connected to and knowledgeable about South Africa as the expatriate presumed. Willoughby accomplished this by emphasizing that Sher was not only expatriate of South Africa, but more specifically, that he was actually native to Cape Town, not Johannesburg – a city, like most, with its own distinctive cultural formations. Describing Sher as “Sea Point’s most famous export after San Marco’s ice cream,” Willoughby noted that this “citizen of the world admits to finding Egoli rather difficult.”<sup>223</sup> The difficulty in question was not only with the constant threat of violent crime in the city, but as Willoughby implied, with the Johannesburg’s literary and theatrical landscape.<sup>224</sup>

Sher, having written three novels set in South Africa (*Middlepost*, which he praised as “fine,” *The Indoor Boy*, and *Cheap Lives*), Willoughby asked him opinion about other South African writers. “However,” he continued, “Sher confesses he doesn’t read other people’s

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<sup>221</sup> “It’s not a great day. The interview which Tony gave on his free Sunday back in Cape Town, with ‘Dr. Death’ has appeared in today’s *Sunday Times*. It goes on about how arrogant Tony is. [. . .] But that’s how bad reputations are built up, I suppose. Through sour, little character assassinations like this one.” Sher and Doran, 194.

<sup>222</sup> Willoughby, Guy. “A Titus of the World Stage Comes Home.” *Sunday Times* 26 Mar. 1995: 18.

<sup>223</sup> Willoughby, 18.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.* An extensive quotation of Sher on the demerits of Johannesburg reads:  
But his idea of a real treat is to bob down to Cape Town, where his extended family still clusters, and to visit old haunts in Sea Point.

“It’s wonderful to be back, to walk around. You can’t walk around in Jo’burg. Cape Town’s quiet” – although he has to admit the first thing he saw on the Sea Point beachfront was a drunken squabble.

Sher is a product of Cape Town’s halcyon days, when in the late 60s live theatre was in a creative ferment.  
“Really, it’s such a pity about Cape Town; nobody in theatre can make a living there anymore. If I come back to stay in South Africa, Cape Town’s where I’d like to be. But it wouldn’t be possible – I’d have to live in Jo’burg.”

Sher is rather rattled by all the things about Johannesburg which some think give it charm.

fiction.” He then quoted Sher’s reply: “I’m not a great reader. I only read books if they relate to a project I’m on. Actually, I’ve probably written more novels than I’ve read.”<sup>225</sup> Predictably, Willoughby remarked that “modesty is not Sher’s strong suit.”<sup>226</sup> Willoughby may have also maneuvered Sher into making another unfortunate confession. As for seeing other artists’ theatre work, Sher said “I don’t really enjoy the stage. I prefer films to the theatre – I suppose it’s a kind of busman’s holiday for me.”<sup>227</sup> Given, of course, that he and Doran had positioned themselves as would-be educators in “relevant” Shakespeare for South Africa, Willoughby went on the attack:

There are some who’ll be interested in Sher’s low opinion of theatre – other people’s theatre, that is – as he certainly has his views on the faults of South African dramaturgy. ‘It must stop trying to be so British.’ No doubt we can leave that to Antony Sher.<sup>228</sup>

Arguably the most damaging aspect of this preview were the pains Willoughby took to portray Sher’s acquired *Englishness*. For example, after asserting Sher’s immodesty, Willoughby added:

[H]e does wrap his egotism in those clipped South Loonon tones that makes the most outrageous trumpet-blowing sound polite. On stage and in rehearsal, this little man can kick up a pretty nifty

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<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

storm: but offstage, in his English accent, he's the genteel author talking of books – his own, that is.<sup>229</sup>

Finally, Willoughby returned to the topic of Sher's discomfiture with Johannesburg, quoting the actor as saying of the city:

It's a very strange place: it assaults you all the time. I cannot find peace there. And it's so noisy! [...] The noise never stops – where we're staying, in Greenside, it goes on all night. Well, maybe it's very creative.<sup>230</sup>

Willoughby's somewhat nasty remark was, "God knows how he manages in London."<sup>231</sup> The point of identifying Sher's specific geographic origins (Sea Point), normal accent (middle-class English) and permanent residence (London) was, in order, to represent Antony Sher as the product of one of South Africa's wealthiest and most liberal enclaves; to stress how assimilated to England he had become; and, finally, to demonstrate that he would most certainly *not* be relocating to Johannesburg, despite numerous hints that he would like to do so.

As hostile and unflattering as Guy Willoughby was towards Antony Sher's homecoming narrative, it is primarily noteworthy as an exception to the overwhelming wave of affirmation for Sher and his *Titus* that was generated by the Johannesburg press. Significantly, this warm welcome remained extended to the actor in spite of the fact that white South Africans had, over the previous few years, been quite vocal about their resentment towards returning expatriates – undoubtedly the subtext of Willoughby's hostile attitude. Still, most of Johannesburg's interested, theatre-going elite put aside their qualms about Antony Sher's cultural

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<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

pronouncements and gave him the benefit of the doubt. The governing expectation was that the charismatic appeal of his performance as one of the “greatest Shakespearean actors of his generation” would eclipse the rhetoric of “relevance” to which Sher and Doran were making steady recourse.

*Enter Doran*

In the case of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Alan Sinfield would agree with Marvin Carlson that program notes are important anticipating audiences’ expectations and suggesting conducive interpretive strategies. Beginning with the decisive influence of the academic Jan Kott, RSC programs have a history of providing images and texts that underscore the validity of the “relevance” being sought by any particular production of Shakespeare. Often “consisting of a collage of scholarly materials,” RSC programs also reprint “bits from Shakespeare’s sources, original contextual gobbets, even discussion of the provenance of the text” that the literary manager then “splices in with modern material, especially quotations of political significance”<sup>232</sup> in order to persuade audiences that any contemporary references that a production makes is a transliteration of the Bard’s original intentions, not an imposition. Assembling programs that could be framed as a “scholarly” collection of the company’s research and care for the authority of Shakespeare’s texts not only appealed to the literary appetite of post-war England’s well-educated middle-class, it also shielded the RSC from excessive censure when certain “relevant” productions, in John Elsom’s expression, “got out of hand.” RSC programs always reassured resistant audiences that the Company’s quest for radical textual interpretation was always,

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<sup>232</sup> Sinfield, Alan. “Royal Shakespeare: Theatre and the Making of Ideology.” In *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994: 200.

properly constrained by an equally rigorous commitment to “textual accuracy and scholarship” – a “combination” of desiderata which, Sinfield writes, “cannot be faulted.”<sup>233</sup>

For the most part, the role that Gregory Doran was to play in production of *Titus Andronicus* as its director was a matter of secondary interest, at best, in the South African press. The reasons for this are not difficult to understand: Sher was a celebrity actor with several famous roles under his belt; Doran had never directed a single production at the RSC. Further, Doran’s portfolio, to explain the South Africanization of the play, was a tricky one. Not only was this the element that elicited the most ambivalence from Johannesburg theatre writers, but Doran was in the awkward position of being a foreign, *British* artist advocating the use of local knowledge about which he could claim only limited competency, i.e., principally what he had learned about South Africa through Antony Sher.

Privately, Doran harbored serious doubts about his suitability for directing *Titus* under the strict terms of “relevance” that he and Sher had established for this production. In one entry that recounts an excursion he made with Sher to a game preserve and, then, a luxury hotel complex for tourists,<sup>234</sup> Doran worried:

But am I not just a tourist, too? How can I direct a play here? Well, South Africa does seem to have been part of my life over the last seven or eight years with Tony, traveling round it, trying to understand it, or working with its exiles and expatriates who were helping to change it. But surely, to be relevant, theatre must have

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<sup>233</sup> Sinfield, “Royal,” 200.

<sup>234</sup> Sher and Doran, 32.

an umbilical connection to the lives of the people watching it. How  
can I provide that?<sup>235</sup>

Doran's answer to this question took the form of a Kottian affirmation: "I suppose the answer is that I won't. Shakespeare will. I'm just a 'facilitator.' I content myself with that thought and clamber back in the Kombi."<sup>236</sup> The less significance Doran attributed to his own agency, the more accessible Shakespeare would be become to the Market. In other words, he, like the actor's in Rodenburg's voice classes, had to trust in 'letting go.'

Doran's comfort level was further boosted by the play's relevance to the New South Africa, his *idée fixe* can be simply stated: the grotesque savagery of that made *Titus Andronicus* one of the most anathema of Shakespeare's plays in Europe for centuries, was simply political *realism* in an African context. Doran also restated this idea in *Woza Shakespeare!*. Writing about the rape of Lavinia, he argued:

Whereas the scene can be absurd and revolting elsewhere, doing the play here in South Africa, a society which has suffered decades of atrocious violence, a strange reversal occurs. The acts of brutality, instead of being gratuitous or extreme, seem only to familiar, and the focus turns instead on how the characters deal with that violence and the impact of grief.<sup>237</sup>

Doran, in an effort to reinforce this interpretation to the cast, wrote "*Titus Andronicus* was written yesterday" on a wall they had to pass every time they exited their rehearsal room.<sup>238</sup> It

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<sup>235</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid*, 150.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

also served to remind Doran himself that his job as a “facilitator” was to consistently “hold the mirror [of *Titus*] up to show them their own reflection.”<sup>239</sup> Thus, in the Kottian paradox, Africanizing *Titus* was the best way to repair the troublesome play's ability to function as a mirror held up to the violent world of Elizabethan England. At certain times, Doran even allowed himself to claim that the specific conditions of South Africa’s 1994 elections presented the play with its first post-Elizabethan opportunity to achieve true relevance again, earlier presentations by Peter Brook, Trevor Nunn and Deborah Warner notwithstanding.<sup>240</sup>

Doran repeated the notion of *Titus*’s unique relevance to South Africa numerous times, and always returning to a key sentence that he reproduced verbatim on every occasion. *Titus* “can seem so gratuitous, just a gory melodrama . . . but not here somehow.”<sup>241</sup> “Here” refers to South Africa; the implicit ‘there’ is the UK. The meaning of “somehow” is more elusive, and implies that full illumination of these historical affinities could only be realized in the light of *Titus Andronicus* in performance.

### *Strange Reversal*

Doran’s presentation of *Titus* might have remained a sidelight to the advance reading strategies being offered through the medium of Sher’s homecoming narrative were it not for a key decision: Doran would have chief responsibility for composing the Market Theatre’s

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<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:

Sher: ‘Why have you brought along *Titus Andronicus*?’ I ask Greg as we unpack our case of books. ‘Might use it if we do some Shakespeare classes. It sort of makes sense in Africa . . .’ [Doran was to have directed a co-production in Lagos with RSC].

‘Why would it work in an African context?’ I ask.

‘I suppose because of the violence. It can seem so gratuitous, just a gory melodrama . . . but not here somehow.’ I nod, staring down at the streets of Jo’burg sixteen floors below and thinking of the things that have gone on in this country over the past half-century. ‘And,’ says Greg, ‘it’s go Shakespeare’s *other* great black part.’

program for the show and, further, would give the explanatory introduction to the SABC television broadcast of the play.<sup>242</sup> In both instances, Sher's homecoming narrative was de-emphasized and Doran's framing of the play's relevance for the New South Africa was pressed with greater brio. Indeed, Sher contributed *no* text to either introduction—a rather notable absence given his propensity for creating explanatory texts for every occasion of his performances.

Given the document's importance, as Sher and Doran's preferred "reading strategy" for their *Titus Andronicus*, it will be useful to reproduce Doran's 568-word essay in its entirety:

"*Titus Andronicus* was written yesterday." I chalked this up on the wall of our rehearsal room at the Market, as a constant reminder that we were approaching the text as if it were a modern play and the ink was still wet on the page. In fact Shakespeare wrote the play four hundred years ago. He was a young man of thirty, it was his first big hit and remained a crowd puller during his lifetime. The play fell out of favour in the intervening centuries. Apparently audiences no longer felt able to tolerate such a blinding spotlight on mankind's capacity for cruelty or his ability to perpetrate atrocities of such extremity. Today at the end of the century which has witnessed two global conflicts and the possibility of atomic annihilation it is hard to believe the world is sane, and perhaps we have come closer to an Elizabethan sensibility. It's significant that it was not until Peter Brook revived "Titus" after the Second

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<sup>242</sup> Doran, Program Note.

World War, with Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, that the play began to be re-appraised and acclaimed. It is undoubtedly a violent play, but approaching the piece here, today, in a society which has suffered decades of atrocious violence, a strange reversal occurs: the acts of brutality, rather than appearing gratuitous or extreme, seem only too familiar, and our attention instead turns to focus on how characters deal with that violence, and we are moved by the impact of grief, man's capacity for survival and desire to heal society's wounds, summed up in Marcus' final words:

“O, let me teach you how to Knit again

This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf

These broken limbs again into one body.”

Another revelation to me is the character of Aaron, the black man, so often dismissed as a stage villain. Here he becomes a much more complex and intriguing.

Shakespeare wrote for the audience of his own day, and his own city, and the plays were performed in the contemporary clothes of the period, i.e. modern dress. Therefore mounting *TITUS ANDRONICUS* at the Market Theatre, we are addressing a South African audience in its own voice, in accents and images pertinent and accessible to that audience. I have strongly resisted a peculiar assumption that Shakespeare is only valid if spoken in a posh English accent, as if the rich variety of indigenous accents

were somehow inferior, lacking in range or expression, or just inappropriate. This seems to me absurd. After all, Shakespeare himself spoke in a accent which sounded like a sort of thick Celtic brogue, as John Barton, a world expert in Shakespeare, demonstrated for the company in our development workshop at The Royal National Theatre Studio.

The nobility of the true-bred, godfearing, hard-fighting Andronici for example, is perfectly caught in the rugged muscularity of an Afrikaner accent. We are making no parallels, there is no specific resonance implied, we are simply using what we've got, and I believe, releasing an unexpected richness in the speaking of the text.

I'd like to thank Sue Higginson, director of The Royal National Theatre Studio, for her endless support, and for arranging an invaluable two week workshop period in London, courtesy of The British Council, for the principal actors to explore the theme of violence and develop their skills in speaking Shakespeare. The production will visit The Royal National Theatre and The West Yorkshire Playhouse in July.<sup>243</sup>

Doran's program must have presented even the most unprejudiced reader with a number of interpretive ambiguities. Among these was not the priority to which Doran assigned "Royal Shakespeare" as the required reading strategy for the performance (his use of the expression

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<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

“constant reminder” barely concealed the force with which Sher and Doran applied this formation to a potentially rebellious cast). Rather, the primary difficulty stems from the rhetorical uncertainty which surrounds Doran’s subject-position. Drawing heavily upon Jan Kott’s arguments, but also pathos, in *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, Doran positions himself as a European in Africa who, imbued with the authority of Shakespeare and the RSC, is able to speak *for* Africans.

Consider Doran’s “standard” sketch of *Titus Andronicus*’s reception and production history: the greatness and relevance of the play was only restored after Peter Brook’s daring staging of it at the RSC. Curiously, though, the events of “cruelty” and “atrocities” that set the stage for Titus’ reemergence are delocalized by Doran. While, in one sense, everyone “knows” that the world wars, the Holocaust and the Cold War were primarily *European* phenomenon, Doran chose instead to stress their nature as “global conflicts” – an imputation of collective moral responsibility that intellectuals in the developing world have vocally resented for decades.<sup>244</sup> The next passage, rather than suggesting that this remark was an innocent slip of awareness, only confirms that the rhetoric of representing European barbarism as outbreaks of global atrocity is a linguistic device for projecting moral disorder ‘out there,’ onto the West’s usual itinerary of bugaboo destinations: in this instance, Africa as the Dark Continent.

While one might have thought the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia, or the ongoing strife in Northern Ireland would have afforded an extended warrant for aligning the play with political violence in Europe, Doran went on to claim that *Titus Andronicus* only became fully relevant in an African context. To be more specific, in *England* (Belfast is a part of the UK) *Titus* might correctly be viewed as “gratuitous or extreme,” but in South Africa, where atrocity is a

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<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

commonplace, the play borders on psychological realism. Therefore, according to Doran's Kottian logic, the only way to restore the immediacy of *Titus'* 16<sup>th</sup> century European essence was to clothe it the signs of 20<sup>th</sup> century Africa.

Undoubtedly Doran is engaging in an African variation on "Orientalism." But this still does not fully account for the odd, passive-voiced syntax that he adopted in this passage. As the sentence reads, "It is undoubtedly a violent play, but approaching the piece here, today, in a society which has suffered decades of atrocious violence, a strange reversal occurs."<sup>245</sup> The question is, for *whom* or *what* does this "strange reversal" occur? As the writer of these observations, there is one clear sense in which this "reversal" was the product of Doran's own perspective, and that of Antony Sher's. But this is not the force of Doran's passive-voice construction. Indeed, the clear suggestion is that this shift of meaning, from *grand guignol* farce to cautionary tragedy is either manifest to any observer seeing the play in a South African setting or, more magically, is a hermeneutic possibility that, in the liberation rhetoric of Patsy Rodenburg, illuminates the true meaning of Shakespeare's text itself. Perhaps there is more than a touch of mere bravado in this as well, i.e., even the horrors of the World War II-era were insufficient for Peter Brook to completely unlock the play's full relevance; South Africa, on the other hand, finally supplies the knowing director with a full measure of Kottian tinder. The final proof of this implicit contention is the existence of Aaron the Moor, the existence of whom races the political conflict in the play in a manner that previous Eurocentric productions could not have adequately integrated. Doran's "revelation" is that he can: "Here," in South Africa, as if for the

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*Ibid.*

time, Aaron as a “black man” can be “much more complex and intriguing” than back ‘there,’ in the UK. (Presumably, black men and racist violence were unknown.)<sup>246</sup>

In either case, the impersonal tone of the “strange reversal” allowed Doran to refrain from taking responsibility for asserting this reading of *Titus Andronicus* as his own, contestable, interpretation. On the contrary, presenting this closed circuit of relevance as “strange” was perfectly consistent with his earlier choice to conceive of himself as a “facilitator” of the Shakespeare’s universal insight into the human condition. As Graham Holderness might observe, Doran’s rhetoric here is boilerplate “Bardolatry.”<sup>247</sup> The true agent of this reversal is presented as none other Shakespeare himself.

If the Bard was credited with creating the initial conditions for *Titus*’ relevance to post-apartheid South Africa, Doran’s role as facilitator still required him to mediate between the sometimes reinforcing, but also sometimes conflicting demands of the universal and the particular. Since Shakespeare’s actors wore costumes and spoke in English contemporary to their time and place, so too would their production use South African “modern dress” and dialects. Once again, though, undergoes an odd transformation. Having been addressing the Johannesburg readers of his program directly, Doran suddenly shifted to the pronoun “we” and wrote of the Market Theatre audience in the third-person, almost as if they were no longer present: “we are addressing a South African audience in its own voice, in accents and images pertinent and accessible to that audience.”<sup>248</sup> This wording might make sense if found in a report submitted to an outside funding agency, such as the British Council, which poured a substantial amount of

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<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> Holderness, Graham. *Cultural Shakespeare: Essays in the Shakespeare Myth*. Hatfield: Hertfordshire UP, 2001. Graham Holderness has defined “bardolatry” as an “attenuated form of relic-worship” with the “liturgical properties of a religion” that, effectively, culminate in the “worship of Shakespeare,” particularly as “a ritual [for] enacting an idealised English past.” (126)

<sup>248</sup> Doran, Program Note.

money into the production, or the new ANC-controlled arts ministry that was still deciding on whether to give the Market Theatre its first state subsidy. But for a program addressed to ticket-holder who has just taken a seat at the theatre, one might expect something a bit more personal and deferential.

More substantively, the sentence is rife with extraordinary cultural assumptions about his Johannesburg audience's epistemological limitations. Why would the sophisticated patrons of the Market Theatre have difficulty 'accessing' Shakespeare? Not only is there a rich history of producing Shakespeare in that country, the expatriate actor and director Janet Suzman had staged *Othello* starring John Kani at the Market Theatre in 1991 – and it was both a popular and critical success, even though it was not done in modern dress, or in South African dialects.<sup>249</sup> Further, this was an audience that had been attending some of the world's most vital political drama since the 1970s, including the plays of Athol Fugard and the drag show satire of Pieter-Dirk Uys.

Since Sher and Doran knew that the traditional, predominantly white audience was sufficiently well-versed in theatre to 'access' Shakespeare, the most charitable assumption to make is that this passage was created with a different model reader in mind altogether. Taking my cue from the behind-the-scenes lobbying being waged by John Kani for a sustaining grant from the new, black majority government – and from Alan Sinfield's insistence that "Royal Shakespeare" is an aesthetic formation virtually hardwired to vouchsafe subsidy – I would argue that this segment of the program was written *as-if* the model reader were a black novice to the theatre. True, Sher and Doran hoped that more blacks would attend their *Titus* – and, in *Woza Shakespeare!*, bitterly complained that few came. However, since the majority of the Market Theatre's audience was white, the language of this paragraph must have been subtly designed to

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<sup>249</sup> Suzman, Janet. "South Africa in *Othello*." In *Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century* Jonathan Bate, Jill L. Levenson and Dieter Mehl, eds. Dover: Delaware UP, 1996: 23 – 40.

present Sher and Doran as offering instructional advice about how to attract and “address” the much-discussed new audiences for South African arts in the post-apartheid era (a topic I shall be addressing in Chapter 5). The white audiences cannot have found the rhetoric of this portion of the essay especially persuasive. Doran’s position of a radical cultural alterity between Johannesburg’s traditional Anglophone elite and the sort of middle-class audiences that patronized the RSC in the UK was scarcely credible.<sup>250</sup>

Doran was then directly addressing the other reader of the program: not the desired, yet mostly absent, newly enfranchised black South African, but the actual, white reader whose presence – and predominance in the theatre – is explicitly rendered problematic. And having fixed this reader with his scolding gaze, Doran proceeded to use code language to link their preference for British English with an unacknowledged racism. The key word is “indigenous.” Opposed to RP is South Africa’s “rich variety of indigenous accents,” the anthropological term coding the “variety” of dialects in question as non-Anglophone and, by implication, non-white. The same attitude that views these voices as culturally stunted and “inferior” is the same ideology that supported apartheid; Doran stops just short of making such a patently offensive *j’accuse* by choosing to call the traditionalist view of spoken Shakespeare “absurd.” His authority for pressing this oblique attack was RSC director John Barton, the “world expert on Shakespeare.”<sup>251</sup>

Up to this point, Doran has been suggesting that the covert radicalism of *Titus Andronicus* was that he would employ it as a tapestry to stage the New South Africa in the colors

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<sup>250</sup> Contrary to the thrust of Doran's remarks, Shakespeare had a prominent place in South Africa's secondary schools educational curricula dating back to the colonial era. Educated South Africans possessed a deep familiarity with the plays, even if they lacked exposure to the most current modes of criticism. For an excellent historical overview of this question, see David Johnson's *Shakespeare and South Africa*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

<sup>251</sup> Doran, Program Note.

of a ‘rainbow nation.’ In the next paragraph, though, Doran had to explain that all of the Andronici would be performed by white actors as Afrikaners in an accent historically synonymous with the sound of the apartheid state. His further description of the Afrikaans Romans as “true-bred, god-fearing, hard-fighting” only drove home the connection between the Andronici and the most fervent sort of pro-apartheid Afrikaners. (In fact, most of the actors in this production of *Titus* would employ Afrikaans accents whether they were overtly framed as Afrikaners or not.) This was not the “rich variety” of South Africa’s human soundscape.

As the collective perpetrators of this racist violence, any focused staging of Afrikaners, *prima facie*, would seem to imply criticism. Yet improbably, in the very next sentence, Doran rushed to assure the audience. “We are making no parallels,” he wrote: “there is no specific resonance implied, we are simply using what we’ve got, and I believe, releasing an unexpected richness in the speaking of the text.”<sup>252</sup> Arguably, this is the strangest reversal to be found in the program note. One might ask, after establishing the play’s relevance for the process of “reconciliation” in the New South Africa, as evidenced, *inter alia*, by Marcus’ quoted speech; the barely submerged accusations of racism and, finally, the assertion that Afrikaners are the spitting image of Roman militarists, how could Doran abjure the audience from seeing uncomfortable “parallels”?

It is necessary to note that Doran wrote this program for a Johannesburg audience who had been patronizing a theatre specializing in political drama under conditions of extraordinary censorship for decades. As Loren Kruger has argued, reading for political allegory was the dominant interpretive strategy for South African theatre-goers.<sup>253</sup> In fact, so pervasive was the

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<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> Kruger, Loren. *The Drama of South Africa: Plays, Pageants and Publics Since 1910*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999: 126-127.

employment of political allegory by white liberal writers in that country, especially during the 1980s as typified by the fiction of J.M. Coetzee, that Nadine Gordimer controversially upbraided that country's cultural elite for their devotion to the cryptic mode of social hermeneutics.<sup>254</sup> Asking such a reader to suspend a reading strategy that had helped produce Athol Fugard, Pieter-Dirk Uys, and Reza De Wet did not reflect a solid grasp of "local knowledge." At best, Doran's "anticipatory suggestions" about how to perceive and, presumably, enjoy his *Titus Andronicus*, while unremarkable by RSC standards, cut against the grain of the average Market Theatre spectator's interpretive habits. At worst, Doran risked scolding this same reader, rhetorically reaching out to other entities and audiences to add their unseen pressure on the recalcitrant reader to accede to the new dispensation of all things South African, cultural and social.

Strikingly absent from this essay, aside from the fact that Gregory Doran did not thank a single South African institution or person,<sup>255</sup> is any reintroduction of Antony Sher's homecoming narrative. After weeks in which Sher's return as a celebrity "Shakespearean" actor had been the focus of advance publicity, the last 'strange reversal' of the program is its omission. As a reading strategy for the audience, treating Sher as the star of the performance was taken completely off the table. To emphasize this, there was no additional text from him as a reader of

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<sup>254</sup> Gordimer, Nadine. *The Black Interpreters*. Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1973. For an example, Jeanne Collieran argues that Athol Fugard's 1992 play *A Place with the Pigs* represents the playwright's uncharacteristic resort to this mode. See Collieran's "A Place with the Pigs: Athol Fugard's Afrikaner Parable." *Modern Drama* 33 (1990): 84-86.

<sup>255</sup> One could stop a close reading of Gregory Doran's program note here. However, my contention that an unacknowledged colonial hubris underwrote many of the Briton's more difficult public pronouncements finds additional support in Doran's "thank you" paragraph. Doran did not thank a single member of the Market Theatre, Johannesburg's arts community or, in fact, any South African at all (Antony Sher excepted). An examination of the programs printed for the UK run of the show at the West Yorkshire Playhouse and London's Royal National Theatre does not reveal any gratitude for his South African contacts either. Instead, all of his – and Sher's – thanks are directed towards British institutions and theatre artists. While many of Doran's journal entries in *Woza Shakespeare!* detail at length his difficulties working at the Market Theatre – complaints that produced a wave of bitterness when the book was published in 1997 – it is a stunning omission that Doran did not thank Barney Simon for extending him the opportunity to direct his first major theatre production, or to numerous other Johannesburgers who, *WS!*, anonymously contributed to existence of the Market Theatre itself.

the program might have reasonably expected from a performer who usually makes good use of such writing opportunities. Neither did Sher's cast bio receive any 'special treatment': the size of his headshot and the brief resume of his theatrical credits was roughly the same as all the other cast members, and placed in alphabetical order. Certainly, this choice reflected what could be seen as an admirable sign of egalitarianism and a token of Sher's wish to place Doran on a more equal footing with him in the eyes of the public. However, given the desire of Johannesburgers to experience the proximity and pleasures of Sher's celebrity, the choice to so thoroughly eliminate this factor from the program bespeaks of the force with which "relevance" was going to be asserted as the preferred reading strategy for the performance.

As a result, an event began to unfold that was, perhaps, not so very different in nature from the one recalled by Marvin Carlson concerning the American premiere of *Waiting for Godot*. While never intentionally setting a bait-and-switch on the order of publicizing Beckett's play as "The Laugh Sensation of Two Continents," the framing of *Titus* did undergo a "radical disjuncture." Antony Sher's homecoming narrative promised a *Titus Andronicus* that, somehow, would serve as a festival of Anglophone cultural affirmation. The discourse of "relevance" told a different story: one of violence and the loss of white hegemony.

### 3.0 PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I offer a detailed analysis of the performance text for Antony Sher and Gregory Doran's *Titus Andronicus*. Consistent with their efforts in the UK workshops, and with Doran's program note, this production bore all of the hallmarks of "Royal Shakespeare": textual revision to support a "relevant" interpretation of the play's themes; scene and costume designs that reset the action in time and place; and, in what we might call a Patsy 'Rodenburg amendment' to the RSC house style, the employment of (putatively) local, authentic dialects in order to enhance the production's connectivity to the audience's native identities. If, according to Alan Sinfield, "Royal Shakespeare" requires the careful calibration of political reference and imprecision to be successful in the UK, I demonstrate that Sher and Doran's artistic choices frequently evinced *precise* allusions to contentious aspects of post-apartheid South African society— "relevance" that risked contradicting Doran's caveat that "no parallels" and "no specific resonance [were] implied." Drawing upon a range of historical evidence, including Sher and Doran's book *Woza Shakespeare!*, I examine both their intended and *unintended* appeals to the "local knowledge" of South Africans. Despite their demonstrable efforts to mitigate the performance of discomfiting political gestures, I conclude by arguing that Sher and Doran's commitment to staging "Royal Shakespeare" came into conflict with their "connected" motives for the event.

#### *Opening Tableau*

First on stage at the start of this production was actor Leslie Fong, dressed in the white robes of a Cape Malay *imam*, wailing mournfully - a sound that simultaneously alluded to the

*adhan*, or the Muslim call to prayer and, in the words of the British critic Michael Billington, “a cry of lamentation of the kind which echoed across townships throughout the 1980s.”<sup>256</sup> The latter resonance was achieved by the opening stage picture: that of the deceased emperor, presented as lying in state, but with the crude bandages and cheap wooden coffin representative of a victim of township violence, and surrounded by a crowd of mostly black actors dressed in rags (Doran reported that his inspiration for this image was the funeral of the Ayatollah Khomeini<sup>257</sup>). It was an opening tableau that quickly relocated this *Titus Andronicus* from Europe to an Africa stretching from Cairo to Cape Town.

As Shakespeare’s text requires, the action began with the emperor’s two sons, the elder Saturninus (Gys de Villiers) and the younger Bassianus (Ivan D. Lucas), immediately exhorting their respective factions in support of their rival claims to the vacant throne. Doran introduced Saturninus by granting him a long audience ‘alone’ with the corpse of his father and - more importantly - the crown, which de Villiers handled covetously enough to establish Saturninus as an amusingly grotesque character.

In addition to providing exposition, de Villiers’ soliloquy also allowed the audience an opportunity of visual adjustment to the modern-dress costuming and local reference that would come to define the production. Having granted several of his actors some freedom over their character’s appearance, Doran allowed de Villiers to play Saturninus as “a Graham Greene roué in an off-white suit” who’s entire “life is just one long, wild rave-up.”<sup>258</sup> Although not considered central to the identity of his character, de Villiers is an Afrikaner whose strapping

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<sup>256</sup> Billington, Michael. “Sher’s ‘Titus Africanus’ Hailed.” *Mail & Guardian II* (31) 28 July-3 Aug. 1995: 29.

<sup>257</sup> Sher, Antony and Gregory Doran. *Woza Shakespeare!* London: Methuen, 1996: 112.

<sup>258</sup> Sher and Doran, 51. See also: Nightingale, Benedict. “Tyranny Lives in Every Century.” *The Times* 14 Jul. 1995: [Features] 19.

build and forceful carriage was developed by years spent as an officer in the South African Defence Force (SADF) - qualities which were further accentuated onstage by his shaved head and goat-teed beard. Unlike other actors (to be discussed) de Villiers was not directed to exaggerate his natural Afrikaans-accented English; thus, to British audiences, Saturninus did not read as particularly Afrikaans. South African theatergoers saw him differently.

Just as he was about to lower the crown onto his own head, Saturninus was interrupted by Ivan Lucas's Bassianus, who grabbed one side of the symbol of state and formed a tableau with his brother. Lucas is a Cape Coloured actor with a pronounced “klonkie” Afrikaans accent, a casting choice that effectively ‘raced’ the conflict between the siblings; this point was underscored by Lucas’s use of a black power (*amandla*) gesture while shouting for the gathered Romans to “fight for freedom in your choice” (1.1.17)<sup>259</sup>. Furthermore, Bassianus was dressed as “a left-bank radical in a black leather jacket” and an intellectual’s wire-rim glasses;<sup>260</sup> costuming that marked him as an angry young revolutionary, a sharp contrast to Saturninus’ unsympathetic rapaciousness. To demonstrate consanguinity, however, Lucas also wore a goat-teed beard and had his head shaved.

The appearance of both Saturninus and Bassianus was suggestive of a post-1960s time frame. In accordance with the rules of relevant eclecticism, the illusion of a stable system of historical reference was deliberately confounded by the entrance of Marcus Andronicus, who was dressed as a Boer War-era (1899 – 1903) Afrikaner nationalist politician.<sup>261</sup> For the role, Sher and Doran fashioned actor Dale Cutts into an iconic “bitter-ender”(i.e., Afrikaners who refused to accept British colonial rule) of the mold who established apartheid after South

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<sup>259</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Titus Andronicus*. The Arden Shakespeare: Third Series, Jonathan Bate, ed. London: Arden, 2002. All subsequent *Titus* quotations are also from this edition.

<sup>260</sup> Sher and Doran, 112.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

Africa's 1948 elections. Cutts is an Anglophone South African, but assumed such an extraordinarily harsh Afrikaans accent in performance that when Marcus informs the dueling brothers of Titus Andronicus' imminent arrival "from weary wars against the barbarous Goths," he rolled every "r" with the racial contempt commonly heard in the Afrikaans derogatory word for blacks – *kaffirs* (1.1.28). Thus when Marcus staged his intervention between Saturninus and Bassanius, dressed as a Tribune with an old-style fedora, squared-off Boer beard and red sash over a three-buttoned suit, the production's representation of 'Rome' became specifically South African.

Cue the entrance of Titus, his sons, and their captured Goths – one of the most visually rich and complex scenes in Sher and Doran's production. To the sound of a brass march, the Andronici paraded onto the stage in the formation of a triumphal procession. The first characters to become visible to the audience were the Andronici sons: Lucius (Martin le Maitre), Quintus (Dan Robbertse), and Martius (Duncan Lawson). Wearing military uniforms that simultaneously referred to the World War II-era (combat boots with white puttees) and South Africa's long-running "border wars" with Angola and Mozambique during the 1970s and 80s (contemporary desert camouflage fatigues,) the Andronici were costumed to give the overall impression that they were South African Defence Force (SADF) soldiers.<sup>262</sup> In keeping with the depiction of Marcus as a "bitter-ender" Boer, the Andronici were fashioned to resemble Afrikaners marked by the signs of rigid militarism and righteous cruelty. Based on the cast's exploration of the psychology of political violence in the UK, Lucius' fuming presence and wide-eyed stare also

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<sup>262</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

See also: McDonnell, Maureen Elizabeth. "Crossing the Line: Performing Cultural Identities Through Global Shakespearean Drama." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2005: 66.

suggested that this character had gone “bossies”: the South African pejorative word for combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder and a wide-spread condition amongst SADF veterans.<sup>263</sup>

Close on their heels came the humiliated Goths, who were chained like animals to an ox-harness, pulling Titus’ ‘chariot’: a desert camouflage military jeep. Attired in torn dark khaki shorts and t-shirts similar to those worn by Southwest Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO) guerillas – the equivalent of the “Vietcong” in the SADF’s operations in Angola and Namibia – their appearance deliberately conjured up images that would have been quite familiar to Johannesburg audiences. Often referred to as “South Africa’s Vietnam,”<sup>264</sup> that country’s newspapers had routinely published propaganda photographs during the apartheid era of killed or imprisoned SWAPO fighters as proof of Pretoria’s ‘successful’ counter-insurgency effort. (The last SADF troops had left Namibia only in 1992.)

Echoing the multi-racial framing of Saturninus and Bassianus, the Goths were cast in such a way as to suggest the normality of racial hybridity elsewhere on the continent. Tamora (Dorothy Ann Gould) and her eldest son, Alarbus (Bruce Laing) were white; but her other sons, Chiron (Oscar Petersen) and Demetrius (Carlton George) were played by an identifiably mixed race Indian and Coloured actor, respectively. Furthermore, Tamora spoke in an especially guttural and, by association, uneducated “poor white” Afrikaans dialect.<sup>265</sup> Gould, like Cutts, is an Anglophone South African, so again hers was an adopted rather than ‘natural’ accent. Neither Sher nor Doran ever directly explained this artistic choice, other than to generally state that the Afrikaans dialect has an “earthiness” of the sort they – and British critics – associated with Gould’s performance of Tamora. And, indeed, all of the Goths were directed to use “lower,

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<sup>263</sup> Munusamy, Ranjeni. “The Lost Khaki Generation.” *Sunday Times* 15 Sept. 2002: 5.

<sup>264</sup> Koch, Eddie. “Delving Into the Pain of SA’s Vietnam.” *Mail and Guardian* 11 Oct. 1996: 14.

<sup>265</sup> Sher and Doran, 14 & 124.

sinewy” body language that contrasted with the “upright, rigid” bodies of the Afrikaner Andronici.<sup>266</sup>

### *Sher's Titus*

The most uptight and rigid of the Andronici was Sher’s Titus himself, standing at attention in the back of the jeep that was pulled onto center stage by a team of Goth prisoners. Like the rest of the Andronici, this Titus was also an Afrikaner. To go further and create an inventory of Titus’ semiosis, however, is not a straightforward task. In a version of ‘he said, she said,’ Sher insisted that the visual appearance of his Titus was merely a generic extension of the Andronici sons (as Boer soldiers) and, that save for private references to his father and a nod towards a famous war film, no specific reference were intended. Virtually everyone else, though, saw a clear likeness to the living Afrikaner figure Eugene Terre’Blanche. He is a character whose social meaning was, by 1995, over determined by his actions during the transition years of apartheid—and the opposite of a floating signifier.

### *Eugene Terre’Blanche*

Born in 1941, Eugene Terre’Blanche became one of the most iconic Afrikaners during the 1980s as leader of the *Afrikaner Weerstandbeweging* (AWB), or Afrikaner Resistance Movement: a Neo-Nazi paramilitary organization that pledged to spark a civil war to prevent black-majority rule. Instantly recognizable by Boer War-era throwback beard, uniform and his ever-present horse, Terre’Blanche became famous for his fiery, white supremacist speeches

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<sup>266</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

delivered at militaristic rallies. Although its dedicated membership was never large, the AWB's extreme visibility in the media led some observers of South Africa to fear that Terre'Blanche might undermine that country's transition to multi-racial democracy.

However, a number of events occurred in the early 1990s that thoroughly defanged Terre'Blanche in the eyes of the South African public and, within in a short span of time, transformed him into a figure of open ridicule. (One of these episodes, the AWB's failed intervention in the 1994 Bophutatswana coup, was alluded to in a pantomimic scene Gregory Doran inserted between Acts I and 2.) Other deflating incidents included a parade in which Terre'Blanche fell off of his horse, and the exposure of an affair with South African tabloid columnist Jani Allen. The AWB's dedicated membership, never the 60,000 paramilitary soldiers they claimed, evaporated. Thus as New York Times correspondent Bill Keller observed:

Eugene Terre'Blanche, the neo-swastika'd leader of the Afrikaner Resistance Movement, is a cartoonist's dream. He sometimes falls off his horse. But while belligerents like Mr. Terre'Blanche command little sympathy among whites and probably do not pose a threat to the next Government, they could become South Africa's Ku Klux Klan. Through acts of terror and bullying of blacks, they could incite a backlash.<sup>267</sup>

Keller was not exaggerating about Terre'Blanche as a "cartoonist's dream," either. While casual observers of South Africa might still see news footage that represented him in a threatening light, by the time Antony Sher returned to South Africa, Terre'Blanche had been reduced to the

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<sup>267</sup> Keller, Bill. "The Elite Are New, But Evita (Hmm) Has Entrée." *New York Times* 21 Dec. 1994: [Arts] 4.

nickname “E.T.” after Steven Spielberg’s harmless space creature.<sup>268</sup> The full flavor of this reversal is caught by a longer profile on the AWB and Terre’Blanche that also appeared in the New York Times in 1994: “Apartheid’s Heirs Strut a Final Hour on South Africa’s Political Stage,” by Francis X. Clines.<sup>269</sup> Clines described atypical post-apartheid AWB rally that, having been denied a permit to gather inside a town, were forced to meet on a small farm. “Outflanked by democracy,” the journalist noted:

The band of white supremacists was a sorry sight today as they lugged rifles and shotguns, pistols and bayonettes, picnic baskets and baby strollers into the woods outside of town in angry mourning over the death of white minority rule.<sup>270</sup>

When he arrived, Terre’Blanche, “a gray-bearded man in battle khakis who not too long ago attracted or frightened thousands,” also gave the impression of “a dated firebrand, lost in exile within his own democracy-intoxicated country.”<sup>271</sup> Parody was the trope that best described this political fringe. As Clines concluded, “they seemed more like a shrinking troupe of actors caught up in a tragicomic costume drama than guerilla warriors bound in the blood-oath cause that their leader invoked.”<sup>272</sup> To add insult, a prominent general in the South African Defence Force

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<sup>268</sup> For an in-depth and humorous portrait of Terre’Blanche in the process of his transformation into a figure of ridicule, see Nick Broomfield’s documentary, *The Leader, His Driver and the Driver’s Wife* (Lafayette, 1991).

<sup>269</sup> Clines, Francis X. “Apartheid’s Heirs Strut a Final Hour on South Africa’s Political Stage.” *New York Times* 29 Apr. 1994: [Arts] 10.

<sup>270</sup> Clines, 10.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

simply dismissed Terre'Blanche as "a non-entity."<sup>273</sup> The civil war the AWB had promised to ignite never threatened to materialize.

There were also South African critics, such as Chris Roper, who resisted this portrayal of Terre'Blanche as a "Boer Buffoon," or as "an embarrassing uncle who turns up at family event, gets drunk and makes a fool of himself, but is forgiven by everybody."<sup>274</sup> Speaking of the popular South African manner of referring to Eugene Terre'Blanche as "E.T.," Roper asked:

Why do we find it amusing that Terre'Blanche's initials are the same as the name of a cute kiddy film hero? It's a mechanism for familiarising evil, for normalising evil. And while laughing at evil might lead you to imagine you can control it, that's a mistake. [. . .] I think we make fun of Eugene Terre'Blanche because he is everything we fear: the unrepentant racist who renders suspect, and slightly hollow, all our fledgling attempts to normalize our society. I think we make fun of him because we want to pretend that he's a Boer buffoon, an Afrikaner problem. He's not. He's a South African problem, who belongs to all of us, and his survival bears uncomfortable witness to our inability to deal with racism in our country.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals: The Untold Story of South Africa's Apartheid-Era Generals*. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2001: 210.

<sup>274</sup> Roper, Chris. "Terre'Blanche, a Boer Buffoon?," *24 News* 16 Jun. 2004: [http://www.news24.com/News24/Columnists/Chris\\_Roper/0,,2-1630-1649\\_1549209,00.html](http://www.news24.com/News24/Columnists/Chris_Roper/0,,2-1630-1649_1549209,00.html) [19 Dec 2008].

<sup>275</sup> Roper.

South Africans were mistaken to treat Terre'Blanche, and the racist "evil" he embodied, as joke, although Roper seems resigned to the fact that this image of the AWB leader had become unshakeable.<sup>276</sup>

While cognizant of the common perception of Terre'Blanche in South Africa, and not wholly immune to its appeal,<sup>277</sup> Antony Sher took Roper's position that referring to the AWB leader as "E.T." was a mistake. This argument is prominently featured in an early section of *Woza Shakespeare!*, when Sher reports a disturbing moment he experienced with his black domestic in Johannesburg. While awaiting a taxi in his guest accommodations, Sher narrates:

I absently watch the telly, while Selena cleans round it. The news is on, and the neo-Nazi AWB leader, Eugene Terre'Blanche (they call him E.T. here) suddenly makes an appearance under her duster. First some old stuff – with him as a wild animal, snarling and slaving – and then some more contemporary footage, with him as a white-haired old dinosaur, saying, 'If the war is over, let's send the soldiers home, referring to the AWB men still in prison. His array of actor's equipment – his eyes, his voice, his passion – is impressive, but he has always mesmerized me in a more personal way, the same way that Hitler does (*I haven't done anything and he wants to get rid of me*), and I expect him to have

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<sup>276</sup> Another South African critic who will not frame Eugene Terre'Blanche as comic figure is satirist and performance artist Pieter-Dirk Uys, who, despite imitating many of the former National Party's more hard-line Afrikaner leaders (such as P.W. Botha) refuses to play "E.T." because "there is nothing redeeming about him." See Uys's *Between the Devil and the Deep: A Memoir of Acting and Reacting*. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2005: 137.

<sup>277</sup> Gregory Doran reported that Antony Sher gave a caricature performance of Terre'Blanche while the pair visited the Voortrekker Monument near Pretoria – the Afrikaner's most sacred national shrine. Sher and Doran, 49.

the same impact on Selina. But no, she just carries on dusting. As though he's just another baddie from one of the dreadful American soaps which swamp SA telly.<sup>278</sup>

Accompanying this story, and its criticism of South African complacency towards Terre'Blanche, was a full-page sketch of the AWB leader's hate-contorted face filling the frame of a television screen while the hand of the maid is seen to be nonchalantly cleaning the top. Unlike the majority of that country, Antony Sher was personally "mesmerized" by Terre'Blanche's oratorical performance, and worried about that his Neo-Nazi message was virulent enough to cause a new outbreak of violent Afrikaner nationalism.<sup>279</sup> For Sher, "E.T." was no laughing matter.

### *Constructing Sher's Titus*

This dialogue about the nature and meaning of Eugene Terre'Blanche is necessary because of sharply divergent interpretations of what – and whom – Antony Sher's Titus was meant to signify. While not directly addressing this controversy in *Woza Shakespeare!*, Sher claimed that the only "local" materials he had employed in his construction of the character were the Afrikaans language (especially as spoken by his father, Mannie Sher) and, visually, the square-cut beard he derived from the general appearance of Afrikaner "bitter-ender's."<sup>280</sup> The

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<sup>278</sup> Sher and Doran, 107.

<sup>279</sup> Aletta J. Norval offers an elegant analysis of the Terre'Blanche problem in *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse* (London: Verso, 1996). She argues that after the National Party decided to negotiate with the ANC in the late 1980s, the ruling party adopted a much more pragmatic public rhetoric, ceding its previous reliance on "volkist mythology" to groups such as the AWB. However, once it was no longer synonymous with the power of the South African state, the force of this mythology could, predictably, only diminish.

<sup>280</sup> Sher and Doran, 130.

other principle influence on his costuming, i.e., his military battle dress, was patterned on George C. Scott's uniform in the film *Patton*.<sup>281</sup>

Furthermore, Sher implicitly emphasized that “relevance” was not the desideratum driving the composition of his Titus, but the Rodenburgian “right to speak” he experienced with the Afrikaans dialect. Noting that his father was a “Boerjood,” or a South African Jew otherwise assimilated with Afrikaans language and culture, Sher credited him with the heavily accented English that became “the basis for the one I’m using for Titus.”<sup>282</sup> The Afrikaans “‘R’ sound is fantastic,” he enthused: “It allows you to claw through certain words, possessing them, or the opposite. Rome becomes *Rrrrrrome*. Bitter becomes *bitterrrr*.”<sup>283</sup> Furthermore:

My voice, my vocal range, feels liberated by this full-blooded Boer accent, and yet it’s not that much closer to my original childhood accent – mildly Jewish, English-speaking South African – than the RP British accent that I later learned at the Webber-Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art in London.<sup>284</sup>

Therefore, as far as the actor was concerned, ‘liberating’ his natural voice and cathartically valorizing the identity of his father were the only inspirations for the Afrikanerization of Titus worth analyzing; the attempt to draw parallels between this character and any (other) real South African figure would be “specious.”<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 117. Sher later states: “As the character of Titus slowly grows, there’s more and more of Dad in him – I’m moving like Dad, sounding like him, *being* him [...]”

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>285</sup> Wilcox, Richard. “Titus Andronicus.” *Plays and Players* Aug. 1995: 33.

Unfortunately for Sher, the difficulty of his position was compounded by the fact that every theatre critic, both in South Africa and the United Kingdom, viewed his Titus as an undisguised allusion to Eugene Terre'Blanche and a patent marker of the production's bid for "relevance." Leaving the South African reviews aside (since their imputation of a resemblance to Terre'Blanche could be dismissed as bias against the show,) it becomes noteworthy that most British critics also depicted an obvious reference, and that they praised the actor for the boldness of this choice. In a preview for the Royal National Theatre's house publication, Richard Wilcox wrote: "[Sher's] bearded Titus speaks in an appropriately harsh Afrikaner accent, rather like that of the repulsive Eugene Terre'Blanche when he deigns to speak English."<sup>286</sup> Nick Curtis opened his review for *The Evening Standard* by stating emphatically "Antony Sher is the spitting image of that crashing Boer, white supremacist Eugene Terre'Blanche."<sup>287</sup> "Sher's beefy, bearded Titus enters in a Jeep," Benedict Nightingale explained to his readers, "the medals of his uniform adding to the impression of a respectable Terre'Blanche [who] exudes patriotic dimwittedness."<sup>288</sup> Michael Kustow, a former dramaturg with the Royal Shakespeare Company and the reviewer whom Doran and Sher singled out for his insight into what they had "really accomplished" with their production, wrote:

Sher squeezes volumes out of Afrikaans nasality and twang, leaning into long vowels like a sailor hauling against a gale, drawing from his accent a desolate poetry in Titus's bereavement. He looks like a cross between Fidel Castro and the Afrikaans extremist Eugene Terre Blanche. The accent helps him convey a

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<sup>286</sup> Wilcox, 33.

<sup>287</sup> Curtis, Nick. "Classic Colonised in Clumsy Fashion." *Evening Standard* (London) 19 Jul. 1995: 44.

<sup>288</sup> Nightingale, 19.

religious sense of rectitude, the muscular force of a career soldier, and a yearning bewilderment that you see on some Afrikaner faces here, after the collapse of all they held dear.<sup>289</sup>

Not only does Kustow confirm what others had observed about this Titus' resemblance to Terre'Blanche, but he also reads a profoundly melancholic chord into the choice - an interpretation that Sher and Doran had publicly avoided in favor of the more celebratory rhetoric of the New South Africa.

Whether intentional or not, the fact remains that when Sher came to "resalute" his country with Titus's opening soliloquy ("Hail, Rome, victorious in thy mourning weeds!" 1.1.73), he did so in the persona of an extraordinarily divisive figure. Guilty by association, the Andronici sons could also be read as Neo-Nazi AWB militia instead of as SADF soldiers.<sup>290</sup> The World War II-era ("elsewhen") costume touches, such as Titus' Sam Browne belt, or the Andronici's puttees only partially cut against the grain of these referents. Thus, even an immanent critique of Sher and Doran's Titus would have to conclude that they called attention to Terre'Blanche and the AWB—and this was part of the unwitting "relevance" the pair achieved on two continents.

### *Disposing of the Bodies*

Once on stage, the first order of business for Titus Andronicus is to see that the bodies of his sons who were killed in action receive proper interment in the family tomb. The deceased Andronici were represented in this production by two black, plastic body bags that were brought downstage in the presence of a small flame. When Lucius asks Titus to "Give us the proudest

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<sup>289</sup> Kustow, Michael. "Exorcizing Apartheid." *Sunday Times* 9 Apr. 1995: [Features] 20.

<sup>290</sup> Armistead, Claire. "Over His Dead Body." *The Guardian* 3 Apr. 1995: [T] 8.

prisoner of the Goths, / That we may hew his limbs and on a pile / Ad manes fratrum sacrifice his flesh” (1.1. 99 – 101), Titus readily accedes and offers Alarbus, the eldest son of Tamora. Tamora pleads for his life and begs Titus for “sweet mercy” (1.1.123) – mercy that Titus matter-of-factly refuses to give. Coupled with the semiotics of Titus and the Andronici as SADF/AWB troops, and as staged with realistic physical detail by Doran, the scene that unfolded resembled a reenactment of battlefield war crime. This association was heightened when Lucius, after having killed Alarbus, tossed the dog tags he had been wearing at the feet of Tamora, who wore them throughout the remainder of the production to represent her origin of hatred for the Andronici (Gould brandished them whenever she was asked to be merciful later in the play).

As the Goths were herded off the stage, Titus’ daughter Lavinia entered on the arm of Marcus. Actress Jennifer Woodbourne had bleached her hair blonde and lightened her skin for the role, in order for Lavinia to appear as Aryan as she was virginal.<sup>291</sup> Perhaps the most significant element to the character’s costuming was her dress: a long, white gown with matching hood, large enough to cover her head like a sunbonnet. Consistent with Sher and Doran’s decision to portray *all* of the Andronici - even the women - as right-wing Afrikaners, the Anglophone Woodbourne was directed to speak with a pronounced Afrikaans dialect.<sup>292</sup> These choices culminated in creating a Lavinia who made specific visual and auditory allusions to the “Kappie Kommando,” a post-Boer War Afrikaner women’s nationalist organization.

After greeting his daughter, Titus throws his support to Saturninus’s claim to the throne as a simple matter of primogeniture; and as a political gesture of reciprocity, Saturninus then asks Titus for Lavinia’s hand in marriage. Titus agrees, but is confronted with the fact that

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<sup>291</sup> McDonnell, 47.

<sup>292</sup> Sher and Doran, 50.

Lavinia has already been promised to Bassianus. This leads to the first ‘rape’ of Lavinia, as she willingly escapes with Bassianus. Other Andronici sons help the couple escape, in defiance of Titus and Saturninus (who is not at all sorry to see them depart).

This scene presented Sher and Doran with two conceptual problems (only one of which they acknowledged). The first of these involved the clashing ‘relevancies’ of presenting Bassianus and Lavinia as lovers. Why would a right-wing Afrikaner woman be partnered with a Coloured left-bank radical? Second is the textual issue that all modern directors of this play have confronted with trepidation: Titus’ murder of his own son Mutius.<sup>293</sup>

Sher and Doran simply did not remark upon the pairing of Lucas and Woodbourne, despite the surface incompatibility of their social identities, and some of the rhetorical dissonances that occurred later in the play. For example, when the two discover Tamora cavorting with Aaron the Moor in Act 2, Bassianus and Lavinia both insult the Goth for the race of her lover. Bassianus: “Believe me, queen, your swart Cimmerian / Doth make your honour of his body’s hue, / Spotted, detested and abominable” (2.2.72-74). And while grasping Bassianus’ arm, Lavinia adds: “And let her joy her raven-coloured love” (2.2.83). These visually hypocritical sentiments make an odd match, but the eclecticism of their juxtaposition is unremarkable by the terms of “Royal Shakespeare.”

Sher and Doran, however, perceived the death of Mutius as a significant problem. “It’s a tricky one,” wrote Doran: “How do you find a journey for Titus to go, if he’s barking mad to start with?”<sup>294</sup> Sher referred to the action as Titus’ “hysteria,” and was concerned that it would fatally diminish an audience’s sympathy for the character.<sup>295</sup> According to Doran, however:

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<sup>293</sup> Dessen, Alan C. “Improving the Script: Staging Shakespeare and Others in 1995.” *Shakespeare Bulletin* (Winter 1996): 5-8.

<sup>294</sup> Sher and Doran, 111.

From a close study of the text, it seems that the death of Mutius might have been an afterthought, a late rewrite. It interrupts a conversation, and Marcus is given the clumsiest segue imaginable in an attempt to get back to the plot.<sup>296</sup>

So employing the type of selective reading strategy that he learned from John Barton at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Doran decided to give Mutius “the chop.” Into the gap created by this cut, Sher’s Titus merely looked on the departure of Lavinia with powerless amazement and “yearning bewilderment.”<sup>297</sup>

Thus in this production, Titus’ reversal from perpetrator to victim was firmly set in motion by the end of the first act—a choice calculated to boost audiences’ sympathy for this character as quickly as possible after the horror of the sacrifice of Alarbus. However, when considering how militaristic the Afrikaners' culture has been, and that they have their own word - *broedertwis* or “brothers’ struggle – to describe internecine family quarrels during times of political conflict, it becomes curious that Antony Sher failed to consider the relevance of this scene for a South African audience.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> *Ibid*, 23. Sher also sought to distinguish his Titus from the one created by Brian Cox in Deborah Warner’s highly regarded production of the play in 1989. As Sher writes: “I finally understand why, in Deborah Warner’s uncut version, Brian Cox had to play him bonkers from the word go. Battle-crazed. At the time, although I admired his performance, I wondered why he hadn’t given himself more of a journey. But I guess if you’re going to kill your own son in the first scene, for a minor misdemeanor, you have to be loony from the kick-off. Wonder if there’s a way ‘round that?”

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid*, 111.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>298</sup> Giliomee, Hermann Buhr. “Broedertwis’: Intra-Afrikaner Conflicts in the Transition from Apartheid.” *African Affairs* Vol. 91, No. 364 (Jul. 1992): 339-364. At several points in *Woza Shakespeare!* and later articles for the press, Antony Sher complained that Barney Simon suggested they do *Macbeth* because it was well known in South Africa, particularly since it was that country’s national education curriculum. Or as Sher reported Simon as advising, “But *Macbeth* is the school set text, and . . . we sometimes have a bit of a problem with audience numbers these days . . .” Sher and Doran, 36.

*“The Rise to Power”*

The end of the first act culminates in Saturninus taking Tamora to be his wife, suddenly catapulting her from that status of a captive prisoner of war to that of the Roman queen. As an overture to her revenge plot, Tamora brokers a public reconciliation between Saturninus and the Andronici—a new dispensation to be inaugurated with a royal hunt presided over by Titus the following morning. In the Market Theatre production, Doran interpolated a pantomimic scene in between these events that he entitled “The Rise to Power.”<sup>299</sup> It was deliberately patterned on images of the failed Bophutatswana coup attempt of 1994. Doran describes the transition scene in short passage:

We entitle the end of the act ‘The Rise to Power.’ ‘What happens in Rome is just what all the whites feared would happen after the Elections here,’ someone says. ‘Like the looting in Bop, that gave everyone the jitters. A real fright. Terrible!’<sup>300</sup>

To explain, “Bop” refers to the former Bantustan, or “independent homeland,” of Bophutatswana, which was best known as home to southern Africa’s version of Las Vegas.

According to the original blueprints for “grand apartheid,” the white South African government created an extensive series of putatively sovereign states (inspired by the United States’ reservation system for Native Americans) for that country’s black majority to call as their legal residences; a desperate fiction formative of the government’s assertion that most blacks

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<sup>299</sup> Sher and Doran, 113. Regarding Trevor Nunn, see Alan Sinfield’s “Royal Shakespeare: Theatre and the Making of Ideology.” *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994: 194.

<sup>300</sup> Sher and Doran, 113. The rioting in Bophutatswana was also one of Doran’s first impressions of South African politics. As he reports, while he was in Cape Town visiting with Sher’s parents, they watched live television coverage of the event: “black looters kicking out plate-glass windows in luxury shopping malls.” As Doran observed, “the Sher’s shuddered with horror. They were glimpsing their worst nightmares about the New South Africa; soon it would be Durban or Cape Town.” (*Ibid*, 34).

were merely guest-workers in their, otherwise, white country. Most countries in the world community refused to recognize these homelands. By the early 1990s, however, many of them had acquired corrupt – and well-armed – administrations which were opposed to the ANC’s plan to abolish the Bantustans and reintegrate them back into South Africa.

The most violent and, potentially, most destabilizing situation occurred in Bophutatswana, where an anti-annexationist dictator was the subject of a coup attempt by his pro-ANC armed forces.<sup>301</sup> Ominously, the former was aided by rogue elements of the SADF and AWB (who wished to convert Bophutatswana into independent *volkstaat* for Afrikaner separatists). The coup was a success and, in the process, created two of the most enduring images of the transitional era between the end of apartheid and the first democratic elections of 1994: the execution-style murder of three AWB members by a soldier of the Bophutatswana Defense Force [see image below], and the burning and looting of that homeland’s biggest shopping mall. “Bop,” as it was routinely called, was promptly dissolved. As one unnamed cast member stated, until South Africa’s national elections were conducted later that year, nobody knew whether the former Bantustan was a harbinger of civic conflict to come.

Such was Doran's inspiration for his “Rise to Power” sequence, which he began by having Saturninus pick up a brick from the ground and hurl it upstage to the sound of breaking glass. The following store alarm bells, sirens, and furious African drumming created a celebratory cacophony in which the Goth prisoners and others recreated the looting of Mmabatho’s Mega City Mall.<sup>302</sup> Chiron and Demetrius then dashed downstage with new costumes draped on a shopping carrel, grocery carts and a store mannequin. As Saturninus

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<sup>301</sup> Lawrence, Michael. “The 'Dog of the Boers': The Rise and Fall of Mangope in Bophuthatswana.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* Vol. 20, No. 3, Special Issue: *Ethnicity and Identity in Southern Africa* (Sep., 1994): 447-461.

<sup>302</sup> Sher and Doran, 114.

reemerged shirtless, playing a saxophone (the desired image, according to Doran, of “fiddling while Rome burns”<sup>303</sup>), the Goths changed into new finery: Tamora donned a green dress campily reminiscent of Shelly Winter’s costume in *The Poseidon Adventure* while, more significantly, Chiron and Demetrius assumed the attire of *skollies*, the low-life criminals known in South Africa for their garish, baggy suits. “In about thirty seconds of stage,” Doran writes, “we see the Goths take over Rome.”<sup>304</sup> This take-over was presented as a carnivalesque parallel to the successful 1994 elections (“the rise to power”), but as Doran also seemed to be aware, was semiotically rooted in an event that had provoked more anxiety than hope for the New South Africa. This, apparently, was also a desired claim on “relevance.”

*Enter Sello / Act II*

The morning hunt is preceded by a scene (2.1) in which the character of Aaron the Moor, played by South African television star Sello Ncube, is introduced as the play’s rascled Machiavel. Dressed in township clothes (a fatigue green vest, dirty green trousers, orange sneakers) and sporting elaborate tribal body tattoos, Sello’s Aaron was visibly aloof during the “Rise to Power,” direction that effectively underscored the Moor’s brooding alienation. As Antony Sher described his conception for this characterization of Aaron:

Sello, on the other hand, will never change out of his ragged clothes. No ‘Rise to Power’ for him. Just life in the bottom of the heap, as everyone’s servant, everyone’s ‘boy’, whether kitchen boy (he serves coffee for the hunt) or toy-boy (for Tamora). Sello’s Aaron moves with a muscular,

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<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*

rolling prowl, half threatening, half submissive, someone who keeps to the walls, to the sidelines, someone whom everybody else forgets to watch.<sup>305</sup>

Returning to the sort of animal metaphor favored by RSC actor training, Sher added “Aaron wrecks lives around him without leering or winking at the audience. It’s just par for the course, the law of the jungle. A harsh urban jungle, like Jo’burg.”<sup>306</sup> Sello’s Aaron was thus imagined to be the face of South Africa’s otherwise faceless black majority: a Sowetan Everyman, whose criminality was potentially political, but in a characteristic move of “Royal Shakespeare,” was also available to be perceived as a sign of Man’s essential (Hobbesian) depravity

Unlike some of the other adopted South African dialects employed by the cast, Sello used his own Tswana-accented English to speak Shakespeare’s verse. Even the most favorable reviews of the production, both British and South African, reported that it was often quite difficult to understand all of Aaron’s dialogue. Alastair Macaulay accurately noted that the actor “hits the first iamb of every line or phrase loudly and then traces a descending diminuendo,” a routine delivery that the reviewer confessed to be “tiresome.”<sup>307</sup>

In 2.1, Aaron’s soliloquy in which he resolves to do “away with slavish weeds and servile thoughts!” and “be bright, and shine in pearl and gold” is interrupted by Chiron and Demetrius, who are arguing about which one should “deserve my mistress’ [Lavinia’s] grace” (1.1.517-18; 533). Aaron counsels them to take turns raping Lavinia, a proposal that the brothers find to be acceptable. From the standpoint of “relevance,” though, Sher and Doran fashioned a scene in which a black man from the townships helped to strategize the rape of an Afrikaner woman by a

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<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 156. On surprise semiotics of Sello’s journey: “Unlike some productions, in which Aaron’s villainy results in material gains as the production proceeds (often presented visually through costuming), this Aaron remains dressed as a servant-boy throughout and refuses to adopt Roman norms of fashion, deportment, or attitude;” his appearance is one of unappeased and all-round “defiance” (McDonnell, 98).

<sup>306</sup> Sher and Doran, 156.

<sup>307</sup> Maculay, Alastair. “Apartheid Titus.” *The Financial Times* 15 Jul. 1995: [Arts] 15.

pair of Indian and Coloured *skollies*. There is nothing in *Woza Shakespeare!* or elsewhere to suggest that either Sher or Doran were concerned about the potential for offense that this framing of the story might produce. Given the implied history of racist violence attached to their figuration of Aaron, it was only natural, even unremarkable, that Aaron would attempt to “resist” white power in this manner.

The royal hunt began with the image of the Andronici sons, “broody and disconsolate,” still in uniform, smoking marijuana and standing around a military jeep in the pre-dawn light (another image of post-traumatic coping behavior).<sup>308</sup> Sher’s Titus entered at a jaunty clip and on the line “And wake the emperor, and ring a hunter’s peal,” reached into the jeep and honked a functional car horn repeatedly in one of the production’s few moments of intended levity. A very hung-over Saturninus then emerged with his equally besotted entourage to suffer through the Andronici’s Afrikaner safari ritual. To further emphasize Aaron’s subalternity, Doran added him to the scene. “As the guests arrive,” Doran writes, “Aaron, still the servant, still the ‘boy’ [...] holds the tray of coffee while Titus and Marcus slosh Oude Meester Brandy into their steaming cups.”<sup>309</sup> Pointedly, Saturninus and the Andronici never gave Aaron a glance as they took the proffered glasses.

Following the dispersal of the hunting party, Aaron’s revenge plot begins to unfold when Bassianus and Lavinia surprise him in the presence of Tamora, who has been amorously engaged with the Moor. After Bassianus and Lavinia engage in, as I have already noted, some oddly configured racist insults, Chiron and Demetrius enter to murder the former and rape the latter. One of the biggest staging hurdles facing Sher and Doran was how to handle the violation and mutilation of Lavinia, an episode of an extraordinarily traumatic nature, even by the

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<sup>308</sup> Sher and Doran, 123.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

Elizabethans' high threshold for stage violence. Rather than choosing to portray the event in either a stylized manner (Brook) or entirely realistically (Warner), Doran chose to combine elements of both approaches.

While Chiron and Demetrius licked Lavinia's face all over, the store mannequin from "The Rise to Power" was brought out to the sound of a tinkling waltz tune. Lavinia then waltzed herself out of their clutches and performed a dissociative, slowly spinning dance while the brothers graphically raped the mannequin, cutting off its hands and "wav[ing] them at her obscenely."<sup>310</sup> As a coup de grace, Demetrius produced a knife and rammed it repeatedly into the mannequin's vagina while Chiron hopped about, laughing. Jennifer Woodbourne's Lavinia dropped to the stage and, with her back to the audience, quickly wrapped her hands with flesh-colored athletic bandages to produce stumps—a restrained theatrical device designed to indicate the nature of the injury rather than 'express' it as Peter Brook had by having Vivian Leigh's Lavinia use Kabuki-esque red ribbons.<sup>311</sup>

For Marcus's subsequent discovery of Lavinia alone in the forest, Doran had Dale Cutts record his long monologue – "Who is this – my niece that flies away so fast?" (2.3.11) – as a voice-over, played across the sound system while Marcus gazed on in shocked disbelief. Titus mirrored the same face of bewildered powerlessness in the next scene, when Aaron's plot implicates his sons Quintus and Martius in the murder of Bassianus, and Saturninus marches them both off to imprisonment. Soon after, Titus' eldest son Lucius is summarily banished.

The beginning of Act 3 might have been entitled 'The Loss of Power,' for the fortunes of the Andronici were patently reversed when Doran had Quintus and Martius begin the scene with a "perp walk" parade: lashed to the same ox harness that had served to bind the Goths in Act 1,

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<sup>310</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

<sup>311</sup> McDonnell, 70.

the young Andronici were set upon by a spitting mob wielding sticks and shouting insults from various South African languages. The spit, Doran emphasizes, was real, not pantomimed. As images from the performance confirm, the actors' beards "drip[ped] with gobs of rheum."<sup>312</sup> Most of the mob was presented as members of Johannesburg's black underclass, further racializing this image. Titus begs the gathered Romans to have pity on him "whose youth was spent / In dangerous wars whilst you securely slept," (3.1.3) but his cries fall on deaf ears. Then deciding to "tell my sorrows to the stones," Sher bent down and pulled up a section of the faux marbled stage floor to reveal bright red dirt – the soil of Johannesburg's landscape that would progressively become the entire stage floor.

Doran offers a detailed account for this design element that explains its "relevance." "At the start of our second half," he writes:

Rome has practically disintegrated. Nadya has designed the set so that, all being well, the central area of flagstones can break in half, revealing a gash of red Johannesburg sand underneath. It's as if the very stones of Rome have eroded away; the forum has crumbled and been overwhelmed by a tide of detritus. There are flies everywhere.<sup>313</sup>

And later in the play, when Titus feigns his *aristeia* and shoots arrows with cries for justice to the gods (4.3), Doran populated the stage with "dump people" in order to make Rome resemble the "post-apartheid Hillbrow district."<sup>314</sup> Doran continues:

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<sup>312</sup> Sher and Doran, 148.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid*.

Picking their way through the encroaching dump will be an underclass of drop-outs, runaways and homeless tramps. Tony has asked each of the actors to observe a fragment of behavior by real characters on the street, and then reproduce it. A real world emerges, populated by street-kids and substance abusers”<sup>315</sup>

Among the sketches of contemporary urban Johannesburg that the costume designer and cast created were a homeless man with an “unblinking reptilian stare,” “a drunk, so sodden his body’s turned to jelly,” and an Afrikaans simpleton who wears “a scout uniform three sizes too small for him” who casts about, “pining for something lost” while “picking at scabs.”<sup>316</sup>

In the words of South African theatre scholar Loren Kruger, this production can be understood to have created a reflection of Johannesburg as the “edgy city.” Writing in 2001, Kruger reports that “the end of apartheid has not brought peace to Africa’s wealthiest city, but rather unleashed the lawlessness that plagued black township residents for decades on the wealthy (mostly white) population as well[.]”<sup>317</sup> Thus the Hillbrow district, which had been a neighborhood for Johannesburg’s young, white professionals prior to the removal of segregation laws, is now ground zero for a “‘lost generation’ of youth with little education and no prospects [that] has turned not only criminal but violent, matching theft and burglary with apparently gratuitous rape, torture and murder.”<sup>318</sup> The crime rate is so high, Kruger contends, that it has placed Johannesburg’s professional theatres “under threat” as the “urban coherence of the city as a city [...] has lost ground to evacuated public spaces and fortified private enclaves of an ex-

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<sup>315</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>317</sup> Kruger, Loren. “Theatre, Crime, and the Edgy City in Post-Apartheid Johannesburg.” *Theatre Journal* Vol. 53, No. 2 (2001): 224.

<sup>318</sup> Kruger, 224.

urban environment.”<sup>319</sup> Put simply, the majority of Johannesburg’s affluent whites fled to the northern suburbs. When South Africa’s Stock Exchange followed suit and relocated to the edge city Sandton in 1993, it was effectively made the country’s gated economic capital.<sup>320</sup>

This geographically circumscribed, intra-national migration was put into motion by these sorts of “dump people” as well as murderers and rapists that Sher and Doran made a primary feature of their “relevant” *Titus Andronicus*. Indeed, many of Antony Sher’s observations in *Woza Shakespeare!* are responses to the ‘edginess’ of living in Johannesburg, and the affect that it had on all phases of the production, from ticket sales to fundamental questions of artistic conceptualization. “A strange place, Jo’burg,” Sher writes:

It’s a city which I don’t really know. I was born and brought up in Cape Town and never came here till last year, just before the elections [. . .] Glassy skyscrapers, fortresses of the old South Africa, hover above a new third-world street life: the pavements crammed with people cooking, sleeping, selling fruit, cutting hair – while crippled beggars limp and crawl their way along. Not a white face to be seen, of course – except in cars, their windows and doors tightly locked. Then at night everyone disappears. It’s an unofficial curfew. The streets radiate a peculiar, silent danger. Jo’burg, murder capital of the world.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>320</sup> Czegledy, Andre. “Villas of the Highveld: A Cultural Perspective on Johannesburg and Its Northern Suburbs.” *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid City*. Richard Tomlimson, ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2003: 21–42.

<sup>321</sup> Sher and Doran, 7-8.

The streets of Johannesburg after ‘everyone has disappeared,’ i.e., suburban whites, is the world into which Sher and Doran thrust the surviving Andronici.

The crime of this environment, already prefigured by the *skollies'* rape of Lavinia, was further reinforced in 3.1 when Aaron tricks Titus into allowing his hand to be cut off. After being promised that if any of the Andronici should remove a hand “And send it to the king, he for the same / Will send thee hither both thy sons alive” (3.1.155-56), Marcus and Lucius race offstage to find a suitable instrument for amputating one of their own. Titus waits until he and Aaron are alone on stage to request, “lend me thy hand and I will give thee mine” (3.1.188). Aaron promptly obliges him.

In his production, Doran framed the scene as an act of violence by a black township criminal against an aged Afrikaner militarist. The contemporary relevance of this image was enhanced by the realism with which the moment was staged; while the others went searching for an “axe,” Aaron produced a *panga*, the crude, semi-curved machete that remains the most commonly employed weapon of murder and mutilation in South Africa. He then proceeded to sever Titus' hand with not one, but three strikes of the *panga* as the general screamed in pain. For a tourniquet, Sher scanned the ground for its detritus, then wrapped his stump with a black, plastic garbage bag. Aaron exited the stage only to return a moment later, with the similarly wrapped heads of Quintus and Martius, and to the sound of buzzing flies – another local cue.

#### *Titus' Aristeia*

Doran staged Titus' next entrance (4.3) as “a parody of his triumphal entry” in 1.1 by having him appear disheveled and downtrodden, wearing a somewhat *buffo* white helmet, baggy

desert camouflage fatigues, and with a dirty yellow bandanna around his neck. The noteworthy innovation here was to have Sher pushed onto stage while standing upright in a shopping cart: an ironic reference to the military jeep that had previously served as his ‘chariot,’ and a visual reference to one of the most iconic objects associated with post-apartheid Hillbrow: the shopping cart.

The image of Titus' parodic entrance presents a caricature of the “edgy city” that borders on camp, but Johannesburg audiences would have recognized the seriousness of its representation. In the photograph above, published the previous year as the centerpiece to a supermarket advertisement in *The Star*, the smiles of the three uniformed guards belie the dangerous circumstances that were responsible for their presence. Crime had become so prevalent in urban Johannesburg that this grocery chain hired former Umkhonto we Sizwe (ANC) guerilla fighters to protect shoppers from being mugged or murdered in its parking lots. Under these social conditions, the shopping cart functioned as symbol of anxiety; the sight of armed and friendly soldiers surrounding it only underscored the city's escalating potential for violence.

From this perch, Titus ordered his retinue to shoot arrows bearing petitions “for justice and for aid” to various Roman gods (4.3.15). Emphasizing the ‘Quixotic’ quality of Titus’ endeavor, Doran cut the minor Andronici characters of Young Lucius, Publius, Caius and Sempronius who serve as the archers in the text and instead assigned the role to the “tin pot army” gathered around Titus in addled curiosity.<sup>322</sup>

After the first volley of appeals had been fired, Ivan Lucas re-entered the stage in a new role: that of the Clown with a basket of pigeons. Essentially a reprisal of the one-man comedy

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<sup>322</sup> Sher and Doran, 159.

routine that had served as the actor's audition ("A Klonkie Full of Kak"), Lucas' Clown was described as being a "Coloured pigeon fancier from the Cape Flats, a *klonkie* who can't say his R's."<sup>323</sup> As written by Shakespeare, the Clown is a rustic whose speech is riddled with mispronunciations and unintended double entendres. Lucas' thick Coloured-Afrikaans accent, which turned certain lines into full-blown Afrikaans translations, conveyed a similar sense of comedic low status. Doran used this character to shift the subsequent scene almost entirely into the realm of the burlesque, staging it so that when the Clown was sent to Saturninus with Titus' entreaty in 4.3, he discovered the emperor sitting on a modern toilet and practicing an anti-Andronici speech. "To see him quivering with fear and anger," Doran explains, "having retreated to the bog, bravely but ineffectually rehearsing his attack on Titus, seems to us to capture precisely the absurdity into which the play descends in this act."<sup>324</sup> Furthering the ridiculousness of this scene, Gys de Villiers was also permitted the use of an oxygen mask, a comic-tranquilizing device directly borrowed from David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet*. It would not require much pushing to make this tyrant fall.

#### *Lucius and the Goth Army Redux*

Lucius, meanwhile, had fled Rome to raise an army amongst the Goths, which Doran presented as a journey into 'going native' for Afrikaans actor Martin le Maitre. The "flourish" and "drums" that announce the beginning of 5.1 became a recreation of martial ratiéh dance that is "traditionally performed in the Malay communities in Cape Town."<sup>325</sup> Others in the cast referred to this moment as "a Goth hakka," after the Maori war dance made famous by New Zealand's national rugby team, the "All Blacks." The Goths also wore costumes similar to the

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<sup>323</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid*, 147.

team's uniform: black outfits that suggested a guerilla army, such as South Vietnam's Vietcong. During Lucius' subsequent exhortation to his new soldiers ("Approved warriors and my faithful friends" 5.1.1), the Goths punctuated the war council with chants of "Ohgee!," a Zulu ejaculation of ritual assent.

The emphasis of the scene appears to be on the Africanization of the Afrikaner Lucius – a vision of potentially great pertinence, even utopian potential, for a production that self-consciously sought to supplement the discourse of "reconciliation." But with Aaron's sudden arrival, babe in arms, a series of distinctly inflammatory images was created. Despite the adopted African touches to his appearance (brown leather fringe armband, same black t-shirt as the Goths), Le Maitre's Lucius nevertheless appeared to be an Afrikaner soldier torturing and interrogating a helpless black victim. The raced cruelty of Lucius was also italicized by having him rudely handle Aaron's child, which was represented by a bundle swaddled in black plastic bagging.

This association of specifically white supremacist violence was a deliberate one; Doran quotes Le Maitre as saying that the stage image was "just like one of those old photos of blacks being hanged in the Deep South,"<sup>326</sup> and admits that this is exactly how he wanted to code Lucius' violence. To perpetuate the analogy, Doran rejected the idea of having Lucius kill Aaron by "necklacing" him – putting a tire around his neck and setting it on fire – because that was "a system of execution used by blacks on blacks, but this is a lynch mob. And it gets more like the Ku-Klux-Klan," the director adds, "when Lucius instructs the Goths to hang Aaron's baby in

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<sup>326</sup> *Ibid*, 174. Doran's choice to call lynching a "mob" act and necklacing a "system" is an invidious comparison that says more about the director's cultural preconceptions than it does about the reality of township violence, especially that between ANC and Inkatha Freedom Party supporters in the run-up to that country's 1994 elections. For more information on this topic, see: Marinovich, Greg and Joao Silva. *The Bang-Bang Club: Snapshots from a Hidden War*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.

front of its father's face."<sup>327</sup> Le Maitre was directed to perform the execution while allowing "no flicker of sentimentality to invade Lucius," for essentially the character is "a hard-line man of war, reactionary, racist, his father's son."<sup>328</sup> The SABC's filmed record of the production thoroughly supports Doran's representation of his performance.

Neither Doran nor Sher, it must be noted, explicitly recognized the more obvious – and local – similarities between Lucius and either the SADF, AWB or the old apartheid-era's notorious internal security service. What Doran did worry about was that final image he created for the pair: having Lucius order the Goths to bury Aaron up to his neck in the red dust to starve to death. He wanted the scene to shift the audiences' sympathies from the Andronici to Aaron, but understood that white South Africans might read it differently.<sup>329</sup> The moment was "politically sensitive," Doran explained, "there might be those who would read Aaron's fate not as a harsh sentence imposed on a man brutalized by oppression, but as a generic punishment to be meted out to his race."<sup>330</sup> Put another way, would whites – incorrectly – cheer the destruction of Aaron rather than – correctly – recognize their deeper complicity for Aaron's acts of vengeance?

The second reading formation has become standard for Othello, in no small part because Shakespeare's text presents him as a tragic figure, a role that is sharply contrasted by the (very Aaron-like) villainy of Iago. Aside from the moving speech Aaron delivers on behalf of his son (4.2.89 – 105), the text presents obstacles to portraying him merely as a victim "brutalized by oppression." This concern prompted Doran to direct against the grain of the script in two

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<sup>327</sup> Sher and Doran, 174.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

respects: adding a subtext to Aaron's final soliloquy ("I have done a thousand dreadful things" 5.1.141) and relocating Marcus' short 5.3.78 speech ("You sad-faced men, people and sons of Rome") to the end of the play – where they formed the last words of the production.

Doran's solution for the perceived empathy gap between Aaron and his mostly white audience was to ask Sello to play his final litany of misdeeds as an act of defiant, but false, braggadocio. After struggling with the unrepentant "tone" of Aaron's final statements, Doran reports that he and Sello made an important discovery in rehearsal:

It then strikes us that he is lying. Why? Because he is performing the role that white society expects him to play – the devil. Since medieval days the devil has always been pictured as black. To Sello, this psychological profile seems accurate and familiar.<sup>331</sup>

Their revelation was manifested in Sello's delivery of the monologue, one whose grotesqueness already seem pointedly incredible on the page, e.g., Aaron's claim to have repeatedly dug up corpses and deposit them on the doorsteps of their still-grieving relations. However, since Doran did not cut Aaron's detailed confession regarding the destruction of the Andronici – the contents of which were entirely true – the desired effect of producing empathy was incomplete.

Before Marcus's relocated plea for healing could be applied as a rhetorical balm for the violence of Aaron's execution, however, the production still had two more scenes of vengeance to perform: Tamora's audience with Titus as "Revenge" personified, and the gruesome Thyestean banquet that concludes the play. The former scene (5.2) was predictably 'Africanized' by having Tamora and her sons wear ritual masks that were procured in a Johannesburg street market. Gould performed "Revenge" with a seductive dance that visibly mesmerized Titus into believing he was in the presence of malevolent spirits, with the illusion of traumatic dissociation

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<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*

bolstered by the sight of Sher slowly carving “bloody lines” into his arm and wrist (5.2.14). The comparatively generic nature of these tribal masks, in addition to the psychological (rather than culturally-coded) image of Titus as a “cutter” shifted the scene out of “relevance,” and may have achieved the production's stated goal of eschewing direct “parallels” to South African politics.

The banquet scene (5.3), however, returned to the production’s focus on Afrikanerdom by framing Titus’ feast as a *braaivleis*, or traditional Afrikaans barbecue. Strands of Christmas lights, a wooden table fashioned out of a door resting on crates, and a *potjie* (dutch oven) suggested an Andronici family now reduced to the status of poor whites - the “dump people.”

Despite his position that the violence in *Titus Andronicus* was not “gratuitous” in an “African” context, Doran staged the subsequent action more as *grand guignol* farce rather than as serious drama. Titus made his entrance to the feast in a comically enormous blood-spattered apron with a white handkerchief tied around his head, while Saturninus took hits from his laughing gas-filled oxygen mask to sooth his nerves. Tamora, “having learned very little Roman etiquette, tuck[ed] straight in” to Titus’ over-sized pie as soon as she was served – and did not stop eating until its human ingredients were revealed.<sup>332</sup>

When it came time for Titus to strangle his daughter, a moment of pathos otherwise surrounded by bathetic effects, Sher waltzed Lavinia around to the same waltz that played during her rape. However, as Maureen McDonnell has correctly observed, Jennifer Woodbourne – apparently in tension with Doran’s directorial intentions – played Lavinia as physically struggling against Titus right up until her death.<sup>333</sup> This choice undercut the presentation of her death as a mercy killing, although Sher was visibly distraught and embracing the desirability of his own, imminent destruction.

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<sup>332</sup> *Ibid*, 177.

<sup>333</sup> McDonnell, 71.

The spasm of recognitions and murderous reversals that followed, by contrast, were entirely slapstick in their design. When informed that she was “Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred” (5.361), Tamora screamed and spewed copious amounts of food onto the stage floor until her Titus grabbed her, forced her face down into the pie, and smothered her to death. Saturninus then stabbed Titus to avenge his wife, felling him on top of Tamora before once more availing himself of his gas mask. Lucius seized the opportunity to murder Saturninus, holding the mask over his face until he expired from asphyxiation. In the SABC broadcast of the production, which was recorded before a live audience, each of the last three deaths was greeted with howls of laughter.

### *Final Speeches*

After so much revenge and carnage, Sher and Doran’s next task was to fashion a conciliatory *denouement* from a text that, as even their most sympathetic critics observed, resists such a reading. To review the script that Shakespeare wrote, the killings of Lavinia, Tamora, Titus and Saturninus provoke another political crisis in Rome. Marcus and Lucius take turns orating to the gathered Roman public, justifying all of their actions – even Titus’ grisly revenge plot – and advancing Lucius’ claim to be the next emperor.<sup>334</sup> The Roman people, represented by various Lords and plebeians, side whole-heartedly with the remaining Andronici. Thus empowered, Marcus and Lucius call, not for the cessation of vengeance, but for its ultimate performance upon the corpse of Tamora and the shackled body of Aaron. Regarding the Goth queen, Lucius declares, “As for the ravenous tiger, Tamora,”

No funeral rite, nor man in mourning weed,

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<sup>334</sup> Marcus: “Now judge what cause Titus had to revenge/ These wrongs unspeakable, past patience,/ Or more than any living man could bear. / Now have you heard the truth: what say you, / Romans?” (5.3.124 – 128).

No mournful bell shall ring her burial,  
But throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey:  
Her life was beastly and devoid of pity,  
And being dead, let birds on her take pity (5.3.194 – 200).

This is the legal desecration that, in Elizabethan England, was reserved for dissident “recusants” and other Catholic enemies of the Protestant state.<sup>335</sup>

What befalls Aaron is of a crueller order, since he is still living. Marcus, positioned to be the voice of conciliatory reason at end of the Market production, summons Aaron to the stage with words that possess nothing of the spirit of mercy:

Go, go into old Titus’ sorrowful house  
And hither hale that misbelieving Moor  
To be adjudged some direful slaughtering death  
As punishment for his most wicked life (5.3.141 – 144).

Therefore, in the play, Marcus is the spokesman for a very limited, internecine type of reconciliation; he grants no amnesties to racial Others, such as the foreign Goths (soon to be dispatched from Rome) or Aaron the Moor (who is condemned to spectacular punishment).

Lucius delivers a “direful punishment” to the unbowed Aaron, who taunts, “If one good deed in all my life I did / I do repent it from my very soul” (5.3.188-9). Imagining a theatre of revenge that will draw Roman spectators for days after the burials of Lavinia and Titus, Lucius inaugurates his new regime by issuing the following decree:

Set [Aaron] breast-deep in earth and famish him;  
There let him stand and rave and cry for food.

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<sup>335</sup> Asquith, Clare. *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare*. London: PublicAffairs, 2006: 38.

If anyone relieves or pities him,  
For the offence he dies. This is our doom;  
Some stay to see him fastened in the earth (5.3.178-82).

Thus the whole of Rome is compelled to become accomplices in the cruel and unusual excesses of Andronici 'justice.'

*"Improving the Script"*

Doran's dramaturgical answer to the unremitting vindictiveness of Shakespeare's script was to substantially cut and revise the text after the murders in 5.3. Marcus's summoning of Aaron was cut in its entirety, as well as most of his political oratory surrounding it.<sup>336</sup> The speaking roles of the assembled Romans were either cut or reassigned to Emilius, whose function was shifted to de facto Tribune. The cruelest of Lucius's lines regarding the punishment of Aaron – as well as Aaron's contemptuous reply – were retained, but Doran also made significant cuts to his lines about the broader political context of his actions.<sup>337</sup> Noteworthy also is the cut of Lucius' son (called the "Boy"), who in the script is the object of his father's tender affections. In the absence of such a character, Lucius was presented in a still harsher light.

The changes created the possibility of refashioning Marcus into a wearily sympathetic *raisonneur*. In *Woza Shakespeare!*, Doran suggests that he merely lifted the character's 5.3.67

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<sup>336</sup> The 5.3 cuts for Marcus include: 118 – 135; 140 – 144; 155 – 158; and 166 – 168.

<sup>337</sup> The 5.3 cuts for Lucius include: 95 – 117 and 159 – 165.



O, let me teach you how to knit again 5.3.69

This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf,

These broken limbs again into one body. 5.3.71

Doran's interpolation of 5.3.72 demonstrates how inventive he had to be in order to give his *Titus* a conciliatory ending. Originally assigned to an anonymous Roman Lord, the first word of this speech is not "lest," but "let." Thus the governing sentiment, as Jonathan Bate has observed, is "Let Rome herself be bane unto herself," which he interprets to mean that "far from mending itself, the body of the state might as well execute itself (be its own bane)."<sup>339</sup> After all, the Andronicis' revenge plot culminates with "the Goths in the very heart of once-all-conquering Rome," a seeming catastrophic defeat that moves the Lord to advocate the "collective suicide" of the Roman people.<sup>340</sup> Marcus' effort to establish his authority as a 'teacher' of civic healing is initially rejected in the face of a lamentation that Rome "Do shameful execution on herself!" (5.3.74). This incipient conflict between the Andronici and the people of Rome is resolved by the spectacular scapegoating of Aaron, a theatrical show of force that closely paralleled the Elizabethan state's displays of power.<sup>341</sup> As written, the last image of the play is that of the Roman people pacified by the sight of public execution.

This content was, understandably, incompatible with the sort of "relevance" Sher and Doran sought to achieve for this production of *Titus*, although the Roman Lord's call for exercising the 'Samson option' might have echoed similar cries by certain voices amongst

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<sup>339</sup> Jonathan Bate, editor's footnote. *Titus Andronicus*, 269.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid*, footnotes 72-5, 76-8.

<sup>341</sup> Orgel, Stephen. *The Illusion of Power; Political Theatre in the English Renaissance*. Berkley: California UP, 1975.

Afrikaners dismayed by the 1994 elections.<sup>342</sup> By changing “let” to “lest,” Marcus’ oration became a cautionary statement, and an exhortation to abjure further acts of vengeance. The textual revision was given additional moral gravitas by having Dale Cutts speak these words while collapsed on the stage floor in a *gest* of broken supplication.

Doran provides clear justification in *Woza Shakespeare!* for altering the text and plot of *Titus Andronicus*. Instead of leaving a post-apartheid South African audience with the lingering sight of a tortured black man, “we decided to temper this image by moving Marcus’ plea for healing to this point.” “After such appalling tragedy on both sides,” Doran continued, “this healing must be the prevailing priority.”<sup>343</sup> As for the specific rhetorical force of the speech that he adapted for Marcus, Doran argued that a balance had been sought between direct social commentary and service to the historically transcendent insights of Shakespeare:

These words hold resonance in South Africa, where the new political orthodoxy is reconciliation. But in order for this unifying idea to be meaningful, justice must be done, and be seen to be done. We want Marcus’s words to resonate with the audience, for them to hear the echo. I’m anxious that we go no further. Otherwise we would be twisting the play too far, creating specious parallels and appear to be trying too hard to apply a relevance which the play does not admit; destroying the text’s application to the universal by limiting its relevance to the specific.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Heribert, Adam. “White South Africa Re-Examined: The State of Afrikaner Ideology.” *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1981): 553-560.

<sup>343</sup> Sher and Doran, 179.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*

Or as Doran sought to clarify his (and Sher's) rhetorical intentions further:

We have chosen to do this play in this way to liberate it, to make it accessible and relevant not in specific, but in general terms. We are certainly not presenting allegory. We are localizing the play by highlighting its themes of racial tension and cycles of violence.<sup>345</sup>

His assumption, or perhaps hermeneutic directive, was that race should not be seen as politics.

“Racial tension” was a category both locally diffuse and more world-historical than that.

The curtain call for the production also merits discussion because it was devised to serve as a virtual *deus ex machina* scene. In line with Antony Sher's homecoming narrative, which was scripted as both a celebration of the New South Africa and Sher's return to it, the standard taking of bows was overlaid by the cast breaking into singing and dancing while festive streamers and colorful balloons showered down onto the stage. The music was a reprise of the “Coon Carnival” score employed during the “Rise to Power” pantomime that was inserted between the first and the second act of the production. Out of character, but still garbed as the old Titus, Sher became the downstage center focal point of a cast joyously ‘African’ and harmonized after the evening's parade of bloody stasis.

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<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*

#### 4.0 THEATRE REVIEWS

How successful was Antony Sher and Gregory Doran's strategy to 'South Africanize' *Titus Andronicus*? This question dominated all of the production's theatre reviews in the Johannesburg-area press. In *Woza Shakespeare!* Sher and Doran claim that South African critics offered them either uncritical "raves" or "vicious" attacks.<sup>346</sup> A survey of all the notices in their entirety, however, suggests a different, more complex pattern of reception. Upon closer examination, most of the positive reviews betrayed a pronounced ambivalence towards Sher and Doran's attempt to localize the production, and the negative reviews, of which there were few, generally remained supportive of what they perceived to be the pair's good intentions. Therefore, contrary to Sher and Doran's representations, it is more accurate to describe the South African reviews as a vacillating compound of measured gratitude and conflict mitigation; the notices appear to have anticipated the controversy that was to come.

For their part, Sher and Doran had two specific complaints about how their South African critics received their efforts to make their *Titus* locally "relevant." First, they protested that unsophisticated Johannesburgers read too much political allegory into their production of *Titus*. Second, they ridiculed the preference, commonly expressed by South African critics, for Shakespeare to be spoken in "received pronunciation" (a desire Sher and Doran had already confronted during pre-production workshops with the cast). Taken together, these dispositions produced a reading formation incapable of adjudging the production's artistic merits and cultural usefulness to the New South Africa. Only British critics and theatre audiences, they argued, had sufficient comprehension of modern Shakespeare staging practices to experience the

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<sup>346</sup> Sher, Antony and Gregory Doran. *Woza Shakespeare!* London: Methuen, 1996.

production's authentic South Africaness: a paradox that Antony Sher and his British supporters would solve by asserting the universal authority of Shakespeare.<sup>347</sup>

### *A Survey of the Reviews*

Nine newspapers in the Johannesburg-Pretoria metropolitan area reviewed the Market Theatre's production of *Titus Andronicus*. Three papers gave the show unqualified favorable reviews: the formerly pro-apartheid, Afrikaans-language *Beeld*, the mass-circulation daily *The Star* and *The Sowetan*, the only black-identified publication to review the show. Most critics, however, offered what can best be described as "favorable to mixed" judgments. These notices included the weekend broadsheet *The Sunday Times*, the centrist *Business Day*; Pretoria's Anglophone but politically conservative *The Citizen*; and, contrary to Sher and Doran's depiction, the second review published by the left-liberal *Daily Mail & Guardian*, written by Mark Gevisser. Only two reviews can be said to have been entirely unfavorable: Diane De Beer's piece in the *Pretoria News*, and the first review to have appeared in the *Daily Mail & Guardian* by Digby Ricci. Additional reviews were aired on local radio stations, such as SAfm (highly favorable) and Johannesburg's High Veld Stereo 94.1 (mixed to unfavorable).<sup>348</sup>

The notion, sometimes advanced by Antony Sher, that recourse to a traditional political spectrum can provide an interpretive key to these reviews is false. His *Titus* received both positive and negative reviews from conservative and liberal newspapers alike. If there is any bias, liberal newspapers tended to be *more* critical of the production, not less. Stated another

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<sup>347</sup> Billington, Michael. "Sher's 'Titus Africanus' Hailed." *Mail & Guardian II* (31) 28 July-3 Aug. 1995: 29.

<sup>348</sup> In an email exchange with the radio station's archivist, I was able to confirm that Antony Sher and this production of *Titus Andronicus*, was extensively discussed on SAfm. Unfortunately, the station has no written transcripts of the relevant programs. Personal communication with Retha Roux, SABC Sound Archivist. 6 September 2006.

way, the most aggrieved critics tended to come from the same privileged, white anti-apartheid community that was the Market Theatre's primary audience before 1995. It was also the same social milieu that Sher was born into himself—a point to which we shall return in the conclusion of this chapter.

### *Localizing Shakespeare*

The favorable reviews all found the production's employment of South Africa's rainbow assortment of ethnicities, dialects and social semiotics to have been novel and engaging, if not always coherent. *The Sowetan's* Victor Metsoemere, the *Beeld's* Laetitia Pople and *The Star's* Garalt MacLiam were all particularly full of such praise. Metsoemere made this point strikingly with the sub-headline of his review: "New Amendments Relieve Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* of Expected Rigidity."<sup>349</sup> He further explained:

The modern touch is influenced by the set and costume designs, props (and the amusement they provide at first sight), the flexible approach to the actors' deportment and the casual, though controlled, treatment of the dialogue. Large, black plastic sheets; sawn-off jeep-like contraptions have replaced chariots; modern military uniforms (with gun holsters!) and top-shelf fashion suits have replaced flowing robes and knight' armor and flick knives have substituted swords and spears.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> Metsoamere, Victor. "A Play Worth Seeing: New Amendments Relieve Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* of Expected Rigidity." *The Sowetan* 7 Apr. 1995: 13.

<sup>350</sup> Metsoamere, 13.

The overall effect of these “amendments,” according to Metsoemere was “to help show the applicability of its overwhelming themes to a South Africa that is on a bumpy road towards ridding itself of a bloody, muddy, reckless and shameful past.”<sup>351</sup> Consequently, he recommended the production as “a play worth seeing.” Curiously, Metsoemere made no mention of Sher by name, nor did he single out his performance anonymously. Antony Sher’s celebrity appears to have played no role in his experience of the production.

At the other end of the political spectrum, the Afrikaans daily *Beeld* also gave Sher and Doran’s production concept acclamation. “Sher Skitter in ‘n Manjifieke ‘Titus’ / Sher Shines in a Magnificent ‘Titus’” wrote Laetitia Pople.<sup>352</sup> In her effusive praise, Pople claimed that the production was a “meesterstuk ‘n uitvoerprodukt wat met trots vir die wêreld gewys kan word” / a masterwork of a production that can be shown to the world with pride.”<sup>353</sup> Nothing within her review contradicted either of these statements.

Pople described the plot and theme of Shakespeare’s play exactly along the lines of “relevance” established by Sher and Doran:

Shakespeare se *Titus Andronicus* is ‘n makabere toneelstuk oor geweld. Hier word nie mooi broojies gebak nie. Die mens se bloeddorstigheid en maglus, word op sy aakligste uitgebeeld. Wraak en weerwraak vier hoogty in die aangrypende stuk. ‘n Spieël word opgehou, en weerkaats Suid-Afrika se hede en verlede [ . . . ] Die karakters word willoos rondgeslinger in ‘n maalkolk van eindelose geweld. Shakespeare se karakters moet sin maak van

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<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>352</sup> Pople, Laetitia. “Sher Skitter in ‘n Manjifieke ‘Titus.’” *Beeld* 31 Mar. 1995: [Kalender] 4.

<sup>353</sup> Pople, 4.

geweld. Hulle moet leer om saam te leef met die geestelike en ligmaamlike vermingking wat daarmee saamloop.

Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is a macabre play about violence. It does not bake into a pretty pie. Human beings are pictured as bloodthirsty and full of lust for power. Revenge and reprisals reign supreme in this gripping play. It is also a mirror that reflects the South Africa of the past and present. [ . . . ] All the characters subsequently get ground up in an endless cycle of revenge. Shakespeare's characters are forced to make sense of this violence. [And] they have to learn to live together despite the ways in which they have physically and spiritually mutilated one another.<sup>354</sup>

Pople was provisionally ready to be persuaded that *Titus* served as a "mirror" for the recent history of South Africa – a view possibly abetted by her reading of the production as demonstrating that *all* parties in the play are perpetrators. (This is a position that neatly side-stepped its representation of Afrikaners as the initiators of the play's cycle of violence.)

Pople warmly commended Doran's localization of the play: "Die behoud van Suid-Afrikaanse aksente is belis een van die vele sterk punte in die stuk. Dit verleen aan die stuk daardie ekstra drakrag" / "[The cast's] retention of South African accents is one of the many strong points of the production. It gives the production that extra oomph,"<sup>355</sup> and noted that Nadya Cohen's set appeared to fuse the historical scene of the Anglo-Boer War with images

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<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*

derived from the civil war in Bosnia.<sup>356</sup> She pointed out other instances in which the *mise en scene* combined local, South African references with signifiers equally applicable to other war-torn societies, such as the set's simultaneous use of a red sand-filled stage floor redolent of the veld, and modern military equipment, such as camouflage-netting, that could be employed by armies all over the world.

Overall, this reviewer described Doran's vision as "vars, intelligent en humoristies / fresh, intelligent and humorous,"<sup>357</sup> and had nothing but approval for the individual performances of the cast. She succinctly lauded Sello Maake ka Ncube's Aaron as "powerful," saving her highest accolades for Sher:

Antony Sher is 'n meester van sy kuns. Sy Titus is 'n belewenis.

Om meer te sê, sal net in hiperbool verval.

Antony Sher is a master of his art. His Titus is the experience of a lifetime. One could say more, but only at the risk of hyperbole.<sup>358</sup>

Elsewhere, Pople asserted that the particular strength of Sher's Titus was his transformation from a historically specific character to someone increasingly emblematic of the "absurd" condition: an interpretation that she partially derived from her experience of the other Titus seen in South Africa after the fall of apartheid, Marthinus Basson's successful Afrikaans production of Heiner Müller's *Anatomy Titus Fall of Rome* in Cape Town.<sup>359</sup> Ultimately, Pople was inclined to view

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<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>359</sup> See Blumer, Arnold. "Heiner Müller in a Third World Context: *Anatomy Titus Fall of Rome* in Cape Town." *Annual Review of German Studies in Africa* Vol. 11 (1993): 24 – 27.

the production's local references more as open signifiers working to evoke the universal violence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, than as a “mirror” reflecting South Africa's own violent legacies. This was not stated as an objection to the production, but as a higher, if from an Afrikaners' collective perspective, self-serving compliment.<sup>360</sup>

Likewise, *The Star*'s Garalt MacLiam gave his approval for the production's “Africanization” of *Titus*, and the “sense of immediacy, of identification” engendered by the show's depiction of “horrors, murder, rape, mutilation, deception [and] betrayal” in a South African setting.<sup>361</sup> MacLiam, though, seemed to anticipate a certain amount of resistance from his readership, and devoted most his remarks to justifying his position. Specifically, he argued that the best way for spectators to enjoy the production was to approach it as “a *skiet 'n donner* for the stage.”<sup>362</sup>

Literally meaning “shoot and thunder,” *skiet 'n donner* refers to an action-filled, violent melodrama that is usually applied to films, especially American Westerns—the mainstay genre of South African “bioscopes” after World War II.<sup>363</sup> As employed by MacLiam, the category of melodrama allowed him to de-politicize what might otherwise have been offensive to some audience members:

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<sup>360</sup> During the apartheid era, Afrikaners frequently complained that world opinion unfavorably singled out South Africa as a site of political violence when other countries arguably had, for example, worse incidents of human rights abuse and material deprivation. The classic statement of this position is Eschel Rhodie's masterful work of propaganda, *The Paper Curtain*. (Johannesburg: Voortrekkerpers, 1969).

<sup>361</sup> MacLiam, Garalt. “‘Titus’ a *Skiets en Donner* for the Stage.” *The Star Tonight* 31 Mar. 1995: 2.

<sup>362</sup> MacLiam, 2.

<sup>363</sup> *A Dictionary of South African English*, edited by Jean Branford, offers this helpful usage of the term from a theatre review published in 1973: “It's the organizer's task to bring the script to life. International intrigues, bloody *skiet en donner*, and dreamy romance are staged, here in Cape Town, all as quickly, cheaply and smoothly as possible” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987): 322.

The work is an expose and an indictment. Its plot deals with the base instincts of humanity, to the point of personifying these characteristics, and it brings to mind movies that have extreme violence as being pivotal to the storyline: Clint Eastwood's "Unforgiven," for example, or "Pale Rider." "Titus," then, is of that style of entertainment, with violence at its core.<sup>364</sup>

Despite the apparent proximity of the production's cultural references, MacLiam insisted that viewers interpret them as boiler-plate instances of local color. Concomitantly, the true narrative being told by these touches was universal, existential and, perhaps even innocuously Hollywood-esque and commercial. Indeed, elsewhere, MacLiam emphasized this point by writing that the locus of the production "might well be happening in any number of countries in Africa, or in former satellites of the USSR."<sup>365</sup>

According to MacLiam's argument, the authenticity of Sher and Doran's representation of South Africa was not an issue because it was not, in this *skiet 'n donner* framework, one of their aesthetic objectives. Significantly, MacLiam began his article with the phrase "*Once in tune with and accepting the pronounced South African accents used in this production* [. . .] there comes a sense of immediacy" [italics mine].<sup>366</sup> MacLiam argued that once this suspension of disbelief was accomplished, the show could then be appreciated—as "a stirring and highly theatrical evening's entertainment."<sup>367</sup> In this description, the production should have been approached merely as entertainment. If the show possessed any political "relevance," it was as an

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<sup>364</sup> MacLiam, 2.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*

allegory about global conflicts zones in a broad, diffuse sense—a position equivalent to the one taken by Laetitia Pople in *Beeld*.

The favorable-to-mixed reviews by Robert Greig (the South African *Sunday Times*), Raeford Daniel (*The Citizen*) and Mary Jordan (*Business Day*) displayed a more ambivalent, if still supportive, attitude towards the production. Evidence for this ambivalence is even manifested in the headline and sub-headline of Greig’s review for the *Sunday Times*, which read: “Schlock-Horror, Elizabethan-Style; For all its tourist trendiness, a new production of Shakespeare’s most vicious melodrama is wrenching, well-wrought theatre.” At a glance, this is not the beginning to a “rave” review (as Antony Sher would later maintain).

On the contrary, this headline accurately signals the contradictory elements of Greig’s review. While he concluded his review by asserting, “this *Titus Andronicus* is stunningly sensuous theatre,” Greig actually began his remarks by stating that the “production elements [exhibit] tourist trendiness – all that Africana exotica, and the burden of labored ‘South Effrican’ accents.”<sup>368</sup> Like MacLiam, these elements struck him as lacking ease and authenticity. Also like MacLiam, Greig argued that once these potentially off-putting qualities were tolerated, the production “works marvelously” in spite of the limitations of Shakespeare’s script:

One is wrenched by the pathos of cruelty, while recognizing that it affronts one’s sense of the probable. Director Gregory Doran directs *Titus* with an admirable conviction that the play is showing things that matter. He wants us to see and understand. The production is passionately detailed; and that passion burns away

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<sup>368</sup> Greig, Robert. “Schlock-Horror, Elizabethan-Style.” *Sunday Times* 2 April 1995: 21.

the spuriousness of the play until a new one – a set of images of people in extremis – emerges.<sup>369</sup>

One might have expected Greig to then define the content of this new set of images, images that Doran struggled to fashion from a ‘spurious’ play. If the production’s many appeals to local knowledge were unconvincing, and if the script was also vacuous, then how did Doran’s performance text redeem these two indicators of failure?

Instead of answering these questions, Greig devoted a considerable amount of his review cataloging further objections to the script of *Titus*. “Shakespeare,” for example, “explores the imaginative range of cruelty” in *Titus* in a way that leads modern audiences to feel “oddly flattered by the vulgar myopia that our age is more violent than preceding ones.”<sup>370</sup> Later, Greig claimed:

*Titus Andronicus*, is an under-performed early melodrama, was a welcome choice for collaboration between the Royal National Theatre Studio and The Market. Since it isn’t really what you’d call school set work material, the chances of *Titus* normally being done here are slim. In the second half, the play is so encrusted with literary and dramatic conventions of Elizabethan schlock-horror that it almost parodies itself. I suspect Shakespeare wrote it as part of his technical training in plot and style and maybe to make a few bucks.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Greig, 21.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*

For a short newspaper review, this is valuable copy space to devote to such extended and unsparing criticisms of the play—criticisms that could not have been calculated to generate much enthusiasm on the part of his readers to attend the Market Theatre’s production. Furthermore, it contained more implicit criticisms of Sher and Doran. Greig’s reference to the “myopia” of equating contemporary political violence to Tudor England seems to be direct critique of Kottian “relevance.” This raises a question which the critic did not answer: if it is such a terrible play, how could *Titus Andronicus* be a “welcome choice” for the Market Theatre to produce?

As self-contradictory as this text reads, these indirect criticisms, rhetorically linked to Shakespeare rather than Sher or Doran, can be seen to have served a purpose: to provide an excuse for the production’s failure that placed the blame on the script, not the producers. Doran and Sher made the best of a bad play, Greig effectively argued. The limitations of the play compelled the director to supplement *Titus* with local references as an aesthetic bandage. Thus Greig wrote that he understood why that production paid “proper obeisance to ‘relevance,’” but generously added that Doran did not “push the point.”<sup>372</sup>

Greig’s estimation of Antony Sher’s performance was marked by a similarly equivocal attitude. He began by offering what could be viewed as a withering observation. Although Sher was “dressed to resemble Eugene Terre’Blanche,” Greig wrote, he “looks more like Fidel Castro.”<sup>373</sup> This comment reflected a serious a disconnection from South African society on Sher’s part. Moreover, Greig’s remark suggests that Sher’s efforts to retain the tragic valence of *Titus* slipped into comic parody with his misappropriation of Terre’Blanche—a point to which we shall return.

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<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*

This interpretation may be supported by Greig’s analysis of what was effective in Sher’s performance. While Greig simply noted that Sher Titus’ had “an earthbound quality” at the beginning of the production, characterized by a “stiff-legged and rigid” portrayal of his character, the critic expressed his enthusiasm for Sher’s acting after Titus’s psyche starts to unravel later in the play. “When the crisis comes,” Greig explained:

His eyes widen and marble, his voice lightens and curls round his daughter in tender tendrils. He starts playing the fool. It’s an astonishingly resonant and suggestive performance.<sup>374</sup>

As his Titus began to shed his stereotypical associations with Terre’Blanche (or Castro) – a phase of his performance in which other critics detected the actor dropping his heavy Afrikaans accent – Greig warmed up to Sher’s characterization. It cannot be coincidental that Greig compared this aspect of Sher’s Titus to that of a “fool”— the role Sher played in the RSC’s much lauded production of *King Lear* in 1982 that launched the actor’s rise to celebrity. The implication, however, was that Antony Sher’s bona fides as one of the greatest living Shakespearian actors only became apparent once the ‘rigidity’ of the production concept started to break down. Perhaps with a better play by Shakespeare – a comedy or a *King Lear* – Sher’s talent would have been showcased to better effect.

For his part, Daniel Raeford, of *The Citizen*, actually started his review with the words, “Such a pity it were not a better play.” Raeford took a sympathetic approach to evaluating a production concept defined by “heavy South African accents,” though. In theory, Raeford suggested, *any* Shakespeare that South African audiences might see abroad would probably be contemporized as Sher and Doran had treated *Titus*. “Now I have no real quarrel with that,” Raeford began:

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<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*

In America and Australia, for instance, Shakespeare is spoken in native tones, so why not here? Moreover, those who choose to adopt a purist stance should remember that, far from spouting the expected manner of Oxford or the BBC, the people in the play would not have been speaking English at all, but Latin or Greek.<sup>375</sup>

Accordingly, he took a business-as-usual attitude to Sher and Doran's project that implicitly scolded the aesthetic provincialism of his readers. Paraphrasing Gregory Doran's program note, Daniel insisted that the production was right to address "a South African audience in its own voice, in accents and images pertinent and accessible to that audience" and to disavow the "assumption that the rich variety of indigenous accents were somewhat inferior, lacking in range or expression, or just inappropriate."<sup>376</sup> Only the review by Mark Gevisser would contain equally unequivocal and thoughtful support for Sher and Doran's importation of the "Royal Shakespeare" and its rhetorical practices.

Raeford seems to have followed the advance publicity for this *Titus Andronicus* and found it persuasive; the beginning of his review almost reads as a summary of these arguments. After witnessing the execution of these ideas on stage, however, Raeford offered a more pragmatic theory for why Sher and Doran South attempted to Africanize *Titus* along those lines: the local cast had simply not been talented enough to either speak the verse or employ any other dialect but their own. "I suspect," Raeford wrote, "that the decision was made because of

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<sup>375</sup> Raeford, Daniel. "Gone with the Gore." *The Citizen*. 31 March 1995: 21.

<sup>376</sup> Raeford, 21.

expediency. And might it be cynical to suggest that a like motive could be found for the mounting of the play in a modern setting?”<sup>377</sup>

This is a startling statement for a local critic to make. Raeford was prepared to blame the deficiencies of this *Titus* and its awkward employment of South African cultural materials on the deficiencies of Johannesburg actors he had been reviewing for years. No other critic made such a claim. Two years later, he would, in fact, would retract this opinion in a bitter reminiscence about Antony Sher’s “daff” characterization of Titus as Eugene Terre’Blanche.<sup>378</sup> But in his review of 1995, the critic gave both Antony Sher – and the Market’s production – an extraordinary benefit of the doubt. The failure of the show lay with its backward local theatre artists.

Even if the cast, on the whole, was not very good, “the presence on stage of armored vehicles and soldiers in battledress does give a feeling of immediacy to the proceedings.”<sup>379</sup> According to Raeford, Sher, “the highly acclaimed expatriate South African making a belated debut in the country of his birth,” gave the “most impressive performance” of the evening;<sup>380</sup> however, the critic offered no specific analysis to support his claim. His stated low estimation of the production ensemble would have rendered this statement an instance of faint praise to a South African reader—a note of subtle dissonance with the rest of Raeford’s review. Only in an essay about a South African production of *King Lear* published two years later would disclose just how offensive Raeford found Sher’s Terre’Blanche Titus. Perhaps more importantly, that

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<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>378</sup> See “Messing with the Mad King” by James Whyte, an article that addresses Raeford’s opinions about Shakespeare in South Africa after the *Titus Andronicus* controversy. Web site: <http://www.chico.mweb.co.za/art/gtown98/980615-lear.html>

<sup>379</sup> Raeford, 21.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*

review supplies some proof of what a delicate exercise in cultural diplomacy these theatre reviews may have been.

Mary Jordan, the distinguished critic for *Business Day*, decided to adopt a more frank, if no less conciliatory, approach to Sher and Doran's *Titus*. First, Jordan's frankness. Unlike any of the other reviewers, Jordan addressed the impact that advance publicity had on the formation of audience expectations for the production. According to her, it was of a wholly alienating nature:

Initially you will surely have been put off, rather than have been encouraged, by the pre-publicity. For the Market Theatre management to have flown the entire cast of *Titus Andronicus* to England to learn about violence was a trifle odd. One could accept speech-training, lessons in how to make sense of, and project, the iambic pentameter; or tuition from Shakespearian experts in movement, voice and Roman history. But soaking up the psychology of torture at a distance of 9, 600 km did seem to be overdoing it. And then actor Antony Sher, of whom as a nation we are all proud, kept making provocative statements to the media about local audiences needing to be shaken up, and their cultural prejudices challenged head on by the use of 'Seffrican' on our stages.<sup>381</sup>

Although Antony Sher's advance publicity, and the RSC workshop, would later become a topic of derision for South African commentators, Jordan was the first to suggest that they framed the production in a negative light.

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<sup>381</sup> Jordan, Mary. "Shakespeare Reconstructed." *Business Day* 4 April 1995: 10.

From this introduction, a reader might expect her to then enumerate the production's failed localizations. Instead, Jordan took a different tack. Having dismissed the possibility that this *Titus* might be an authentic representation of South Africa, she reversed Jan Kott's "relevance" equation and advanced the surprising counter-claim that the show should be viewed as accurately reproduced *Shakespeare's* 'locality': the social and political fabric of 16<sup>th</sup> century England. To this end, Jordan took the unusual of crediting the scene designer for accomplishing that impressive feat. "Look at Nadya Cohen's set design," Jordan directed the prospective audience:

She reconstructs and develops Shakespeare's plot, directly appealing to middle-class sentiment, as he did. First of all, she signs a composite representation of Elizabethan themes; the fear of civil war, the morality of leaving vengeance to God. She symbolizes the constant and ever-present struggle between good and evil by emphasizing the height and depth of man-made buildings, but places the pit piled with refuse bags firmly in view to the left. [ . . . ] This visual realism is an impressive token that we are about to be exposed to battles, execution and bloodshed.<sup>382</sup>

This passage restates E.M. Tillyard's discussion of the "Great Chain of Being," and as we have seen with other reviews, redirects the reader's attention toward the universal and the allegorical by its conclusion. (Her reference to "middle-class sentiment" is more elusive, but looks to be a patronizing appeal to her elite readers' sense of cultural *noblesse oblige* in the matter of on-stage jeeps and other tokens of "visual realism.") Sher and Doran's *Titus* was superficially located in South Africa, but was more essentially an inspired facsimile of Elizabethan England, literally by

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<sup>382</sup> Jordan, 10. See also: E.M.W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Vintage, 1944).

design. This argument reads like a variation on other critics' tendency to deflect the South African references elsewhere.

As for Antony Sher's performance, Jordan ascribed a double voice to the actor's moving characterization of Titus, Shakespeare's "precursor of Lear." "Music comes from the way Sher measures and weighs his words," she wrote, and "each is reinforced by the charge of facial and bodily muscle."<sup>383</sup> Indeed, so virtuosic was his performance that his Titus transcended the self-imposed hurdle of imitating someone as unmusical as Eugene Terre'Blanche. "No matter that the vowel sound is distorted to imitate the speech of the Afrikaner," Jordan explained, "Sher is unforced as he juggles from one level of consciousness to another."<sup>384</sup> But more importantly:

Keep an eye out for the solitary gleam of ironic humor. Above Sher's medal ribbons, and looking hugely out of place on the khaki drill jacket, is a pair of Royal Air Force wings. You do not need to have it spelled out that Sher could fly in English if he wanted to.<sup>385</sup>

Thus, again with a little help from a designer, Sher's *Titus* was compelling in spite of his production concept—by design. Or, rather, this show possessed both exoteric and esoteric pleasures. For those able to crack the code, Jordan's reasoning concluded, it could be a worthwhile theatre-going experience. Still, informed readers must have found it difficult to credit Antony Sher's performance as 'ironic' when his Terre'Blanche Titus was the programmatic embodiment of the actor's pre-production polemics about the desirability of South Africanizing Shakespeare.

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<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*

Two other Johannesburg-area critics also agreed that Sher and Doran's *Titus Andronicus* lacked local authenticity. However, they were much less disposed to be charitable about it: Diane De Beer for the *Pretoria News* and the *Weekly Mail*'s Digby Ricci. Indeed, taken together, these count as the only truly hostile reviews the pair received in the South African press. But they were negative reviews of a passionate, engaged and revealing sort. De Beer and Ricci displayed a familiarity with Antony Sher's long association with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and both freely confessed that the bitterness of their reviews was directly proportionate to their sense of disappointment with him, personally.

Given the ferocity of her language, it is surprising that Antony Sher made no mention of De Beer's review when he was summarizing the attacks made against his *Titus* in *Woza Shakespeare!*. Even the headline of her appraisal appeared to drip with contempt: "Please Drop the Affectation." As she opined in her opening paragraph, the production's attempt to root itself in South African history was thoroughly botched and deeply offensive. "Never have South Africans tried so hard to sound like South Africans," she began, "and alas, failed so dismally."<sup>386</sup> In this review, De Beer made no effort to offer cultural explanations for this failure, nor did she offer any excuses for Sher and Doran.

Like many of her colleagues, De Beer could not abide this production's adoption of South African dialects. "In an effort not to impose," De Beer wrote, "as the director states in the program notes, a 'posh English accent', the white actors – instead of using their natural accents, adopt a particular voice."<sup>387</sup> The voice most often in question was the dialect of an Afrikaner, characterized by "a harsh rolling 'r' which seems to be the determining factor of this particular brand of South African." So overdone was this "harsh Afrikaans accent" in the mouth of

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<sup>386</sup> De Beer, Diane. "Please Drop the Affectation." *The Pretoria News* 31 March 1995: 10.

<sup>387</sup> De Beer, 10.

(Anglophone) Jennifer Woodbourne's Lavinia that De Beer ruefully noted that "it was a blessing when she lost her tongue and could no longer utter a sound."<sup>388</sup> As for (Anglophone) Dorothy Ann Gould's attempt to give Tamora a "poor white" Afrikaans dialect, De Beer simply stated that it was "unlike anything ever heard on local shores and succeeded only in distorting her wonderful acting."<sup>389</sup> Only a few of the true Afrikaans actors playing the Andronici sons managed to achieve the production's goal of proving a theatrical forum for the South African performers' natural speech.

De Beer reserved her strongest criticism for Antony Sher himself. "Having read so much about [his] amazing talents," she began, "and having waited so long to experience him on stage":

It was simply horrifying to witness only the accent and see so little of the actor. He played Titus as a rightwing general struggling against madness as his whole family is cruelly destroyed, and dropped his British accent in favor of a guttural sound which one assumes is how he understands Afrikaners to speak[.]<sup>390</sup>

Aside from the issue of verisimilitude, which other critics have raised before, De Beer suggests more strongly than the others that the equation that Sher drew between Afrikaans and Eugene Terre'Blanche was profoundly alienating. This is the manner in which De Beer may have 'witnessed' Sher's dialect—as an accent necessarily connected to a set of images of Afrikaners at their moral and political worst.

However, according to De Beer, Sher did not consistently maintain this sound and emotional valence. At times, she noted, his "accent wavered and sometimes sounded

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<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*

uncomfortably close to that of a rabbi. It also robbed his performance of any pathos which is so necessary to understand this character.”<sup>391</sup> If this observation is true – that Sher’s Titus seemed almost rabbinical during certain scenes – Sher would have an explanation for this observation in *WS!*. While his Titus was visually made to resemble Terre-Blanche, Sher also employed certain vocal qualities from his Afrikaans-speaking father, a self-described *boerejude*, or “Boer Jew.”<sup>392</sup> However, it is not hard to understand why the emergence of this voice would have seemed puzzling and troubling to De Beer: a Jewish voice from a Neo-Nazi’s face?

No other critic made this observation, and the SABC film does not provide evidence for it, so it is debatable whether Sher ever adopted a *boerejude* dialect, or if he did so with any frequency. It is more likely that De Beer’s assertion reflected the nearly unanimous criticism that Sher’s Afrikaans accents was ever-shifting and was often perceived to be a source of struggle for the actor. (This is a different question, though, than the one of Sher dropping his Afrikaans accent altogether in favor of Received Pronunciation.)

The bigger issue that De Beer raised is whether Sher was strategically dropping his Afrikaans accent for certain set-piece scenes and speeches from the play—those “star turn” moments – around which traditional expectations for ‘classical’ virtuosic performance were heightened. This selective use of a hard Afrikaans dialect is what I called in my previous chapter the issue of Antony Sher’s ‘double voice’ for this production. For the most part, questions about Sher’s double-voiced Titus were aired after the first round of production reviews appeared in the Johannesburg-area press. When they did, critics tended to remark that when Sher slipped out of

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<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>392</sup> The term “boerejude” refers to Jewish immigrants to South Africa who chose to culturally assimilate with Afrikaners instead of Anglophones. It is not a derogatory expression. Antony Sher later reported: “As the character of Titus slowly grows, there is more and more of Dad in him – I’m moving like Dad, sounding like him, *being* him[.]” (Sher and Doran, 130.)

Terre'Blanche Afrikaans, he reverted to a "received pronunciation" British accent. De Beer's claim that Sher sounded like a "rabbi" is unique to the reception literature, and reads as an uncomfortable projection of ethnic stereotyping. But the consensus opinion was that Sher's accent did shift.

By contrast, De Beer argued that other actors who were *not* required to use an Afrikaans dialect, but rather, their own varieties of South African English, sounded much more convincing: "The black and Coloured cast members who spoke in their natural tongue fared rather well."<sup>393</sup> In fact, De Beer implied, there could have been an effective way of using South African dialects, if the goal of authenticity had been equally applied to the white actors of the cast—a quality that actors Gys De Villiers and Martin Le Maitre (both Afrikaans-speakers) achieved by keeping "reasonably close to their natural tongue, especially as the play ran on."<sup>394</sup> As the film of the stage performance demonstrates, their accented English was much softer than the Afrikaans dialect affected by Anglophone actors Dale Cutts, Jennifer Woobourne and Dorothy Anne Gould.<sup>395</sup>

As de Beer concluded, "The problem is not the local accent," but the fact that so many of the cast were directed to use dialects that "sound[ed] anything but South African." "Yes," she added, "localize the play by all means. Give the relevance to the audience on a platter if you wish." But "if an African flavor is your bent, make sure you get it right."<sup>396</sup> This does not read like an entirely sincere declaration of De Beer's sympathy with Sher and Doran's overarching goal for the production. On the contrary, her statement can be read a grudging acknowledgment

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<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*

that post-apartheid cultural priorities would have to be more multicultural – and less racist – than they had been under Nationalist rule.

Apparently aware of how angry and uncompromising her review must have read, De Beer chose to end on a more confessional note. “If this all seems very harsh comment,” she wrote:

It is probably that expectations were dashed so cruelly by a production approach which patronized rather than acknowledged the understanding of local audiences. And still I have to wait to see Sher at his brilliant best.<sup>397</sup>

The word “understanding” might well have been interchangeable with the word “desires” of De Beer’s affluent, suburban white readership. But there is no denying her profound sense of dashed expectations. Arguably, there is something refreshingly honest about this passage, as well. Other critics noted the many ways in which the production misrepresented South African society, but advanced other evidence in mitigation (e.g., the limitations of the play, the local cast’s lack of talent, and etc.).

De Beer’s assessment seems raw, by comparison. In the end, though, this rawness included her revealing wish to see Antony Sher perform again on a South African stage. For this would-be fan, a door has been left open to Sher for a return engagement and a second chance. Like the most favorable critics, De Beer’s desire to remain connected Antony Sher’s celebrity was shaken but remained intact.

Diane De Beer’s aggrieved sense that Antony Sher had misrepresented South African whites, and missed an opportunity to connect with this adoring audience, was further echoed by the critic Digby Ricci in that country’s most famous anti-apartheid cultural institution,

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<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*

Johannesburg's *Mail & Guardian*. Since by Antony Sher's own admission, this newspaper functioned as the recognized authority on Market Theatre productions, it will be useful to briefly examine that publication's history and ideological formation.

### *The Mail & Guardian*

Although the *Mail & Guardian* only began publishing in 1985, its provenance goes back much further than that.<sup>398</sup> Months beforehand, Pretoria had shut down Johannesburg's oldest English-language newspaper, the *Rand Daily Mail* (founded in 1902) and the popular, left-liberal *Sunday Express* (1966). Weeks later, elements of their respective staffs merged to form what was initially called the *Weekly Mail*. Created on a shoe-string budget generated from outright financial donations by Johannesburg's liberal northern suburbs, the staff of the *Weekly Mail* soon broke almost all of that country's most controversial political stories for the remainder of the apartheid era. As a result of its investigative journalism, the paper achieved commercial success at home and professional recognition abroad. At the onset of the De Klerk thaw in 1991, this combination of domestic marketability and foreign respectability boosted by the enticed the United Kingdom's Labour-friendly Guardian Media Group to invest in the *Weekly Mail*, culminating in the Group's take-over of the paper's ownership in 1994.<sup>399</sup>

The newspaper, renamed the *Mail & Guardian* (hereafter *M & G*), continued to play its traditional investigative role. But as the new South African government became an instrument of the democratically elected African National Congress under the presidency of Nelson Mandela, this oppositional project became more problematic. The *M&G* was now a white-identified

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<sup>398</sup> Merret, Christopher and Christopher Saunders. "The *Weekly Mail*, 1985 – 1994." In *South Africa's Resistance Press*, Les Switzer and Mohamed Adhikari, eds. Athens: Ohio UP: 458 – 486.

<sup>399</sup> Merret and Saunders, 480.

newspaper probing and, sometimes, embarrassing the newly elected leaders of the black majority.<sup>400</sup> To make matters more difficult for its editors, this paper also became a sounding board for Johannesburg's liberal elite's increasing alienation from the populist multiculturalism of the New South Africa—a bitterness that the *M&G* also attempted to frame in a critical light.<sup>401</sup> Politically and racially, the publication sought to chart a middle way.

In *Woza Shakespeare!*, Antony Sher noted the ideological complexities of the *M&G*'s position in South Africa by depicting it as a parallel institution to the Market Theatre. As Antony Sher explained:

That paper is a sort of journalistic version of the Market. During the bad old days, it bravely criticized the insanity of South African society and became a symbol of decency and honesty. [ . . . ] Like the Market, its role is no longer clear in the New South Africa and, like the Market, it is no longer safely perched on the moral high ground, beyond criticism itself. Many readers are increasingly irritated by its intellectual posturing.<sup>402</sup>

The comparison was probably a fair one to make. What is striking, though, about this passage, published two years after the *Titus Andronicus* controversy, are the flashes of *schadenfreude* that Sher displays towards the ideological difficulties facing white liberals in post-apartheid South

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<sup>400</sup> In 1995, the *Mail & Guardian* published a series of investigate reports on then First Lady and cabinet minister Winnie Mandela that revealed the extent to which she had been personally involved in human rights violations during the 1980s. These accusations put pressure on President Nelson Mandela to distance himself – which he did by divorcing her in 1996. Since then, the newspaper has spearheaded probes into government corruption. For example, in 2005, the *M&G* broke the “Oilgate” scandal, a kick-back scheme that touched President Thabo Mbeki himself. To the distress of many international observers, the ANC-led government attempted to physically censor the story by ordering 45,000 copies of the paper to be seized and pulped. See “Court Gag on South Africa ‘Oilgate’” by Andrew Meldrum. *The Guardian* (UK) 28 May 2005: 3.

<sup>401</sup> I examine the *Mail & Guardian*'s efforts to critique the limitations of Johannesburg's tradition of genteel white liberalism in Chapter 4.

<sup>402</sup> Sher and Doran, 205.

Africa; as we have read, his pre-*Titus* fiction and journalism was a model of “connected” charity and psychological insight.

The above quotation also contains a profound irony of which the author seems unaware, i.e., that the “many readers” in question were vociferously opposed to Sher and Doran’s own “intellectual posturing” with *Titus*. As we shall examine in the following chapter, reader response to Antony Sher in that newspaper was extraordinarily hostile.

Antony Sher framed the *M&G* this way, of course, because he sought to accuse that newspaper’s theatre critics, Digby Ricci and Mark Gevisser of being disconnected elitists, and to establish himself as an accurate barometer of the cultural desires of a socially voiceless majority, i.e., implicitly, Johannesburg’s black population. To be fair, it did not require much selective editing on Sher’s part to portray Digby Ricci as a representative of a moribund Johannesburg tradition of wistful Anglophilia. In *WS!*, Sher accurately noted that:

In the space of one normal-sized review, he manages to make references to Aeschylus, Ovid, Christopher Marlowe, Dr. Johnson, Samuel Beckett, Athol Fugard, Kenneth Tynan, Peter Brook, T.S. Eliot, Bertrand Russell and several others . . . all before starting on us.<sup>403</sup>

In the context of the entire review, which we shall examine shortly, it can be argued that all of these names were pertinent for explicating the textual and production histories of *Titus* for a general audience. Still, his choice of warrants to defend his negative assessment left the door open for Sher to ridicule the dated quality of Ricci’s theatrical references. “Oh, I see,” Sher concluded, “It’s not so much a review – it’s an *essay*” composed in a “pompous, olde-worlde

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<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

style – for which he can't be blamed."<sup>404</sup> If Ricci's style was reminiscent of a private school headmaster's, this may have stemmed from the fact that he was one.<sup>405</sup>

Antony Sher later stated that he could not "blame" Ricci for his views. This was because this critic represented "a certain type of white South African [who] is fearsomely snobbish about the Afrikaner accent." "I understand this keenly," Sher confessed, "having been one of those South Africans myself."<sup>406</sup> The Afrikaans phrase for the strongest form of this condescension by that country's privileged Anglophones is simply *boerehaat*, or "Boer hatred."<sup>407</sup> The expression – and the sentiment – has a long history in South Africa that dates back to the Anglo-Boer War (1899 – 1902). At the height of the apartheid era, the term had become a frequently played political "card" within the constant, inter-ethnic rivalry amongst South African whites.<sup>408</sup>

Did *boerehaat* have a role in the general disparagement of Afrikaans accents in Sher and Doran's production of *Titus*? Although the evidence for this is weak, Antony Sher could have made a case for this interpretation. Since Sher grew up in an Afrikaans-speaking household, he had an insider's knowledge about this prejudice. This is speculation, but it might have been useful for his South African critics – and readers of *Woza Shakespeare!* – if Sher had shared even more, e.g., how he worked through his shame of Afrikaans, and even came to embrace it again. Such a presentation of psychological and artistic vulnerability might have eased the resistance of his South African audiences by recasting this *Titus* as one expatriate's auto-

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<sup>404</sup> *Ibid*, 205.

<sup>405</sup> Digby Ricci was not exactly a "colonial headmaster," but the Chair of the English Literature department at the Roedeans School, a private, secondary education academy located in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg for many years until his retirement in 2006. See <http://www.roedeanschool.co.za/news>.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid*, 206.

<sup>407</sup> Branford, 34.

<sup>408</sup> For example, see: Dalcanton, David C. "Vorster and the Politics of Confidence 1966-1974." *African Affairs* Vol. 75, No. 299 (1976): 163-181.

therapeutic journey home; after all, this was the main “script” Antony Sher had been offering his South African fans since his visit to Johannesburg the year before. Given the excitement over Sher’s subsequent return, one can safely say that many there must have identified with that narrative. And to paraphrase the rhetorician Kenneth Burke, identification provides a platform for persuasion.<sup>409</sup>

Renewing his previous stress on his connectedness to white South Africans and their shared identity struggles might also have simply circumvented Digby Ricci in the eyes of the critic’s own readers. Compared to his colleagues, Ricci’s position was rather extreme. More damning, his own editors at the *Mail & Guardian*, a paper not known for shying away from a fight, were dissatisfied with Ricci’s effort. Their choice of a younger journalist more in sync with the New South Africa’s emergent cultural norms was indicative of the problem they perceived. Sher might have recognized the shifting terrain and waged a successful war of position. As the previous reviews demonstrate, he still had powerful allies amongst Johannesburg’s cultural elite.

Instead, Antony Sher publicly lashed out at Digby Ricci in manner that could have only been intended to cause ripples of offense. A few weeks after Ricci’s review appeared, Sher wrote in *The Star*, “The arts editor of the *Weekly Mail* needs to explain why a serious paper employs a critic like Digby Ricci, whose antiquated views on Shakespeare would get him laughed off any local rag in England.”<sup>410</sup> Later, in *Woza Shakespeare!*, Sher stooped to name-calling, repeatedly dismissing the critic by the name of “Digby Wigby.”<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> This argument, central to most of Burke’s work on rhetorical criticism, is perhaps given fullest expression in *The Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: California UP, 1969).

<sup>410</sup> Sher, Antony. “SA Theatre in Serious Trouble.” *The Star* 26 Apr. 1995: [Opinion] 14.

<sup>411</sup> Sher and Doran, 207 – 08.

Mark Gevisser, on the other hand, was initially presented by Antony Sher in a more favorable light. “I may have misjudged the *Mail & Guardian*,” Sher wrote in *Woza Shakespeare!*:

They’ve been in touch with the Market, saying *they’re* unhappy with Digby Wigby’s review and want to do a second opinion this Friday. The journalist is to be Mark Gevisser. He’s asked to talk to us personally for Friday’s piece and Greg [Doran] elects to take the call. This lasts about an hour, during which Greg makes several thumbs-up signs.<sup>412</sup>

“Afterwards,” Sher added, Doran told him that “We’re going to be all right.” Gevisser had taken the time to interview the director, and had seemed well-informed and genuinely sympathetic to their project.

After reading Gevisser’s review, however, Sher claimed that “it’s as bad as Digby Wigby’s effort, maybe worse. If this is a *second opinion*, I’m glad the guy isn’t a doctor.”<sup>413</sup> Unlike Ricci’s review, Sher did not relate *any* of the contents of Gevisser’s piece; there are no quotations from Gevisser’s review in *WS!*. Once again, Sher resorted to more name-calling. “Later,” Sher wrote, “someone in the company mentions that Gevisser has a nickname among the profession: ‘Gevicious’.” “We walked into it again,” Sher added.<sup>414</sup> Sher’s reader was given no indication that Mark Gevisser actually had many thoughtful and favorable remarks concerning the production (as we shall examine in detail below.) Indeed, as I shall argue, that

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<sup>412</sup> *Ibid*, 207 – 08.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid*, 208.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid*.

Gevisser's notice was an *apologia* for the production. The impression Sher advanced, however, was that he had once again been victimized by a mean-spirited hack.

To sharpen his attack (he would say counter-attack), Sher claimed in *WS!* that the only satisfactory review of *Titus* during its Johannesburg run was authored by the British *Sunday Times* theatre critic Michael Kustow. "At last," Sher wrote, "a grown-up view of what we've done."<sup>415</sup> It was a notice in which the London-based Kustow opined:

What we see is not just a theatre production. It is a significant act of cultural cross-fertilization, cooked up in South Africa, not imported from abroad. It is yet another reminder of Shakespeare's inexhaustible relevance, in the face of fashionable critical theories that would like to downgrade his plays as cultural impositions from the white man's canon. And it is a personal achievement on many levels for its leading actor and begetter, South African-born Antony Sher.<sup>416</sup>

Leaving aside the obvious questions about Kustow's authority to declare this production wholly "cooked up in South Africa, not imported from abroad," this excerpt demonstrates the critic's defiant support for "relevance," dismissal of post-colonial criticism and public investment in Antony Sher's celebrity. This review was, arguably, Sher and Doran's first, true "rave."

By contrast, "Digby Wigby" and Mark "Gevicious" lacked the correct perspective to perform their role with competence. Antony Sher explained why they were not:

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<sup>415</sup> Kustow, Michael. "Exorcising Apartheid." *The Sunday Times* 9 April 1995: [Features] 20.

<sup>416</sup> Kustow, [F] 20.

It isn't the fault of Digby Wigby or Mark Ge-vicious that their practical experience of Shakespeare is limited (though they could be blamed for shouting their ignorance from the roof-tops).<sup>417</sup>

Michael Kustow, on the other hand, "has spent a lifetime Shakespeare-watching, both in the UK and abroad, culminating in his much-praised season of International Shakespeare for the RSC at the Barbican last year."<sup>418</sup> In other words, he was a critic with the distinction of possessing the "Royal Shakespeare" seal of approval.

*Digby Ricci and the "Relevance" Pit*

One might assume from Antony Sher's remarks that Digby Ricci knew little about Shakespeare production outside of South Africa. A closer reading of his review nevertheless reveals a well-informed and cogent evaluation, however weighted down the piece is with pedantry. Consider the essay-like passage to which Sher scornfully alluded:

First acted and printed in 1594, *Titus Andronicus* is regarded as Shakespeare's earliest and bloodiest tragedy, and, although immensely popular with Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences, it has subsequently been savaged by critics from Dr. Johnson to TS Eliot. Such critical contempt has never been shared by those who have actually presented the play in the theatre. Peter Brook, whose 1955 production is still regarded as one of the finest Shakespearean productions ever, once expressed bewilderment that he had been

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<sup>417</sup> Sher and Doran, 206 – 209.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid*, 208.

hailed as the triumphant creator of a silk purse out of a sow's ear.<sup>419</sup>

To emphasize this point, Ricci added that the “equally innovative director, Deborah Warner, has expressed similar sentiments.”<sup>420</sup> Ricci evoked the names of Brook, Tynan and Warner to refute the opinion, expressed by other Johannesburg critics, that *Titus Andronicus* was a hopelessly flawed play.

In what must have been a deliberate act of irony, what Ricci was also describing was the success that *Titus* had achieved being produced under the aegis of “Royal Shakespeare.” What these directors understood better than several centuries of disparaging critics was that *Titus* “is not merely a ‘gory melodrama,’” but “a searing indictment of the revenge ethic that depicts brutalities enacted in the name of honor in terms that run the gamut from lofty tragedy to the grittiest humor.”<sup>421</sup> This is a conventionally post-Kottian reading of the play that was echoed by numerous theatre critics in the British press as well.

These introductory remarks were designed to affirm both the aesthetic and political appropriateness of producing *Titus Andronicus* at the Market Theatre in the fledgling New South Africa. Gevisser would be more explicit on this point, but in 1995 South Africa, Ricci's point would have been clear enough to most readers. The ANC-led government, having decided to go forward with a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was still in the process of persuading that country's black majority that it was in their collective best interest to eschew the “revenge ethic.” Ricci saw how *Titus* could be a useful supplement to this national conversation.

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<sup>419</sup> Ricci, Digby. “Titus Topples into the ‘Relevant’ Pit.” *The Mail & Guardian* 31 March 1995: 34.

<sup>420</sup> Ricci, 34.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*

Presenting himself as one knowledgeable about Royal Shakespeare at its best, Ricci then attempted to employ this authority to support his claim that Sher and Doran's *Titus* was Royal Shakespeare at its worst. The master fault of the production, according to Ricci, was their decision to make this *Titus* "firmly, not to mention crudely, rooted in South African militarism," a choice that generated a host of incendiary reminders of apartheid across the Market's stage:

With grizzled beard and camouflage uniform, Titus resembles nobody so much as the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging's farcical leader; the Goths – one must be politically correct, after all – are enraged victims of colonization; Lavinia, in wedding-gown and short white gloves, has a Voortrekker-maiden quality and, for comic measure, Demetrius and Chiron are low-camp tsotsis in violet and red suits (respectively, I think, but my memory may have reeled).<sup>422</sup>

This approach, Ricci suggests, was a scatter-shot appropriation of South African social stereotypes. The production was "a bizarre, unthinking mélange of styles" that was "in no way suited to Shakespeare's masterly blending of genres and emotions and serves only to raise maddening questions, both serious and facetious, in the minds of bewildered audiences."<sup>423</sup> For Ricci, these questions were about rhetorical motive (serious) and verisimilitude (facetious).

First: verisimilitude. The production's use of South African dialects came in for a serious drubbing. Ricci was as unsparing as Diane de Beer:

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<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.* The word "voortrekker" refers to 19<sup>th</sup> century Afrikaner pioneers, particularly those who undertook the Great Trek from the Western Cape to the territories that became the Orange Free State and the Transvaal Republic; "Tsotsi" is another word for a young, urban or township thug.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*

Why, oh why, is every performance hobbled, nay, mangled, by the use of offensively exaggerated South African accents? The accents. Why, there's the rub. Nobody is demanding the crystalline voices of a Vanessa Redgrave or a John Gielgud from a local cast, but it does seem willfully perverse of a director to rob most lines of beauty, grandeur or even meaning by an insistence on relentlessly rolling r's and pancake-flat vowel sounds.<sup>424</sup>

Furthermore, Ricci singled out two characters for special censure:

Dorothy Ann Gould's Tamora looks and sounds like Fugard's Milly<sup>425</sup> on a rather bizarre safari; Sello Maake's Aaron, when not inaudible, is incomprehensible, growling of the sun's gilding of the ocean with "his bims," and unforgivably swallowing one of Aaron's most celebrated and splendid lines, "I will be bright, and shine in pearl and gold."<sup>426</sup>

Once more we read that the production's South African stage dialects were unpleasant, inaccurate and difficult to understand.

There is also a muted echo of Raeford Daniel's dismissive attitude toward the collective talent of the local cast. Ricci's remarks on Sello Maake were, however, the strongest of their kind to be published, and would provide others involved in the subsequent controversy with putative evidence for Ricci's crypto-racism.

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<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>425</sup> Ricci's reference is to the character of Milly, in Athol Fugard's play about sibling "poor whites," *Hello & Goodbye*. This association is significant because impoverished, mostly rural-living Afrikaners use an accent thought to be especially uncultivated and harsh.

<sup>426</sup> Ricci, 34.

Digby Ricci's frustration with the production's failed localizations, as well as his sense of personal disappointment, boiled over in his remarks on Antony Sher himself:

Sher's own performance has some flamboyantly effective touches: the ripping up of the "silent" stones, the grotesque waltz with Lavinia before he kills her, and, most powerful, the pelting of Tamora with fragments of the Thyestean pie. At times, too, when his Flip Vorster<sup>427</sup> accent slips, as, praise the Lord, it often does, he gives us hints of his range and authority as an actor. His delivery of "I am the sea" had the appropriate Olivier-like ring, and the combination of lament and self-mockery in his rendition of one of my favorite passages, "What fool hath added water to the sea . . . ?" was flawless. But what a waste, what a ridiculous, misconceived waste.<sup>428</sup>

It is an observation that speaks volumes about the critic's passionate disappointment with Antony Sher's return to South Africa. Unfortunately, Ricci's remark about an "Olivier-like ring" also became a recurring topic of derision by Antony Sher and his sympathizers in the British press, and "proof" of Johannesburg's rampant philistinism.<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>427</sup> "Flip Vorster" refers to B.J. Vorster, Hendrik Verwoerd's successor as Prime Minister of the Republic of South Africa (1966). Unlike his highly educated predecessor, Vorster's speech was considered to be crude and overbearing.

<sup>428</sup> Ricci, 34.

<sup>429</sup> For example, see Jonathan Bate's review of *Woza Shakespeare!* in the *Times Literary Supplement* entitled "Root Accents of the Beloved Country," 24 January 1997: 19. Bate wrote: "Did Shakespeare receive a roaring welcome in the new South Africa? Emphatically not. The white reviewers were prejudiced against Titus from the start. They wanted Hamlet or Macbeth. And they wanted the tones of the RSC." Later, in a sentence rich in unintentional irony, "Doran trained his young, multi-racial company to speak in their own voices." Apparently, it did not strike Bate as odd that an English director would have to "train" South African actors to use their own dialects.

But Ricci's evocation of Olivier had a meaning specific to Antony Sher's use of an Afrikaans dialect. In *WS!*, Sher omitted Ricci's reference to J.B. Vorster, the particularly brooding and ominous former Justice Minister of South Africa who became Prime Minister after the assassination of Hendrik Verwoerd in 1966. There is a reason this omission is significant. Ricci was claiming that Vorster's accent represented Sher's baseline stage dialect. Thus, it was quite noticeable and, to Ricci's ears, pleasing when Sher dropped his harsh Afrikaner dialect and slipped into R.P. – and, one might argue, into an identifiable performance of “Royal Shakespeare.” After all, this is an actor who has relished his identification with that theatre company. Indeed, four years after the publication of *Woza Shakespeare!*, Antony Sher was knighted, primarily for his work with the RSC.

Finally, what did it say about the ideology of the production concept if Antony Sher broke ranks with his South African cast and slipped into a British accent when he performed the virtuosic monologues in *Titus Andronicus*? That, to use Mary Jordan's expression, Sher could “fly if he wanted to”? That, despite Gregory Doran's populist rhetoric of ‘relevance,’ that Sher's specific celebrity as a Royal Shakespearean was more worthwhile than the putatively ‘local’ colors assigned to the rest of the cast? That, referring to Mary Jordan's review, Antony Sher did ‘fly when he wanted to’?

Digby Ricci made no attempt to ascribe a coherent framework to what he perceived as the production's fatal inconsistencies. For Ricci, this *Titus* was essentially unreadable as a totality. And the bits that did suggest a coherent narrative greatly troubled him. This was particularly the case with the character of Lavinia. Whereas other critics found her representation – and her exaggerated Afrikaans accent – merely inauthentic and annoying, Ricci detected a more sinister way to interpret her role in this production concept. “Jennifer Woodbourne's

Lavinia,” he claimed, “has a certain doll-like pathos after her fate worse than any form of death, but her one-dimensional prissiness before her rape tends to obscure subsequent minor merits.”<sup>430</sup>

Ricci could have gone further still, since the filmed version of the production presents Lavinia in a thoroughly unappealing, even alienating light. But Ricci’s fear remained the same:

If Lavinia, complete with kappie-commando accent, is utterly lacking in charm or dignity,” he asked, “then does the director wish to lesson the horror of her rape and mutilation? (A distasteful thought, which no production should inspire).<sup>431</sup>

American readers of this remark might charge Ricci with merely indulging in racist paranoia. However, the New South Africa has consistently ranked amongst the worst countries in the world for rape.<sup>432</sup>

Digby Ricci concluded by writing, “This is a botched, insultingly unsubtle production of an often misunderstood, marvelous play.” “Oh, the pity of it!,” he ended with an exclamation.<sup>433</sup> Like Diane De Beer, Ricci ultimately cast his anger at the production as disappointment. Yet, if De Beer seemed to leave open the possibility that she would welcome the opportunity to see Antony Sher in a future South African venture, Ricci was less sanguine. For this critic, the production concept was not merely an inauthentic mirror of that country’s society, but a thinly disguised, and vindictive, political allegory.

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<sup>430</sup> Ricci, 34.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.* The “Kappie Commando” was “an ultra-conservative Afrikaner Women’s political organization.” At rallies, they would dress in replica voortrekker dresses and sun-bonnets (i.e., “kappies”).

<sup>432</sup> In 2002, the official statistic was 228 rapes per 100,000 women, although researchers maintain this is “just the tip of the iceberg.” See R. Jewkes and N. Abrahams’ “The Epidemiology of Rape and Sexual Coercion in South Africa: An Overview.” *Social Science Medicine* 55.7 (2002); 1231 – 44.

<sup>433</sup> Ricci, 34.

*Mark Gevisser*

A few days after Digby Ricci's notice was published, the editors of the *Mail & Guardian* contacted the Market Theatre to inform them of their decision to run a second review by Mark Gevisser.<sup>434</sup> The *Mail & Guardian* must have believed they had picked their best qualified journalist for the task. Even a quick glance at his resume up to 1995 reveals that Mark Gevisser was not just another staff writer, but one of the New South Africa's pre-eminent young cultural critics.

An openly Gay man, Mark Gevisser was one that country's first AIDS activists at a time when there was still a considerable amount of denial about the seriousness of the epidemic. In 1994, for example, he co-edited *Defiant Desire* with Edwin Cameron, a collection of first-person essays about being Gay and Lesbian in South Africa.<sup>435</sup> The book was hailed as one of the first of its kind in a country that has since undergone both a cultural and legal revolution regarding homosexuality.

But Gevisser's journalistic endeavors were also more wide-ranging than the field of sexual politics. By the mid 1990s, he had emerged as one the New South Africa's most important pundits writing about all aspects of that country's post-apartheid transformation—significantly, from a stand point often sympathetic to the ANC regime, if often highly critical of individual politicians affiliated with it. This project was his trademark activity at the *Mail & Guardian*. He became best-known for a series of lengthy biographical profiles that were published as *Portraits of Power* in 1996.<sup>436</sup> The success of these pieces subsequently led President Thabo Mbeki to

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<sup>434</sup> Sher and Doran, 207. John Kani, who then served as Artistic Director of the Market Theatre, confirmed Antony Sher's version of this event in a personal interview with the author.

<sup>435</sup> Gevisser, Mark, and Edwin Cameron, eds. *Defiant Desire*. London: Taylor & Francis, 1995.

<sup>436</sup> Gevisser, Mark. *Portraits of Power: Profiles in a Changing South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1996.

designate Gevisser as one of his authorized biographers. Gevisser has also served as *The Nation*'s bureau chief for southern Africa since 1988. Theatre, film criticism and, also, screenwriting, by contrast, has been a mere sidelight to this distinguished career.

All these aspects of his work positioned Mark Gevisser to be what Stanley Fish has called an “informed reader” of the production. An informed reader, according to Fish, is one who, *inter alia*, “is sufficiently experienced as a reader to have internalized the properties of literary discourses, including everything from the most local of devices [ . . . ] to whole genres, conventions and intellectual background.”<sup>437</sup> Furthermore, the informed reader is one who “shares the central concerns” of the work. For Fish, this means ideological affinity with a text’s – or a performance’s – rhetorical warrants.<sup>438</sup>

Following Michael Walzer, we might just as well call such a person a “connected” reader, i.e., a reader who is prepared and inclined to reiterate the terms of a text, if not its conclusions. Shared “concerns” is not synonymous with shared outlook; in other words, connected critics and readers hold certain *premises* in common without agreeing upon conclusions. This is why Walzer argues that connection and criticism are often supplementary activities. (The word heresy describes the outer limit of this dialectic.) The social coordination of similarly-minded people can be as fraught with conflict as the enmity generated by groups in wholesale, ‘disconnected,’ opposition to one another.

Viewed from this perspective, Mark Gevisser’s criticism of *Titus Andronicus* is a model of connected readership. Provocatively entitling his piece, “What’s Wrong with Relevance?”, Gevisser, in fact, framed his essay not as a critique of Sher and Doran, but as a rejoinder to his

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<sup>437</sup> Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980: 48.

<sup>438</sup> Fish, 50.

colleague at the *Mail & Guardian*, Digby Ricci. As it is structured, Gevisser's notice was a pointed refutation of the latter's review. It also served as a patient exposition of why Ricci, given the cultural shifts of the post-apartheid era, was not the model reader of *Titus* as the critic and many of his readers might have supposed.

*What's Wrong with Relevance?*

Like Ricci, Gevisser impatiently dismissed the common complaint that *Titus Andronicus* was a poor choice of a play to produce in South Africa. On the contrary, he argued that the play provided an excellent dramatic vehicle for a contemporized examination of modern South African social realities. Doran and Sher's "project was one of contextualization," Gevisser wrote:

[They] wished to make this play live and breathe in South Africa.

In this, they are ably assisted by the text, with its violence, with its explorations of race and bigotry, with its anatomy of the consequences of colonial conquest.<sup>439</sup>

Consequently, he added, "It is nonsense to suggest, as other critics have, that the last is the inappropriately 'politically correct' preoccupation of this production: all the above are manifest in Shakespeare's 16<sup>th</sup>-century text." This was a clear endorsement of the script and, possibly, a clearer statement of its *raison d'être* for South Africa than Gregory Doran had been able to offer in his program note (e.g., . . . 'somehow, not here . . .').

Gevisser's reference to political correctness was also the first of many swipes against Digby Ricci – his colleague at the *Mail & Guardian* – not Sher and Doran. The most potentially damning of these counter-criticisms may have been Gevisser's extended apologia for Sello

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<sup>439</sup> Gevisser, Mark. "What's Wrong With Relevance?" *Mail & Guardian* 7 Apr. 1995: 32.

Maake ka Ncube, the production's single black celebrity actor. Where Ricci was alienated by Sello's thick isi-Tswana accent, Gevisser credited his performance of Aaron as "troubling," but in "a rewarding way." "Using Shakespeare's language," Gevisser argued, Sello "created an intensely powerful presence on stage; in his swaggering body and lilting voice there was sexuality and cold rage; one felt how he felt brutalized and fetishized."<sup>440</sup> Aaron's inability to use the language of his oppressors in way that sounded comfortable or 'natural' actually assisted the underlying statement about power and stigmatic representation. "The point is that he is brutalized and fetishized by the very words he has to speak, for he is," Gevisser concluded, "the product of a racist Elizabethan imagination." Mourning the superficial loss of Shakespeare's verse in the mouth of Sello – and not the underlying historical trauma that produced those "distortions" – ultimately reflected a failure to *hear* on the part of Digby Ricci and other critics. Specifically, it was the failure of Johannesburg's white, liberal elite to recognize their own complicity in South Africa's essentially colonial mode of cultural production.

Still, was Sello sometimes hard for the audience to understand? Gevisser answered this question in the following way:

In exploring the complex dynamic between actor and text, Ncube did let slip some beautiful language. He was difficult to hear and understand, and did not bring a classical (or, one should say, a 19<sup>th</sup> century) sense of "poetry" to the verse. In the quest of interesting, challenging and accessible reading of a verbose and ill-structured,

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<sup>440</sup> Gevisser, "Relevance," 32.

but nonetheless fascinating play, some of the words get lost. Big deal.<sup>441</sup>

The putative ‘Ge-viciousness’ of this passage was one more rebuke to Ricci, and a nice compliment to both the directors and the actor on a matter of considerable racial sensitivity.

For Gevisser, the cultural discomfort caused by Sello’s performance did more anything else to justify the production concept. “This production of *Titus Andronicus* should be lauded, not slammed,” he argued, “for attempting to bring Shakespeare to South Africa in a way so different to the rote readings of set works that are our usual diet.” As the *Mail & Guardian*’s mandated ‘second opinion,’ this conclusion should be read as a repudiation of Digby Ricci’s review. At a minimum, its editorial board must have viewed Gevisser’s second opinion as the extension of an olive branch to Antony Sher, the Market Theatre and, perhaps, the new ANC-led government itself, who had, by that point, given that venture its seal of approval.

*The Story of South Africa and Eugene Terre’Blanche*

Even if Gevisser emphasized his general approval of this *Titus*, he did not shrink from reaffirming some of the other criticisms of the production that had appeared in other notices. Like others, he was not impressed by the authenticity of the production’s local touches. For example, Gevisser described the mise en scene as a “littering” and “a post-modern hodgepodge of artifacts and styles [.]” And as the production concept impacted characterization, Gevisser reported that the actors were given “emblematic roles dictated by their social and ethnic assignments” that came at the expense of cultural subtlety or psychological richness:

Sher, for example, is justly renowned for his ability to create a three-dimensional character out of a sequence of small physical

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<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*

gestures and verbal tics; here, however, his Titus often seems constrained by the need to get the pronunciation right. Likewise with Dorothy-Ann Gould's Tamora and Dale Cutts' Marcus: they often seem to be trying too hard to be Wild Coloured and Ordentlike Boer respectively [ . . . ] Cutts, however, struggles to the end to find the right accent, in every sense of the word.<sup>442</sup>

Gevisser makes no mention of Antony Sher employing a 'double voice,' but the more general criticism obtains. Struggling to get the "ethnic assignations" right, Sher and others tended to labored to give psychologically convincing performances.

The other, more serious, way this production failed to achieve its goals, according to Mark Gevisser, was Sher and Doran's attempt to fashion a persuasive political allegory out of this South Africanized *Titus Andronicus*. Gevisser explained his argument this way:

Wits University drama lecturer Carol Steinberg has noted that perhaps the greatest problem with contextualization is the thin line that needs to be found between localizing a Shakespeare play in order to make it "accessible" and using the play to create an allegory in order to make it "relevant." This is the problem that Doran's production does not quite resolve. From the moment Sher appears on stage as Titus, a dead-ringer for Eugene Terre'Blanche, the production announces itself as a political allegory: the Andronici representing Afrikaners having to deal with consequences of their own belligerent past; the Goths representing

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<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.* "Ordentlike" is an Afrikaans word meaning "orderly" and "upright," perhaps to an excessive degree.

the marginality and subaltern ambiguity of Coloureds, and Aaron  
the Moor representing the rage of the shackled black masses.<sup>443</sup>

Gevisser virtually invokes the rule of rhetorical ambiguity advanced by Alan Sinfield in his discussion of “Royal Shakespeare,” i.e., the “thin line” between accessibility and allegory. Some localization assists an audience to identify with the story and the characters. But if the localization is too specific and schematic, then questions of allegorical coherence risk becoming intrusive and distracting.

In the case, according to Gevisser, the single most significant miscalculation that Sher and Doran made was to portray Titus as Eugene Terre’Blanche in a manner that brooked no strategic ambiguity. In the language of semiotics, this key choice represented a closed rather than an open signifier that severely limited the Market Theatre’s audience’s scope of interpretation. What anyone with local knowledge of Johannesburg’s white elite would know is that Terre’Blanche is viewed as a “farcical leader,” to use Ricci’s expression, not an honored, or even a real leader of any significant segment of South African whites. This fact was probably the subtext behind Gevisser’s remark that “Doran sets himself up unnecessarily by beginning with a caricature of the White Right[.]” From his first appearance on an old army jeep, the first reaction that most of the Market Theatre’s audience to Antony Sher as a surrogate for Terre’Blanche would have been revulsion.

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*Ibid.* Carol Steinberg, a noted playwright, was then a Lecturer in Drama at the University of Witwatersrand. Minister Ngubane soon appointed Steinberg to serve as his Special Adviser for arts and cultural affairs. While she has not published any remarks on the Titus Andronicus controversy, she has written extensively on the cultural politics of South African theatre during the post-apartheid transition. For example, see Steinberg’s essay, “PACT: Can the Leopard Change Its Spots?” *Theatre and Change in South Africa* Geoffrey V. Davis and Anne Fuchs, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1996: 246 - 261.

As we observed in Ch. 2, Antony Sher viewed Eugene Terre-Blanche as a figure of real terror and considerable populist appeal. And to be sure, most international observers of South Africa during the transitional years after Nelson Mandela's release from prison took the threat represented by Eugene Terre-Blanche and associated right-wing Afrikaner nationalists very seriously.

For a few days in January of 1994, these fears seemed to be realized when a small force of AWB members launched an incursion into the "independent" homeland of Bophutatswana for the purpose of shoring up its tottering, apartheid-era puppet regime. More disturbing still, at the time, were the signs that the AWB had the tacit backing of the South African Defense Force. In the event, the small detachments of AWB men were easily neutralized by Bophutatswana rebellious armed forces. Photo-journalists famously captured the casual execution of one car-load of AWB men—after they had begged for their lives.

The abject failure of the AWB to spark a rightist Afrikaner putsch was predicted by many domestic political pundits, and tended to confirm the more common view within South Africa that Eugene Terre'Blanche was no second-coming of Hitler, but rather, a "Boer Buffoon." This view of Terre'Blanche has been spelled out by South African political columnist Chris Roper. "What would you do if Aryan skinheads moved into your neighborhood and set up a Nazi organization?," Roper began a well-known piece on Terre'Blanche. Roper continued:

Imagine the scenario: you wake up one morning, and there's a Swastika flying from a flagpole in front of your neighbor's house, there's a bunch of black-clad storm troopers goose-stepping around and, even worse, one of them is riding a horse up and down the road, flashing Heil Hitler salutes and blathering on about a fight to

the death. What do you do? Anywhere in the rest of the world, with the possible exception of small-town America, you react with outrage and venom. Not here. Apparently, if you're a South African you have a bit of a giggle and get on with your life.<sup>444</sup>

“For some strange reason,” Roper reported, “South Africans - and in particular the South African media - have decided to treat Eugene Terre'Blanche as a lovable buffoon,” or “like an embarrassing uncle who turns up at family events, gets drunk and makes a fool of himself, but is forgiven by everybody.” In other words, within South Africa, Eugene Terre'Blanche is read through a comic, even grotesque, frame; he is emphatically *not* seen as a tragic figure.

Perhaps like Antony Sher, Chris Roper thinks this reading formation is politically dangerous. As Roper explained:

Perhaps I'm overstating the case, but it's undeniable that the release of ET from jail was covered for the laughs by many publications. Even that acronym - ET - makes me uncomfortable. Why do we find it amusing that Terre'Blanche's initials are the same as the name of a cute kiddy film hero? It's a mechanism for familiarizing evil, for normalizing evil. And while laughing at evil might lead you to imagine you can control it, that's a mistake.<sup>445</sup>

It is a mistake, Roper argued, “because [Terre'Blanche] is everything we fear”:

The unrepentant racist who renders suspect, and slightly hollow, all our fledgling attempts to normalize our society. I think we make fun of him because we want to pretend that he's a Boer buffoon, an

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<sup>444</sup> Roper, Chris. “Terre'Blanche, a Boer Buffoon?” *Cape Times* 15 June 2004: 12.

<sup>445</sup> Roper, 12.

Afrikaner problem. He's not. He's a South African problem, who belongs to all of us, and his survival bears uncomfortable witness to our inability to deal with racism in our country.<sup>446</sup>

This is a position shared by other, influential critics in that country. It also remains the official view of the South African government.<sup>447</sup>

But as Roper himself admitted, after he ran “a snap poll, asking people what they think of when they hear the name of Eugene Terre’Blanche,” most respondents replied that “two images immediately spring to mind”:

The first is the description of his holey green underpants, famously worn during a liaison with another rightwing cretin, Jani Allan.

The second is the image of him falling off his horse.<sup>448</sup>

As Roper’s informal poll forced him to conclude, the popular understanding of “E.T.” as a harmless figure of ridicule was overwhelming.

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<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>447</sup> An Afrikaner separatist –terrorist group known as Boeremag, or “Boer Force” conducted a series of bombings in killing three black South Africans in 2002. Although they had no affiliation with Terre’Blanche, government prosecutors employed language that lumped the bombers in, not only with the AWB, but the Group of 63, an association of academic Afrikaans culture advocates. However, this strategy was perceived to have backfired when it was revealed that Boeremag’s master plan involved deporting all black South Africans to Zimbabwe, and shipping all of that country’s South Asian population back to India. Boeremag then became a subject for public ridicule.

See Patrick Lawrence’s article, “Afrikaners Opt Out, or For the ANC” in *The Star* 31 January 2004: 18. The Afrikaners who still exude a sense of menacing tragedy are men like Eugene De Kock, and others like him who were Special Branch officers during the apartheid era. See *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid* by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2003) and *The Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* by Antjie Krog (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998).

<sup>448</sup> Jani Allan was a popular, politically conservative columnist for South Africa’s *Sunday Times*. Her affair with Terre’Blanche became public during a libel suit she filed against BBC 4. During the course of the trial, a large, threadbare, pair of green boxer shorts was introduced into evidence that, allegedly, belonged to Terre’Blanche. In 1992, Terre’Blanche fell off of his horse while leading an AWB parade in Pretoria. It was reported that the AWB leader was intoxicated at the time.

The tension between these competing constructions of Terre'Blanche as dangerous menace and political clown are also reflected by Antony Sher in a diary entry dated February 7, 1995:

Waiting for the taxi, I absently watch the telly, while Selina cleans round it. The news is on, and the neo-Nazi AWB leader, Eugene Terre'Blanche (they call him ET here) suddenly makes an appearance under her duster. First some old stuff – with him as a wild animal, snarling and slaving – and then more contemporary footage, with him as a white-haired old dinosaur, saying, “If the war is over, let’s send the soldiers home,” referring to the AWB men still in prison. His array of actor’s equipment – his eyes, his voice, his passion – is impressive, but he has always mesmerized me in a more personal way, the same way that Hitler does (*I haven’t done anything to this man, but he wants to get rid of me*), and I expect him to have the same impact on Selina. But no, she just carries on dusting. As though he’s just another baddie from one of the dreadful American soaps which swamp SA telly.<sup>449</sup>

To accompany this entry, Sher added a full-page sketch of Terre'Blanche's enraged face filling the screen of a television, with his black maid's hand dusting the top of the unit (entitled “Cleaning the Telly.”) The face depicted belongs to the “wild animal” phase of the AWB's political career; it is entirely disturbing. The action of the maid, by contrast, appears unconcerned, almost patronizing.

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<sup>449</sup> Sher and Doran, 107.

Antony Sher felt personally threatened by Eugene Terre'Blanche's unsubtle efforts to embody Hitler, despite the fact that Sher was keenly aware that the AWB leader was largely the product of "actor's equipment." This knowledge should have diminished his fear, Sher seems to argue. Quite understandably, Terre'Blanche's virulent anti-Semitism did not make this possible. On the other hand, what his maid really thought of Terre'Blanche is unknowable. Sher, however, chose to interpret Selina's silence as proof of her political and cultural anesthetization, and her inability to discern the difference actual 'baddies' and melodramatic villains from American television shows.

Thus, when Gevisser wrote that Doran was engaged in a "caricature of the White Right," he was only hinting at the complexity of the rhetorical problem that faced this production of *Titus*. Because Terre'Blanche was already viewed by most South Africans as a caricature of Afrikaner nationalism, there is one sense in which Gevisser was pointing out the incongruity of watching an unintentional caricature of a caricature. Rather than fully explaining the interpretive difficulties raised this doubleness, however, (this was a newspaper, not an academic review, after all) Gevisser retreated to a double gesture of his own:

By localizing the action in South Africa, this production of *Titus Andronicus* fails as *The Story of South Africa*; but it works as a story set in South African with South African themes.<sup>450</sup>

The specificity of the production's social referents generated an expectation for allegorical coherence that Sher and Doran could not fulfill.

Refashioning *Titus Andronicus* to read as a tragedy about the painful consequences of apartheid and Afrikaner militarism was an acceptable premise; the text even lent support to this narrative. But Eugene Terre'Blanche and his AWB supporters were inappropriate social actors to

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<sup>450</sup> Gevisser, "Relevance," 32.

tell such a story because Market audiences were not able to identify with the Andronici in any way. On the contrary, most of the Market's audiences, white and black, would have seen Terre'Blanche as representative of a lunatic fringe whose ineffectiveness made them better candidates for public contempt than prosecution. Any South African would have known this.

The question most South African critics implicitly asked is whether Antony Sher knew this? If he did, then his choice to play Titus as Terre'Blanche could be interpreted as rhetorically malicious. That is, was Sher suggesting that all white South Africans were equally contemptible? If this were Sher's intention, then his production would have functioned as an echo of the global anti-apartheid movement's view of white South Africans. This would have also been a repudiation of Antony Sher's stated objective to be a "connected critic" for the New South Africa.

Mark Gevisser, unlike Digby Ricci, but like most of his peers in the South African press gave Antony Sher and his partner Gregory Doran the benefit of the doubt. This was not hard to do: Sher was still more of an expatriate than a citizen of the country. Gevisser, though, offered a unique explanation for Sher's failure to make Titus relevant in a fully satisfactory way. This critic pointed to the emergent cultural programming of the new South African government.

The tip-off for Gevisser was Gregory Doran's reassignment of Marcus' "mutual sheaves" soliloquy to the end of the play. With this creative bit of dramaturgy, the production's last word becomes "a plea for reconciliation." To his taste, "the bleakness of the original text would have been far more interesting." "But not as relevant," Gevisser hastens to add:

If the play did not end with a call for reconciliation, what then would the minister of arts and culture have been able to say as he handed over millions to The Market?<sup>451</sup>

For Gevisser, the first aspect of the production to bear in mind is that the Market Theatre was a cultural institution seeking subsidization from a new ANC-led government with non-negotiable discursive agenda. In 1995, that was the discourse of truth and reconciliation.

“It’s the end of *Titus Andronicus*,” Gevisser continued:

The stage is littered with bodies; awash with blood and poison. Minister of Arts and Culture Ben Ngubane, a good man, is invited to address the august audience. He thanks the players, and, before pledging R5-million<sup>452</sup> to the Market Theatre—thereby saving it from certain death—he gives his reading of a play we have just seen. “If there is one message to be got from this,” he says, “it is that violence begets violence and that reconciliation is the only answer.” The new South Africa will squeeze reconciliation out of any stone—even one as dense and as bleak as *Titus Andronicus*.<sup>453</sup>

During the era of the post-apartheid transition, white theatre audiences should accept that the new political order was bound to assert itself in the cultural sphere. There was, so to speak, a new “model reader” in town. Ben Ngubane’s whiggish interpretation might not have been to the critic’s taste, but his reading reflected a politically desirable *use* of the production. Market

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<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>452</sup> This was approximately \$700,000.00 in 1995 U.S. dollars.

<sup>453</sup> Gevisser, “Relevance,” 32.

Theatre audiences should, for their part, defer to this reading. And as Gevisser reminded his readers, the Market Theatre's financial survival was wholly dependent upon it.

Antony Sher and Gregory Doran may have provided the public face for this production of *Titus*, but real rhetorical agency resided elsewhere. Thus Gevisser displaced most of the blame for the production's failures on the shifting ideological weather of the times. Given the pressure to make Shakespeare relevant to the theme of national reconciliation, Sher and Doran created a moderately satisfying production. The greater sin, though, would be for South Africa's white critics, like Digby Ricci, to indulge their sense of grievance; that might constitute a failure to keep faith with the new political dispensation. He might not have been a sophisticated theatre critic, but Minister Ngubane was a "good man." White theatre critics should take their cue from him, Gevisser concluded.

### *Conclusion*

As Alan Sinfield has argued, "Royal Shakespeare" has flourished in the UK on the basis of deploying imprecise markers of "relevance." As a theatrical formation, this has not only been produced by a battery of aesthetic practices employed by the RSC, it is also a function of the cultural desires of their target audience, particularly as ratified by an "interpretive community" of newspaper critics and scholars. These South African reviews speak, on the other hand, express an almost universal discomfort towards what they perceived as too precise parallels and, furthermore, a lack of desire to see South Africa reflected in Shakespeare. The most sympathetic South African reviewers attempted to play by the rules of "Royal Shakespeare" as they understood them, and sought to open up the production's signifiers of Afrikanerdom and

Eugene Terre'Blanche, for example, and represent them as surrogates for Kottian figures of universal 20<sup>th</sup> century political violence (e.g., comparisons to Fidel Castro and Bosnia).

The theatre critics working for the newspapers with the most liberal and anti-apartheid of editorial boards found it difficult to decouple the local references from political allegory—the kind of reading formation these interpreters had been wont to bring with them to dissident cultural activity, such as that produced at the Market Theatre. The result was a breakdown of a theatrical formation under reception conditions that, amongst Johannesburg's Anglophone elite, most closely resembled *pre-war* British theatre audiences. This last observation is driven home by the question of South African dialects which, as in the residual British class system, were also heavily policed as a matter of hegemony maintenance. These language sensitivities were only further chafed by the cast highly uneven adoption of these accents.

Even though the production generated more ambivalence than genuine enthusiasm, these same South African critics, with two major exceptions, published extraordinarily diplomatic notices. Indeed, most of the reviewers appear bent on rescuing the good intentions of Sher and Doran for their readers in a collective effort to soothe the ruffled sensibilities of would-be spectators. From the perspective of “connected criticism,” the South African press was anxious to preserve the umbilical cord that tied this celebrity actor to the country of his birth. This is not to say that these reviews, on the whole, can be read as sincerely urging their readers to attend the production; they are rather more persuasively read as a consensus *caveat emptor*. But neither did these reviews rule out a proverbial “second act” on the South African stage. Treating *Titus* as learning experience, these same critics looked forward to a return engagement in which he would star in a vehicle that would also his talent as a classical actor to “soar.” How Antony Sher responded to this qualified expression of approval is the subject of the next chapter.

## 5.0 THE PRODUCTION CONTROVERSY

Even before the last of the mixed production reviews were printed in the Johannesburg press, audience attendance for *Titus Andronicus* at the Market Theatre was low. After the opening weekend, houses for the production averaged well below half-full for the remainder of its South African run. Morale among the cast of *Titus*, already suffering, was further depressed after Digby Ricci's unfavorable critique was published in the *Mail & Guardian*. Within a matter of days, it was clear that the show was both a critical and commercial failure.

Since most of the Johannesburg reviews were politely mixed-to-favorable, the de facto failure of *Titus* to resonate with South Africans did not, by itself, precipitate a production controversy. As I have argued, Sher and Doran could have convincingly portrayed their effort as a *succès d'estime*. Indeed, had they chosen to do so, they could have persuasively read Mark Gevisser's review, "What's Wrong with Relevance?," as a final vindication of their project; just as they could have likewise explained that the poor turnout for *Titus* was a function of a trend adversely affecting all of Johannesburg's central business district theatres. To speculate further, had Antony Sher been inclined to concede any merit to criticisms of his production, he could have won back his detractors by framing this return as a 'learning experience' that would leave him better equipped for his next theatrical effort there.

Instead, Sher, and a cohort of his key backers, decided to pursue a policy of confrontation with the Johannesburg public. Rejecting the *Mail & Guardian*'s attempted peace-offering of Gevisser's second review, Sher lobbied John Kani and others to speak out on behalf of the show and make a direct appeal for audience support in the Johannesburg press and radio. Kani declined to do so, as a matter of established policy at the Market Theatre;<sup>454</sup> but Barry Ronge,

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arts editor for *The Star*, accepted the challenge. In a column entitled “So Where Are All the Lovers of Good English?,” he accused Johannesburg’s Anglophone theatre-going elite of cultural hypocrisy for staying away from *Titus*.

Ronge began by restating the two major themes of Antony Sher’s homecoming narrative: the repatriated actor’s professional accomplishments and the moral authority he accumulated as an apartheid-era exile. “Let’s spell it out,” Ronge asserted:

We have Antony Sher in town. He is one of the top five classical actors in the English-language theatre. He is certainly one of the top three classical actors in the world. A distinguished South African exile who has returned home to The Market Theatre is in itself an event of enormous cultural resonance but he has not just come home. He has brought with him a bold, vigorous production of *Titus Andronicus*, located so ingeniously in the context of South African language and politics that it is like a flare which brought new illumination to the play[.] He has cast the play with South African actors and allowed them to stretch and explore as few productions before have allowed them to do. Are people standing in line to see this remarkable event? Is there a black market in tickets as there would be in a city like New York?<sup>455</sup>

“Of course not,” Ronge added with a sarcastic flourish: “The show is playing to half-full houses.” While the arts editor acknowledged the malaise depressing ticket sales at all of Johannesburg’s urban theatre venues, he nevertheless insisted that attendance at Sher and

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<sup>455</sup> Ronge, Barry. “So Where Are All the Lovers of Good English?” *The Star Tonight* 21 Apr. 1995: 3.

Doran's *Titus* was mandatory. This was a cultural experience of singular importance: a post-colonial experiment recombining “good English” with *better* politics i.e., Shakespeare adapted to the New South Africa. Sophisticated theatre audiences elsewhere would appreciate the pluck and novelty of such an artistic venture; South Africans, Ronge despaired, were simply waiting for the next revival of *Crazy for You* or *Me and My Girl*.<sup>456</sup>

The subject of “good English” that Ronge broached requires further explanation, because it refers to another cultural quarrel raging simultaneously in Johannesburg that had almost certainly impinged the reception of *Titus*. One of the first actions of the new ANC government’s culture ministry, in the spring of that year, was to order a sweeping make-over for SABC1, South Africa’s premiere English-language radio station. Renamed “SAfm,” the new management team fired the majority of the station’s white announcers and replaced them with a new, multi-racial staff.<sup>457</sup> SAfm also adopted a new language policy; whereas the previous staff was required to follow BBC pronunciation guidelines, SAfm’s broadcasters were encouraged to employ their own racial and ethnic linguistic variations of South African English. After years of imitating the official mouthpiece of ‘Mother England,’ this station would now speak ‘S’effrican.’

Johannesburg's privileged English speakers, however, considered the government’s decision to dismantle SABC 1 to be an act of “political betrayal.”<sup>458</sup> They flooded their newspapers with angry letters. Hugh Pope’s report for the *Independent* affords an excellent summary of the SAfm controversy, and sheds further light on the linguistic context of *Titus*’ poor reception.<sup>459</sup> “From the drawing rooms of Johannesburg’s northern suburbs to the barbecue

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<sup>456</sup> Ronge, “So Where,” 3.

<sup>457</sup> Mcgregor, Liz. “Radio Nation.” *The Guardian* 27 March 1995: [T]17.

<sup>458</sup> Beuster, J.T.R. “Radio Revamp is a Political Betrayal” *The Sunday Times* 12 March 1995: 16.

<sup>459</sup> Pope, Hugh. “Rainbow’ Radio Upsets SA’s English Speakers.” *The Independent* 11 April 1995: 11.

parties of Natal,” Pope wrote, ethnic English voices are being raised in revolt as South Africa’s new ‘rainbow’ culture hits home where it hurts: on their radio sets.”<sup>460</sup> Among the many protest letters he quoted, Pope singled out one irate listener who wrote: “What they have done is imposed their will on us. You vill listen to Black music and mangled Black English, ve haf vays and means!” Another complaint decried “the cold-blooded slaughter of the English language which occurs daily on SAfm.”<sup>461</sup> This firestorm was raging concomitantly with Sher and Doran’s errand to South Africanize Shakespeare at the Market Theatre.

Pope’s analysis of the problem was succinct: the Anglophones believed that the ANC was deliberately endeavoring to deracinate them. “One of the consequences of this shift of power to the African National Congress,” he quoted an editor for South Africa’s *Sunday Times* as saying, “has been to cut English-speakers off from Britain as completely and as finally as the British occupation cut the Afrikaners off from Holland.”<sup>462</sup> The old SABC 1, and the residual colonial formations of language that this institution ‘mimicked,’ was a foundation of their cultural identity. Its loss was traumatic.<sup>463</sup>

Hugh Pope devoted a greater portion of his coverage to the perspective of SAfm’s new management on this listener’s revolt. Employing martial imagery, he reported:

Withstanding the onslaught in his bunker two floors underground in Johannesburg’s Radio Park, SAfm’s new head of current affairs, Charles Leonard, had just drafted another letter defending the record of his 22 young and mostly newly recruited staff. “We are

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<sup>460</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>461</sup> Carlisle, M. “SAfm Trashes English.” *The Sunday Times* 19 March 1995: 17.

<sup>462</sup> Pope, 11.

<sup>463</sup> Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994: 85.

catching a lot of flak from arrogant white English speakers. These people cannot come to terms with the exciting new rainbow society we are trying to create,” he wrote. “The letters always begin ‘I am not racist, but . . . ‘I know that means one thing. They are raving racists.’”<sup>464</sup>

Leonard’s final accusation seems deliberately inflammatory, particularly because Johannesburg’s white liberals had overwhelmingly opposed apartheid rule. Pope, anticipating the response to Leonard’s charge, was quick to add: “The English? Racists? The charge stings a community that has always seen itself as more progressive than the Afrikaners, who built the apartheid regime that gave whites 46 years of privileged rule until last April.”<sup>465</sup> Dispassionate analysis and political gratitude were not the principles governing the public speech of SAfm’s leadership. Openly calling white Johannesburgers “racist,” they adopted an uncompromising, ‘take it or leave it’ approach to this once powerful demographic.

This sentiment was echoed by Govan Reddy, SAfm’s managing director, who simply declared that the old SABC 1’s core audience had only consisted only of 400,000 listeners—and that most of them were over 55 and “dying.” Reddy added, “SAfm was launched to attract a larger, younger and more multi-racial listenership . . . its programs had to change from the dated English sitting-room types.”<sup>466</sup> Reddy was authorized to make these changes rapidly, and with little regard for the preferences of the soon-to-be superannuated “English” South Africans. Despite the ANC’s strategic policy of “reconciliation,” a new talk-show host like Kenosi Modisani could express the following opinion without fear of contradicting his politically

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<sup>464</sup> Pope, 11.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*

appointed station manager: “If they don’t like it, they can go back to England. We didn’t ask them to colonize us, so they’ve only got themselves to blame.”<sup>467</sup>

SAfm resolutely turned a deaf ear to the grievances of Johannesburg’s northern suburbs; the suburbs responded in kind. By the end of 1995, according to statistics gathered by the South African Advertising Research Foundations, over 20-percent of SAfm’s traditional audience had “simply stopped listening to the radio.”<sup>468</sup> The loss of the white audience was not compensated by a corresponding gain in young, multi-racial listeners. Like other institutions in this phase of dramatic transition, the cultural policy of the ANC, perfectly represented by the restructured SAfm, was still wandering between two worlds.<sup>469</sup>

Barry Ronge enlisted this unresolved cultural debate in order to persuade his white readers to change their minds about *Titus*, and attend the show. “Having read the recent outcry in the nation’s press about SAfm,” Ronge rhetorically asked:

I am moved to ask – where are all those people who accused SAfm of raping and pillaging English culture and tradition? For a fortnight we were deafened by the bleats of people who acted as if their birthright was being stolen and they were the victims of forced removals to a squatter camp. I wonder how many of his huge army of self-proclaimed “lovers of good English and fine tradition” on behalf of whom the bleaters spoke, were in the theatres? I’ll bet that most of them were at home watching “The

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<sup>467</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>468</sup> Bierbaum, Niel. “Radio Listenership Takes A Dive.” *Mail & Guardian* 11 Nov. 1995: 5.

<sup>469</sup> For a discussion of the blueprint for the ANC's post-apartheid cultural policy, see Anthony O'Brien's “Literature in Another South Africa: Njabulo Ndebele's Theory of Emergent Culture,” *Diacritics* Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring, 1992): 66-85.

Nanny.” Of course they’ll whinge about the dangerous roads and the crime in the streets and they’ll come up with a hundred excuses before they will actually put their money where their mouths are and go to the theatre.<sup>470</sup>

“Lovers of good English,” Ronge exhorted, should take social action for their own cause by attending *Titus*, a play by the paragon of the English language.

This argument was incoherent: Sher and Doran’s *Titus Andronicus* was performed in the local dialects that Ronge’s readers would have associated with 'bad English,' the same English they were boycotting on SAfm. Why would angry Anglophones who could not bear to hear the *weather* forecast in "S'effrican" accents want to hear Shakespeare similarly 'slaughtered?' Perhaps aware of his argument's logical flaw, Ronge turned to dire prognostication. The refusal of suburban whites to embrace the necessary evolution of the city's traditional arts institutions would have catastrophic consequences:

The next time you’ll hear from them is when they turn the Civic into a supermarket, The Market into a gym in which Olympic athletes can train and the Alhambra into a massage parlour. Then they’ll turn down the TV for five minutes and pen a scathing, racist letter about the way African politics have killed European culture before they settle down smugly to watch a British sitcom.<sup>471</sup>

The failure to support *Titus Andronicus* was presented as a betrayal of both Johannesburg's emergent post-apartheid identity and the liberal values on which they prided themselves.

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<sup>470</sup> Ronge, “So Where,” 3.  
<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*

*Enter Sher*

As Antony Sher's most ardent proponent in the South African press, Barry Ronge subsequently invited the actor to submit a guest editorial to his paper. This appeared a week later, under the ominous headline, "SA Theatre in Deep Trouble." On the front page, Ronge published this teaser: "He believes our theatre is dead [. . .] and he explains what turned the triumphant return of a distinguished exile into a wake for a dying culture."<sup>472</sup> The arts editor's apocalyptic tone would have been difficult to ignore.

Sher began his essay by addressing decorum of publicly discussing the poor houses for *Titus*, a topic that is "normally taboo since its thought to be synonymous with failure[.]" He insisted that *Titus Andronicus* deserved a special exemption from this rule, because, within other spheres of judgment, "there is no smell of failure around the production." Sher enumerated the expanding circles of what reader-response critic Stanley Fish would identify as "interpretive communities" when he informed his readers:

The SABC are filming it, our UK run is already sold out (following a rave review in the British *Sunday Times*) and then we are taking up an invitation to play the Almagro Festival in Spain, one of Europe's most prestigious theatre festivals. There are also invitations from other European countries. I can foresee us doing a world tour, a sort of Shakespearean *Sarafina*.<sup>473</sup>

In other words, his production had won the imprimatur of ANC cultural affairs desk (the SABC), the British theatre establishment, and sophisticated Continental aesthetes (the Almagro festival). There was even a tantalizing prospect that, like *Sarafina*, this *Titus Andronicus* would achieve

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<sup>472</sup> Ronge, Barry. "SA Theatre Not Reaping Benefits of Democracy." *The Star* 26 Apr. 1995: [AE] 1.  
<sup>473</sup> Sher, Antony. "SA Theatre Is In Deep Trouble." *The Star* 26 Apr. 1995: 14.

the ultimate recognition - commercial success in New York City and other "world" destinations. Although Johannesburgers had collectively misjudged the production, failing to perceive its myriad attainments, their interpretation would have no authority beyond South Africa.

Having vividly described the heights of esteem to which the show was ascending on foreign stages, Sher firmly rebuked his skeptical readers. "In the months to come," he predicted, "Johannesburg people will read about it and one will ask the other: "Now why didn't we go and see that show?" And the reply will come: "Um . . . maybe because the *Weekly Mail* said it wasn't *lekker* [nice] the way they did it, a bit South African?" Once again, white South Africans were going to put themselves in the position of being invidiously compared with international norms of taste and behavior; once again a skunk amongst nations – a recurrence that ought to give his detractors pause.<sup>474</sup>

A few hostile notices were *part* of the problem - Johannesburg theatre audiences *had* been misinformed - but local critics were not wholly to blame. Paradoxically, Sher confided that he was "thrilled by our reviews":

They were controversial and sexy; there was hot argument and debate. We were slaughtered by the *Pretoria News* and the *Weekly Mail*, which, bizarrely, panned not just once but twice, the second time under the guise of "a second opinion!" It seemed like they were trying to hurt us seriously, and, since the Market Theatre audiences read that paper, perhaps had the power to do it.<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>474</sup> De Villiers, Les. *South Africa: A Skunk Among Nations*. Johannesburg: Universal-Tandem, 1975.  
<sup>475</sup> Sher, "SA Theatre," 14.

If one were to focus exclusively on the production of *Titus Andronicus* at the Market Theatre, the actor reasoned, then one would naturally conclude that Digby Ricci and Mark Gevisser were chiefly responsible for the show's inability to draw crowds that could be expected elsewhere.

Sher, however, took a broader view of theatre attendance in Johannesburg, which led him to appraise the situation differently. As he correctly discerned, virtually all of the productions housed in Johannesburg's downtown theatre venues "suffered the same fate as us," *regardless* of the notices they received. The low attendance at *Titus*, Sher disclosed, "profoundly shocked" him, and his first impulse was to take it "personally," that is, until he "realized that the same thing was happening to the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* at the Civic."<sup>476</sup> Further, even award-winning shows produced locally - some of them plays written by respected South African dramatists - were having to curtail the number of scheduled performances because of empty houses. "Serious theatre" Sher concluded, "is in serious, serious trouble in this city." Since it was systemic malaise, an accurate diagnosis would require a search for an appropriately all-encompassing etiology.

Sher's explanation reached back over the immediate politics of South Africa's transition to multi-racial democracy and, seeking the *longue duree* malady, identified the "cultural boycott" as the source of Johannesburg's dysfunctional arts environment. The cultural boycott was one instrument of the international anti-apartheid movement that began to coalesce after the infamous Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. Inaugurated after a plea by the ANC to the world community, and loosely monitored by a committee of the United Nations, the boycott was designed to pressure South African whites to end apartheid by punishing them with an embargo on arts, entertainment and sports. Over the years, the boycott produced some of the more memorable international

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<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.* Sher made no effort to disguise just how dismal attendance for *Titus* had become: "We're lucky if the house is a quarter-full, and last Tuesday played to only 50 people!"

controversies associated with the apartheid era – such as the humiliation of the country’s national rugby team, the Springboks, during their 1981 tour of New Zealand; the various debacles surrounding Bophuthatswana’s “Sun City” resort and casino; and the vociferous debates over American musician Paul Simon’s album *Graceland*, which was recorded with members of Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Ironically, for the former crown colony of South Africa, the British Screenwriters Guild and British Actors Equity were the frontline institutions involved; through auspices British films were not screened in South Africa, allied playwrights refused to allow their plays to be produced there, and British actors were forbidden to work on its stages.<sup>477</sup>

The cultural boycott remained in effect until 1991 when, following the release of Nelson Mandela, representatives of the ANC called for it to be rescinded. By that point, nearly thirty years of contemporary theatre practice and drama had been unavailable in South Africa—a loss which white liberals believed unfairly penalized them, rather than the true perpetrators of apartheid, the Afrikaners.<sup>478</sup> Despite its very real consequences, however, the question of whether or not the cultural boycott actually achieved its stated objective of hastening the end of apartheid remains a matter of contentious debate.<sup>479</sup>

During the boycott years, one current of opinion held that the fruits of this “cultural deprivation” would simply make people less intellectually fit to serve as citizens of a full-fledged democratic South Africa, if and when that time came.<sup>480</sup> Four years after it was lifted, Sher

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<sup>477</sup> Nixon, Rob. *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994: 83.

<sup>478</sup> Nixon, Rob. “Apartheid on the Run: The South African Sports Boycott.” *Transition* No. 58 (1992): 68-88.

<sup>479</sup> Nixon “Apartheid,” 68-88. Given the centrality of Commonwealth-centered sports such as rugby and cricket to Afrikaners' cultural identity, Nixon argues that the sports boycott was the international anti-apartheid measure that did the most to harm National Party rule. The cultural boycott, by contrast, actually supplemented Afrikaners long-time wish to sustain the precarious hegemony of Afrikaans in that country by isolating South Africa from the wider world community of English-speakers.

<sup>480</sup> Herbstein, Denis. “The Hazards of Cultural Deprivation.” *Africa Report* No. 32 (July-August 1987): 33.

refurbished this position to make a novel argument. Johannesburgers failed to appreciate good theatre offerings like *Titus Andronicus* because they had become radically stultified as a result of the cultural boycott. Or to use Sher's preferred word, they had lost their faculty of "curiosity."

Antony Sher generously credited South African-born actor Janet Suzman with supplying him with this gloomy prospect:

That because of the boycott, people's range of artistic experience got smaller and smaller, and their range of vision got smaller too – literally –until they were just holed up in their homes watching a video of last year's hit movie. People's sense of curiosity has been whittled away, and curiosity is at the heart of all artistic activity, both for those who make art, and for those who watch it. I mean, how can the people of Johannesburg not be interested to see the Royal Shakespeare Company perform? And, love us or hate us, how can they not be interested in our experiment with Shakespeare?<sup>481</sup>

Since they had been denied artistically challenging and 'experimental' theatre, South African audiences had become, to use another term derived from reader-response criticism, "incompetent readers."<sup>482</sup> These elite Anglophones, who prided themselves on their identification with British high culture, had, in fact, devolved into middle-brow consumers of American television. The final proof of this community's unacknowledged rift from Mother England was their lack of "interest" in the RSC – a reaction that was as unthinkable as it was unforgivable.

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<sup>481</sup> Sher, "SA Theatre," 14.

<sup>482</sup> Dane, Joseph A. "The Defense of the Incompetent Reader." *Comparative Literature* Vol. 38, No. 1 (1986): 53-72.

Despite these deleterious consequences, Antony Sher reiterated his support for the former boycott. He was entirely “for it” without reservations, and as he noted in another piece he wrote a few weeks later, “I make no apologies for my stance, and wouldn’t take any different one if we had to go through it again[.]”<sup>483</sup> As far as fashioning a useable past with which to maintain his connection to post-apartheid South Africa, though, insisting on his support for the cultural boycott was the last argument Sher should have made - or the *first* gambit in a revised ‘exit strategy’ of disconnection – a possibility to which we shall return. And, indeed, Sher’s remarks after observing the stultifying effects of the boycott can be read as a sustained un-writing of his homecoming narrative. Once “bloody proud” of his new South African passport, Sher now celebrates the good fortune of having retained his British citizenship and the career he forged there:

I am very lucky I get on a plane in three weeks time and fly back to a country where there is a huge appetite for theatre. Even in a small country town – Stratford-upon-Avon – even there, three theatres, with a total seating capacity of 2,000 are kept full all the time, even in the winter months, long after the tourists have gone. So I am very lucky. It’s taken this bruising homecoming for me to realize just how lucky I am. I don’t say that with any smugness.<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>483</sup> Sher, Anthony. “A Violent Reaction to a New Culture.” *Sunday Times* 18 Jun. 1995: [Features] 1. Curiously, Antony Sher offered a circumspect statement of his previous support for the cultural boycott elsewhere: “As an Equity member, I naturally supported the boycott, but always cautiously, with a kind of agnostic spirit – it was hard to decide whether this was a good thing or not. I felt relieved when the boycott was applied selectively, allowing, for example, Janet [Suzman] to direct *Othello* in SA, with the full blessing of the ANC, and me to publish my books there” (Sher, Antony and Gregory Doran. *Woza Shakespeare!* London: Methuen, 1996: 219.)

<sup>484</sup> Sher, “Violent Reaction,” 1.

Leaving aside his disingenuous characterization of Stratford as an ordinary rural location, in this passage, Sher reverses the polarity of his invidious comparisons. Whereas before he had accused the UK's theatre culture of crass consumerism and celebrated the new artistic possibilities afforded by the New South Africa, after the "bruising experience" of performing *Titus* at the Market, the RSC is presented as an idyll to which he was longing to return and Johannesburg as a place of "demise" that is "very painful to witness."<sup>485</sup> Coupled with his insistence on the cultural incompetence of Johannesburgers, Sher's reversed homecoming narrative – this time, back to the UK – begins to read like the Michael Walzer's allegory of the "imperial judge [...] who finds natives whose conception of the world is radically mistaken."<sup>486</sup> True, Sher admitted, "the Market is now regarded, along with the Moscow Arts, The Comedie Francaise, the RSC and the National, as one of the world's most famous theatre companies."<sup>487</sup> But Antony Sher's gift of *Titus Andronicus* to South Africa's sole 'world famous' theatre was, regrettably, going to only be a one-time contribution.

One other, comparatively fleeting, feature of "SA Theatre in Deep Trouble" deserves comment. The issue of race and the reception of *Titus* had been a peripheral question, generally limited to a few complaints about Sello's pronunciation of Shakespeare's verse (most theatre reviews balanced those criticisms with praise for the psychological dimension of his performance). Sher shifted the conversation to one of marketing: "We should be getting a more substantial black audience now[,] in the new South Africa," he claimed. Why were they also refusing to attend?

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<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>486</sup> Walzer, Michael. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987: 44.

<sup>487</sup> Sher, "SA Theatre," 14.

Sher was prepared to blame “insurmountable transport difficulties.”<sup>488</sup> The major townships were located far from the central business district of the city. However, Sher was not able to sustain this argument. As he was forthright enough to relate, “whenever Hugh Masekela plays at Kipples (the bar next door to the Market), as he did last week, the place throngs with black audiences, and they stay till well past midnight, and then manage to get home.”<sup>489</sup> Johannesburg’s infrastructure was not a decisive obstacle.

He had no further explanation to advance, so his observation remained just that: a brief, exasperated complaint. Still, the possibility that township blacks were the actual target-audience for this South Africanized *Titus*, if only they realized it, had been raised. This was a novel assertion. And it was a notion to which Sher and Doran would both return and amplify in the coming months.

### *The Suburbs Write Back*

Within days after the publication of Antony Sher’s broadside, Johannesburg’s newspapers and radio stations were bombarded with commentary from the public. A minority of South African respondents pronounced their support of *Titus Andronicus* and Sher’s analysis of the cultural boycott. For example, the novelist Jenny Hobbs wrote:

I urge readers to ignore the tendentious and mean-spirited review of *Titus Andronicus* by your drama critic, and to flock to the Market Theatre to see this dazzling production. It is a privilege to see and hear the legendary Antony Sher at last, especially when supported by a South African cast giving of their utmost in an

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<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*

interpretation that has profound relevance to today's South Africa.<sup>490</sup>

Writing for *The Star*, Joyce Ozynski took the more qualified position that “Antony Sher’s dismay at the poor response to *Titus Andronicus* and the diminishing size of audiences for good theatre is understandable.” She agreed, too, that there were “profound effects of cultural deprivation,” and one should expect that, in the near-term, South African taste “will inevitably be exposed and every weakness marked.” However, Ozynski cautioned Sher and others from adopting an attitude of complete despair. In spite of “the discouraging signs,” she argued that there were “reasons for optimism[.]” As she explained:

We are all at the end of an era, and at the beginning of a new one.  
[...] In the case of the theatre, the composition of the audience has changed because of larger changes in society. The largely white audience that supported theatre is dwindling, while a new audience has not yet developed.<sup>491</sup>

This was the same survey of Johannesburg’s cultural landscape that the managers of SAfm offered. Like them, Ozynski was confident that this “new audience” of recently enfranchised South Africans would fill the void left by the “dwindling” number of white patrons.<sup>492</sup>

The force of change, Ozynski continued, had not even spared the comparatively multi-racial Market Theatre. Historically “a place where discoveries ha[d] been made and democracy affirmed,” the revolution in South African society indicated that “a cycle has undoubtedly ended,

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<sup>490</sup> Hobbs, Jenny. “This Shakespeare is Great.” *Mail and Guardian* (19) 5 May 1995: 23.

<sup>491</sup> Ozynski, Joyce. “Changing Voices of Radio South Africa.” *Africa News* Mar. 1995: 14.

<sup>492</sup> Ozynski, 14.

and even the Market will have to find a new way of working.”<sup>493</sup> Though the Market had once flourished under government repression, the theatre’s challenge in 1995 was to win government subsidy; the reception of Sher’s *Titus* was only reflecting these growing pains. To the extent that the production had exposed “the aggressive philistinism of whites of all classes,” the resulting controversy would only hasten the transformation of arts institutions like the Market from being social clubs for “a fraction of an elite” to truly popular venues for forms of entertainment relevant to the needs of a black majority audience.<sup>494</sup>

Other pro-Sher voices were not as sanguine as Oznyski. One editorial page correspondent opined, “Antony Sher is absolutely right. Theatre, certainly in Johannesburg, is dying and we are infinitely diminished by this.”<sup>495</sup> The respondent, who implicitly acknowledged that South African theatre was between cultural ‘cycles,’ could foresee nothing but loss. The problem was even worse than Sher realized:

The boycott contributed to a malaise that goes much deeper than a mere cultural indifference that whittles away at our curiosity and sensitivity. It, together with sustained attacks on many fronts, brought about deep-seated feelings of guilt and a loss of confidence in white South Africans. Their tastes were Eurocentric and therefore to be attacked. Shakespeare has no relevance to Africa, nor have symphonies, they were told. Their cultural heritage stood in the way of national development. Powerful South African plays attracted large numbers of theatergoers to the Market

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<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>495</sup> Winters, B. “White Guilt, Lack of Confidence, Blamed for Empty Theatres.” *The Star* 3 May 1995: 10.

and other theatres in the 1980s, but as light began to dawn on the political sky, they seemed increasing to speak the language, not of reconciliation, but of our dark apartheid night. Tired and uncertain, we closed our ears to new plays that seemed no longer great theatre but peons to political correctness.<sup>496</sup>

The howls of anti-Eurocentrism would only multiply in the post-apartheid era. The aestheticism of that country's Anglophone elite, and the sorts of cultural practices that supplemented it, such as the performance of Shakespeare, had already been the subject of sustained attack as irrelevant to the "national," i.e., popular and African, cultural needs of a New South Africa. What chance did Shakespeare and, indeed, the entire "cultural heritage" of South African whites, have in such a future? While acknowledging that Sher's "impassioned plea was moving and accurate," this writer concluded by expressing disappointment that the South African-born celebrity had stooped to making a "parenthetical sneer at whites who seem to undervalue the powerful growth of South African theatre." His disappointment was understandable; Sher's blanket disapproval of all white South Africans "has made us melancholy."<sup>497</sup>

A letter by K. Jordan also adopts a melancholic tone. For Jordan this sense of loss was not merely symbolic, but literal. Many of those who would have been Sher's natural audience had departed from the country:

Antony Sher cannot be expected to know but the sector from which the white theatre patrons came has virtually disappeared. The ones whose grandparents founded the theatres and whose parents supported them are, in the main, no longer living in South

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<sup>496</sup> Winters, 10.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*

Africa. Over 40 years of Nationalist rule saw to that. The cultured intellectuals did not have to stay. They were welcomed with open arms by the countries of the West. [. . .] Their going may not be mourned, but their absence will be noticed.<sup>498</sup>

Having been away from the country for so long, Jordan credited Sher with possessing the best of intentions. Yet as the letter gently tutors him, he was not the only white South African to emigrate. The country was not the same since its apartheid-era ‘brain drain’ and, by Anglophone elite standards, would never be the same again. Jordan was resigned to a future in which their passing would be unwept by the majority of South Africans.

#### *Antony Sher’s Detractors*

Most Johannesburgers took “SA Theatre in Deep Trouble” as an opportunity to vent their disapproval of *Titus Andronicus* and their outrage at Sher’s reaffirmation of the cultural boycott. Some of the letters focused on the former, such as that submitted to the *Sunday Times* by Gerald A. Van Eeden:

*Titus Andronicus* can only be described as a third-rate Shakespeare work. It is so different from anything else he wrote that it has been widely questioned whether he really wrote it. Most Shakespeare audiences are discerning people, lovers of the English language and Shakespeare. They seek the high standard of entertainment provided by a well-produced Shakespearean play. Anthony [sic] Sher, the British lead and one of the finest Shakespearean actors in the world, has said that the content of the play is relevant to the

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<sup>498</sup> Jordan, K. Letter to the Editor. *The Star* 8 May 1995: 12.

South African situation. The play is the most blood-soaked one that Shakespeare ever wrote. Gratuitous violence is a phrase that springs to mind.<sup>499</sup>

For this reader, the demerits of the choice of script made the success of this production impossible. If only Sher had chosen a better play by Shakespeare to employ as a vehicle for his talent. Having chosen an inferior play, the work that Sher and Doran performed to make the text relevant pushed the matter from failure to offensiveness. Even if their historical analysis was “correct,” Van Eeden also questioned what this had to do with the equally important desideratum of *pleasure* for the audience:

Who wants to be reminded of the crime and political situation of a pathetic, but beautiful country at the southernmost tip of the African continent? We do not need to have our noses rubbed in the dirt even further. We live in it day by day.<sup>500</sup>

In a similar vein, according to Van Eeden, white theatre audiences got their fill of South African accents every day. Further, after years of relative isolation and compensatory “local is *lekker*”<sup>501</sup> campaigns promulgated by the previous regime, they had their own wishes for vicarious cultural tourism:

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<sup>499</sup> Van Eeden, Gerald A. “Blame Poor Theatre. Not Equity Ban.” [Letter] *Sunday Times* 14 May 1995: 19.  
<sup>500</sup> Van Eeden, 19.

<sup>501</sup> While SABC 1 (Radio) was a clone of the BBC, SABC television and the National Film Board were directed to produce dramas and comedies focused tightly on southern Africa. Many of these teleplays and movies had a clear pro-apartheid bias, such as the surprise international hit *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980), directed by Jamie Uys. As the word “lekker” implies, this cultural policy was closely aligned with the objectives of Afrikaner nationalism, and was a constant object of criticism and, even, ridicule by South Africa’s Anglophone elite. For more information, see: Tomeselli, Keyan, *The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South African Film* (New York: Smyrna, 1988) and Reingard Nethersole, ““Local is Lekker”: Or Why the New South African Parochialism Will Not Go Away,” *Journal of Literary Studies* Vol. 7, No. 3 (1991): 239 – 251.

In plays I have seen at Stratford and on screen, I could understand the use of local English accents for some of the parts. But after spending the last 20 years listening to SABC-TV-English spoken by mediocre actors in South African accents, I can assure you that I have no desire to attend yet another play using the same “voice.”<sup>502</sup>

Thus in no way was the show designed to cater to this reader’s desires, one of which was to experience Shakespeare performed as a document of English culture. Van Eerden indignantly concluded that “Sher underestimated the sophistication of his audience.”<sup>503</sup> “Relevance” was interpreted as condescension.

Ann Braun was also of the opinion that Johannesburgers had a right to their own aesthetic taste and standards. In a letter entitled “Sick of Sher’s Excuses,” Braun railed:

There are many who by now are sick of listening to the catalogue of excuses made for Antony Sher’s spectacular failure to set the Johannesburg theatre world on fire. We are not children who need to be told what is good for us – we are perfectly able to make discerning judgments for ourselves, and if these do not coincide with Sher’s opinion of what we should enjoy, perhaps he should admit that he has made an error of judgment.<sup>504</sup>

The principle “error” in this case being a kind of liberal paternalism, born of a disconnection from local preferences.

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<sup>502</sup> Van Eerden, 19.

<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>504</sup> Braun, Ann. “Sick of Sher’s Excuses.” *The Star* 15 May 1995: 8.

Ellen Smith also wrote a letter condemning Antony Sher's artistic judgment, though hers is singular for another reason: Ms. Smith had been teen-aged Sher's elocutionary teacher in Cape Town. Flying to Johannesburg just to see him perform at the Market, Smith submitted a biographically rich critique that is worth quoting in full:

The last time I saw Antony Sher he called me Miss Smith and I had traveled from Cape Town to see how he had shaped from the bright kid I knew in my Standard One class. What his ex-teacher received was an inspired production of *Titus Andronicus*. In this *Titus* we had the full spectrum of our unique South African system both historic and current. All our artifacts and idioms were there from urban terrorists to the AWB. And then finally Antony! Oh what a shock. Not the Royal National voice, but Cape Flats Gamat. Oh Antony, why the ersatz accent? We dropped that distasteful Capey accent many years ago, shortly after he left for the UK. If this Market *Titus* had been presented in Athlone, dear ex-pupil, you would suddenly have found yourself in a riotous comedy.<sup>505</sup>

“Mercifully,” Smith added, groping for a kind, last word, “he occasionally let this accent slip and then with those few moments we got the full benefit of the rich velvety sonority of his voice.”<sup>506</sup>

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<sup>505</sup> Smith, Ellen. “Sher’s Yin and Yang.” [Letter] *Weekly Mail & Guardian II* (10) 13-20 Apr. 1995: 26. “Athlone” refers to a predominantly Cape Coloured and “poor white” suburb of Cape Town.

<sup>506</sup> Smith, 26.

(observation that Sher sometimes let his Afrikaans dialect slip for several lines was made by others as well, such as the theatre critic Mary Jordan.<sup>507</sup>)

The window that Smith throws onto Sher's past – and the self-conscious labors he endured to eliminate his own South African accent in favor of the “Royal National” brand of Received Pronunciation – sheds a good deal of light on the longer psychological history of this issue for Sher. Painfully, I think, Smith was the first to openly debunk one of the production's articles of faith regarding local authenticity of speech: Antony Sher never spoke with a northern, “Boer” Afrikaans dialect of English; on the contrary, his original accent was upper-class Anglophone with a touch of “Capey,” rhythm as derived from Cape Town's large and vibrant Coloured population. So in spite of his repeated claims to be using his “own voice” for the first time at the Market Theatre, Sher's Titus spoke in an “ersatz” vernacular whose lack of authenticity was audible to everyone in Johannesburg. (Guy Willoughby made a similar, if somewhat indirect, statement when he characterized Sher's natural voice as English.) Its adoption owed more to the strategic “relevance” of the production concept, than the Rodenburgian imperative of ‘to thine own speech be true.’ To make an imperfect analogy, it would be like an expatriate Irish actor raised in Dublin adopting a Belfast accent and claiming it as his true tongue – a claim that would strike many on that island as incredible regardless of the skill with which the dialect was rendered.

### *The Cultural Boycott*

Still more of the letters and opinions expressed in Johannesburg's press were squarely focused upon Antony Sher's remarks about the cultural boycott. Sally Perry bluntly wrote, “the

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<sup>507</sup> Jordan, Mary. “Shakespeare Reconstructed.” *Business Day* 4 Apr. 1995: 10.

cultural boycott that Antony Sher supported has now come back to bite him,” before proceeding to scold the actor on *The Star*’s editorial page:

You cannot deny a nation something for more than a generation and then complain because it has no culture of knowing quality theatre. It will take a long time re-educate South Africans to appreciate this art form when it has been fed an undiluted diet of entertainment from a country that voted “Forest Gump” Best Picture!<sup>508</sup>

Another respondent, L.J. Fisher, concurred with Perry:

An actor who advocates and actively promotes over a quarter of a century a boycott of a country and then brings into the cultural desert that he has helped to create one of Shakespeare’s less attractive plays, has only himself to blame for his lack of success. He deserves neither our support nor our sympathy.<sup>509</sup>

These letters, one notes, did not contest Sher’s contention that the boycott had left a “cultural desert” in its wake. What public opinion could not accept was that Sher also placed the blame on white Johannesburgers for this state of affairs. Since they overwhelmingly objected to the boycott, Sher’s unstated premise was that this audience was at fault because of their collective responsibility for apartheid – a policy that liberal Anglophones also abjured.

More prominent members of Johannesburg’s intelligentsia – writers who historically found themselves in opposition to the common wisdom of the city – added their column space to

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<sup>508</sup> Sally, Perry, “Cultural Boycott That Sher Backed Has Now Returned to ‘Bite Him.’” *The Star* 3 May 1995:

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<sup>509</sup> Fisher, L.J. Letter to the Editor. *The Star* 8 May 1995: 10.

this popular chorus of complaint. *Sunday Times* editor Jeremy Brooks contributed the most discussed essay attacking Antony Sher's restated support for the cultural boycott;<sup>510</sup> the piece is also singled out for censure in *Woza Shakespeare!*.<sup>511</sup> Citing Sher's incredulity regarding Johannesburg's lack of interest in *Titus* and the concomitant visit of the RSC, Brooks retorted:

Come off it, Mr. Sher. The answer is this: South Africans, white and black, no longer give a fig for what is happening to our arts and theatre. And blame for this should be laid squarely at your door. Years ago Sher was among the scores of Hampstead "luvvies" who decided over their glasses of Muscatel that "something must be done" about South Africa. The answer was for their union, Equity, to come up with the cultural boycott, a crass, naïve and monumentally stupid concept. No films, plays or documentaries featuring British actors could be produced in South Africa. The policy gained momentum, extending to the publishing, music and visual arts world.<sup>512</sup>

Shunned and deprived of British arts and letters, South Africans had become middle-class consumers of American culture. For whites, the fact that this deprivation was perceived to be administered by liberal expatriates ("Hampstead luvvies") who should have known better about who was really harmed by these measures. That country's blacks, on the other hand, interpreted this phase of isolation merely as evidence of the West's cultural exhaustion; according to

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<sup>510</sup> Brooks, Jeremy. "You Made Us Philistines." *The Sunday Times* 30 Apr. 1995: 14.

<sup>511</sup> Sher and Doran, 59.

<sup>512</sup> Brooks, 14.

Brooks, “No one wants Eurocentricism in the new South Africa.”<sup>513</sup> The cultural boycott had only given succor to the aesthetic politics of reactionary black populism.

This did not mean, however, that South Africa was “a nation of Philistines.” Speaking for South African whites, Brooks added: “It simply means we have grown suspicious of the mutual back-slapping of the arts and culture apparatchiks, supported by critics too nervous – or dishonest – to reveal a largely shabby and tired event for what it is.”<sup>514</sup> Alienated by a wave of didactic art bearing the stamp of the ANC’s aggressive national cultural policy, Johannesburg’s northern suburbs were in revolt against what they perceived to be a wave of artless propagandizing for the new dispensation. For audiences who still, unfashionably, yearned for the old “Eurocentric” arts, such as Shakespeare, “the present state of theatre and art is tragic, but, given the circumstances, inevitable.” White liberals like Brooks were prepared to accept some revamping of South African arts in the wake of apartheid, but they were in no mood to be shamed all over again about a boycott whose necessity they had never recognized. Indeed, the poor reception of *Titus*, from Brooks’ perspective, was a vindication of their critique of the cultural boycott. “For people like Sher to bleat about it today,” Brooks concluded, “is ironic.”<sup>515</sup>

Though concurring with the general points that Brooks’ presented, Julius Eichbaum (the normally staid editor of South Africa’s oldest performing arts journal) went further and published an ethical criticism of Antony Sher that sought to sever the actor’s “moral luck” from

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<sup>513</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*

the moral authority he presumed to have acquired as an expatriate.<sup>516</sup> Eichbaum sarcastically introduced Sher as:

The well-known South African born actor who successfully shook the dust of this country off his shoes to earn fame and fortune on the British stage and from which vantage point he became an outspoken critic of South Africa, in general and of apartheid, in particular.<sup>517</sup>

Eichbaum hastened to add that there was “nothing wrong with the latter;” like Sher, he was also opposed to National Party rule. “But most of us,” Eichbaum asserted, “unlike Mr. Sher, were denied work permits and were thus obliged to oppose, what Mr. Sher once referred to from the stage of the RSC as ‘the regime,’ from within and in a less publicity-seeking and self-serving manner.”<sup>518</sup> Lacking the unique agency afforded to Sher by the contingencies of his talent and career, most South African liberals were involuntarily constrained to live as subjects of the apartheid state; this was their moral unluckiness.

During the late 1980s, when the actor was still ‘coming out’ as a white South African, Antony Sher might have recognized the complexity of these circumstances and eschewed the language of censure. Instead, Eichbaum accused Sher of complicity with a “campaign against this country.” Specifically, this took the form of “his involvement with, and support for, the cultural boycott,” a policy which the arts editor maintained, “did *nothing* whatsoever to end apartheid but which served, instead, to hamper the efforts of Mr. Sher’s fellow artists (who were

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<sup>516</sup> See: Williams, Bernard. *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982: 20-39. Eichbaum does not explicitly refer to Bernard Williams, but this is precisely the argument.

<sup>517</sup> Eichbaum, Julius. “But Why *Is* Our Theatre In Big Trouble, Mr. Sher?” *Scenaria* 11 May 1995: 3 – 4.

<sup>518</sup> Eichbaum, 3.

just as opposed to apartheid as he was) to make a meaningful contribution to general public awareness about the evils of the system.”<sup>519</sup> What Eichbaum is so insistent upon here is not the self-defeating consequences of cultural boycott, per se, but the fact that there was meaningful opposition to “the regime” amongst those who stayed in South Africa.

If Sher had been properly connected, he would have known and acknowledged the hard-won accomplishments and viewpoints that constituted “local knowledge” in Johannesburg.

“Now that apartheid is dead,” Eichbaum inveighed:

Mr. Sher has the temerity to return to the land of his birth, rather like the Duke of Plaza Torro, who led his troops from behind, and declare that, because his production of *Titus Andronicus* at the Market Theatre played to less than the capacity house this “conquering hero” expected, South African theatre “is in dire straits” and the fault lies, of all things, with *the audience!*<sup>520</sup>

Eichbaum forcefully rejected this as “rubbish” that misplaced the blame for the failure of *Titus Andronicus* and its attendant rancor. “THEY have let us down,” he accused Sher and his backers, reversing the axis of judgment, and “as a direct result of their own deficiencies and derelictions of duty!”<sup>521</sup> For Eichbaum, it was not just that the cultural boycott had served as a prop for the moral narcissism of a clique of expatriates (or, in Sher’s case, the actor’s belated self-identification as a committed expatriate). By enervating the sphere of culture as a domestic arena for contesting apartheid, supporters of the boycott had injured South Africa.

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<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Eichbaum's dismissal of Antony Sher's credentials as a "connected critic" was complete and can be read as a representative statement of white Johannesburgers' alienation from the actor following the publication of "SA Theatre in Deep Trouble." A closer reading of Eichbaum's argument will have already revealed its shortcoming, since the cultural boycott was more than an internecine battle between geographically separated white, liberal elites. The ANC was the prime mover behind the cultural boycott, and it was the black majority of that country that bore the brunt of both the symbolic and physical trauma of that era. The affront Antony Sher caused white South Africans must be weighed in this greater moral calculus.

Black voices were almost entirely absent from this debate, except for one: Israel Motlhabane's essay in *The Star*, "The Cure for the Theatre Blues."<sup>522</sup> Motlhabane dismissed the arguments over the poor reception *Titus* and the cultural boycott as an internecine squabble amongst white Eurocentrists who had already crossed the threshold of irrelevance to the New South Africa. More importantly, Antony Sher was simply wrong: "South African theatre is not dead," he countered, and "neither is it in deep trouble."<sup>523</sup> Motlhabane employed the remainder of his column to lecture both Antony Sher and his hand-wringing detractors on the dramatic, racial limitations of their perspective:

Fact of the matter is, we've got the wrong people manning our Department of Arts and Culture and the corporations I've just mentioned. It's all very well to moan about Shakespeare's celebrated *Titus Andronicus* and other shows of its ilk playing to nearly empty houses, but to the theatre lover in the townships,

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<sup>522</sup> Motlhabane, Isreal. "The Answer to Theatre Blues." *The Star* 4 May 1995: 18.

<sup>523</sup> Motlhabane, 18.

Shakespeare is sawdust.<sup>524</sup> Gibson Kente is a hero! I can understand Mr. Sher's lamentation about his show – but what about all the scripts and theatrical productions that have never had proper theatres in which they could be produced or performed?<sup>525</sup>

Black theatre in the townships, primarily based on musical theatre dramaturgies, was flourishing and organized around its own cherished masters and celebrity performers. Moreover, this aesthetic formation was thriving without the benefit of state subsidy or even the use of dedicated theatre facilities. Shakespeare, and the capital-intensive production armature associated with it, was irrelevant to the black majority.

The social location of theatre consumption in Johannesburg was of such importance to understanding the preferences of its black citizens that Motlhabane offered a short history lesson on the topic:

Apartheid decreed that a black man could not enter a white theatre to see a show, let alone perform there – unless the production was owned by a white impresario. Bertha Egnos with *Ipi Tombi* and *Lulu Wena* and Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, *The Island*, etc., come easily to mind. We darkies were forced to perform our shows in lousy halls that were nothing more than stables. We took our productions to those “stables” and packed them with theatre lovers. Ask Gibson Kente, Ben Nomoyl, Sam Mhangwani, Alf Montsho, Aggrey Klaaste, Doc Bikitsha and other luminaries who

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<sup>524</sup> As if to confirm his opinion that the Titus controversy was of little interest to Johannesburg's black community, there is no evidence that *The Sowetan* published any editorial, column or letter on this topic.

<sup>525</sup> Motlhabane, 18.

graced our stages.<sup>526</sup> We packed the audiences in, despite the fact that some of us were dogged by the Security Police and men from the Censorship Board. Some of our shows were banned at the last minute or while the shows were on! But that did not stop us. [...] Poor as most of us are, we love entertainment like everyone else.<sup>527</sup>

The “entertainment” experience they craved was in a space of their own making, and with their own definition of community. What they sought, at least under the conditions of apartheid, was an exclusionary space. Motlhabane proposed to use subsidization to convert “stables” into permanent stages. Or, as he advised, “Build top-class theatres in the townships and bring good shows to them.”<sup>528</sup>

His call for improved facilities, however, did not imply any concomitant demand for more ‘advanced’ forms of Euro-bourgeois dramatic performance. On the contrary. Aside from its connectedness to the values and wishes of its communities, decades of active repression (unlike the official tolerance of institutions like the Market) had made South African blacks proud of their own township theatre traditions. “Good shows,” in this case, meant theatre created by local artistic talent. The services of white liberals bearing Shakespeare were not required. Neither were the fresh corps of savants at the “new Department of Arts and Culture and Technology,” who had already demonstrated a similar predisposition for supporting educational drama at the expense of popular entertainment. Motlhabane put it more colorfully:

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<sup>526</sup> For a full discussion of “township” theatre in South Africa, see Loren Kruger’s chapter (6) on “The Drama of Black Consciousness” in her *The Drama of South Africa: Plays, Pageants and Publics since 1910* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999): 129 – 153.

<sup>527</sup> Motlhabane, 18.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*

We did not vote for a government that appoints black men with white mentality to push our culture and aspirations down the drain the way apartheid did! This is a black man's country. To hell with intellectuals who are placed in powerful positions like the media to frustrate the aspirations of the masses and the artists.<sup>529</sup>

Therefore, the way forward was to reject all forms of cultural elitism, of both the liberal Anglophone and ANC commissariat varieties. "The Department of Arts & Culture should be manned by showbiz people," Motlhabane declared: "We suffered like everyone else for this country."<sup>530</sup> After all that they had endured under apartheid, and with the added pressure of constant political mobilization, the black majority had earned their right to a theatre of pleasure.

*"A Fond Farewell"*

After weeks of press coverage, talk-radio dialogues and an SABC television broadcast of *Titus Andronicus* in performance, Antony Sher wrote two more articles on the debate. The first, entitled somewhat ominously "A Fond Farewell – For Now" was his attempt to offer a summary of the arguments made for and against his homecoming project.<sup>531</sup> The second was composed for the British *Sunday Times*, intended to serve as both a report on his "bruising homecoming" and as advance publicity for the upcoming UK performances of *Titus* at the West Yorkshire

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<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*

Mtholbane's suspicion of the new ANC government's plan to take a more active role in South African theatre was born out two years by the Sarafina II scandal. Conceived as an AIDS awareness sequel to Mbongeni Ngema's internationally successful township musical Sarafina!, which premiered at the Market Theatre in 1988. After a 14 million Rand commission, and repeated delays, the show was a complete failure with audiences and critics alike.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>531</sup> Sher, Antony. "A Fond Farewell – for Now." *The Star* 12 May 1995: 10.

Playhouse and the Royal National Theatre. Each documents Sher's decisive withdrawal from the role of connected critic.

Sher riddled the former piece (once again written for *The Star*) with barbs for his South African critics, while simultaneously denying that Johannesburg's reception of *Titus* had upset him in any way. "Last weekend was stimulating," he began:

First a lunch party with the Market Theatre trustees, where everyone was talking about IT – IT being the fact that Jo'burg audiences seem reluctant to attend serious theatre. Then to Pieter-Dirk Uys's excellent new show, where he said: "I believe Antony Sher is angry with Jo'burg audiences for not coming to the theatre . . . I hope someone tells him how full we are tonight!" – to which the (99% white) audience cheered and clapped, applauding themselves for braving it from their fortress-like homes to the fortress-like Civic. Finally, on the way back, we stopped for a take-away, only to overhear a radio DJ reviewing the theatre listings: 'and the Market Theatre's *Titus Andronicus*, in its last week – unless Antony Sher gets too angry to finish the run.' Angry? I'm delighted. The debate is up and running. Letters, public and private, newspaper articles and radio forums have produced a diverse, often surprising, always stimulating, range of arguments.<sup>532</sup>

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<sup>532</sup> Sher, "Fond Farewell," 10.

The irritations and imputed hypocrisy of the “edgy city” aside, Sher assured his readers that he was actually grateful such controversy had erupted after the publication of “SA Theatre in Deep Trouble.” Furthermore, he claimed that the event had been extraordinarily productive in illustrating new ways to revitalize theatre in South Africa, and used the opportunity to add a proposal of his own. “[T]icket prices should be drastically reduced,” he asserted. “All the arguments about security risks or cultural philistinism because of the boycott, all these arguments suddenly vanish in the face of a good old-fashioned bargain.”<sup>533</sup> Specifically, Sher recommended that theatres like the Market slash their ticket prices by half; the remainder of which would be paid for by state subsidy.

Sher also held Johannesburg’s culturally backward and incompetent theatre critics responsible for retarding ticket sales. His tone was superficially constructive:

Finally, if I was staying here longer, I would love to help organize a meeting between the leaders of the theatre community and those of the media, to find a way of sharing the problem of small audiences. For example, the arts editor of the Weekly Mail needs to explain why a serious paper employs a critic like Digby Ricci, whose antiquated views on Shakespeare would get him laughed off any local rag in England; and the arts editor also needs to answer the question: “All right, so perhaps you succeeded in cutting down our audiences – now what are you going to do to save serious theatre in this country?”<sup>534</sup>

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<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*

The reviews of *Titus Andronicus* demonstrated the need for such a forum: an assembly that would, presumably, purge itself of critics proven to harbor “antiquated views.” It would also be the function of such a body to market activities for the arts in way that would attract more patrons, especially from the beyond the northern suburbs.

Sher went on to conclude his essay by writing that “it has been a privilege to participate in South African Theatre [. . .] I hope I can come back one day, and I pray that, in terms of audience numbers, things are in a healthier state than at present.”<sup>535</sup>

*“A Violent Reaction”*

Within a few weeks of penning his provisionally “fond” departure notice to the citizens of Johannesburg, Antony Sher wrote a lengthy report detailing his experiences in that city for the British *Sunday Times*; this essay also served as a touchstone for all of his and Doran’s publicity efforts for the run of *Titus Andronicus* in that country. Sher depicted South Africa as both a country of extraordinary violence, and one where unreconstructed white racists still governed Johannesburg’s cultural life to the exclusion of silent, victimized blacks. The latter characterization is not an exaggeration, as the following bathetic passage (which served as the introduction to one of his essays) amply attests:

One night in Johannesburg a five-year-old boy came to see our production of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, one of the most violent plays ever written. He and his mother were in the Market Theatre bar after the performance, and I asked the woman whether her son had understood the play? “Oh I think so,” she said, and explained that his father was murdered in front of his eyes in a

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<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*

political killing just before South Africa embraced democracy. So hadn't the play upset him? "Only at the end," she said. Of course, all the deaths. "No," she corrected me, "he didn't mind those . . . it was the curtain call." The curtain call? "Yes, when all the dead people stood up, he asked if his dad could do the same."<sup>536</sup>

The story is undoubtedly moving, leaving one to wonder why Sher did not quote it in any of his South African publications or interviews. It is also a sensationalist way to introduce this country as land of horrendous, even hopeless, barbarity. "Stories such as these still surprise me," Sher commented, "even though I've got to know my homeland rather well again after a quarter century away."<sup>537</sup> While in Cape Town and Johannesburg, the actor was saddened by the fact that "the new South Africa is a place where violence is still a part of everyday life."<sup>538</sup> Violence, it must be emphasized, that he figured as entirely 'Other' from the experience of his Western, British reader.

This slice of the Dark Continent also retained a vestigial and somewhat ridiculous colonial class. Once again, Sher attempted to cast Johannesburg's Anglophone elite in bold relief by recounting his favorite tales from the "edgy city" in a tone of faint mockery:

"Have you developed Jo'burg elbow yet?" a lady asked me during my book launch at the glamorous Sandton Sun hotel, and then demonstrated a swift backwards flick of the arm that locks your car door at traffic lights. The city-centre pavements are blacks-only

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<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*

territory, where people look as impoverished as before. Meanwhile, out in the white suburbs, one of the Market Theatre trustees was reluctantly adding electrified wiring to the fortress walls around his property. These mansions all carry signs from one of the armed-response units, which promise to be on your doorstep within two minutes of an emergency call. I liked the one called Bianca's Armed Response, which presumably summons up some fab, power-dressed chick to sort out your intruders.<sup>539</sup>

This tableau of embattled white perpetrators and traumatized black women and children was not accidental. The ANC's "concept of reconciliation instead of revenge," Sher wrote, "is providing some whites with a convenient excuse to live and think exactly as they did before, while blacks still have nowhere to put their pain and anger."<sup>540</sup> Despite the corona of hope surrounding the "rainbow nation," South Africa was still "a society full of open wounds, not healing scars."<sup>541</sup> It was too soon for the celebratory enthusiasm he had felt the year before.

These unresolved tensions also impacted the way in which Shakespeare is regarded in that country. Comparing the interstices between art and politics there to a "minefield," Sher accused Johannesburgers of having some very funny ideas about Shakespeare. They either regard him "as a kids' writer (a recent production of *Macbeth* had to cancel all performances during the school holidays,) or else they revere him preciously, and prefer old-style production, all wrinkly tights and starched vowels. My own included."<sup>542</sup> This was a restatement of South

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<sup>539</sup> Sher and Doran, 103.

<sup>540</sup> Sher, "Violent Reaction," 1.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid.*

Africa's cultural backwardness, but with a difference: to a British readership, he chose to reveal his outrage. At the outset of *Titus*' run, he had been willing to patiently and cheerfully educate South Africans on the aesthetics of "relevant" Shakespeare. "But a week or two later," he continued, "some different emotions started bubbling up."<sup>543</sup> Continuing to approach the problem of the show's reception in terms of Shakespeare was, given their collective prejudices, impossible.

Therefore, Sher explained that a different strategy for "putting bums on seats"<sup>544</sup> was necessary; hence, his decision to frame the poor response to *Titus* on the cultural boycott. Sher reiterated his arguments and, during the discussions that followed, drew what he considered to be an important conclusion: "with only one exception, all of the participants in this debate were white. [ . . . ] This is also at the root of the problem. The future for South African theatre, and the arts in general, must be surely rely on a significant input from black culture." His white critics were ultimately irrelevant, and the lone, unnamed "exception" did not shed any light worth quoting on the problem. "Black culture" must have the final say in the New South Africa, and Shakespeare must simultaneously remain a central feature of their theatrical landscape.

This widening, rather than narrowing gap, between white and black South Africans was ultimately responsible for the divisive response to Antony Sher's homecoming. He experienced "a fair amount of hostility from some white people, who tended to say, 'Oh you're back, now that it's chic to work here,' while black people tended to say, 'Welcome home, thank you for your anti-apartheid work in London.'"<sup>545</sup> In other words, white racism made Sher's return to South Africa premature, and white racism was still responsible for suffocating the black majority

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<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*

in the New South Africa of its cultural life. Victimized by the community that had only a year ago embraced his homecoming narrative, Sher would emphatically *not* be changing his residence to Johannesburg.

*UK Advance Publicity / Reviews*

The British press and key English luminaries of Shakespearean scholarship uncritically echoed Antony Sher's interpretation of *Titus Andronicus*' relevance for South Africa and of the ensuing debate over the cultural boycott. They rallied around him and, like Sher himself, appear to have pitched their remarks to an imagined double audience of sympathetic British *and* hostile South African readers. In doing so, these critics took the frayed strands of Sher's connection to South Africa and unraveled them more forcefully, retreading a quantity of anti-apartheid discourse in the process.

Advance publicity in British newspapers was highly partisan in this regard. Writing for the *Guardian*, Claire Armitstead informed her readers:

The Shakespearean theatre, like much else in the country, had become trapped in a time warp - it was still taught in schools, but performance styles hadn't moved on. The cultural boycott had put paid to any international Shakespeare traffic, stranding them with a received idea of what it should be like based on the theatre of 30 years ago.<sup>546</sup>

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Armitstead, Claire. "Over His Dead Body." *The Guardian* 3 Apr. 1995: [T] 8.

As a consequence, Johannesburg theatre critics did not have a clue how to evaluate *Titus Andronicus*. Michael Kustow went further, explaining that they were unable to appreciate the manner in which this production was an authentic reflection of South African history and culture:

What we see is not just a theatre production. It is a significant act of cultural cross-fertilization, cooked up in South Africa, not imported from abroad. It is yet another reminder of Shakespeare's inexhaustible relevance, in the face of fashionable critical theories that would like to downgrade his plays as cultural impositions from the white man's canon. And it is a personal achievement on many levels for its leading actor and begetter, South African-born Antony Sher. He and Gregory Doran, the play's director, picked *Titus Andronicus* because of the relentless reflection it holds up to the cycles of violence and revenge that shook South Africa for the lifetime of every adult in their audience.<sup>547</sup>

As a Briton, Kustow took the questionable (but unquestioned) position of declaring this *Titus* to be of genuine local mint, and not a foreign cultural imposition. Since the “South African-born” Sher was its chief “begetter,” how could it fail to be?

Indeed, so confident was Kustow in his analysis that he had no qualms about ‘staging’ an encounter he had with an angry white patron during a South African performance of *Titus*.

Addressing the production’s use of South African accents, Kustow wrote:

By performing the play in indigenous speech, rather than getting their cast to ape Olivier or Gielgud, Sher and Doran have confronted deep cultural preconceptions in their white audiences.

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<sup>547</sup> Kustow, Michael. “Exorcizing Apartheid.” *The Sunday Times* 9 Apr. 1995: [Features] 1.

A rich-looking white 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 neighbor is unimpressed: "I think they're just trying to make fools of us," he growls. [...] There seems almost to be a resentment that Sher has short-changed people, by withholding the noble actor's speech they had been deprived of for so long.<sup>548</sup>

Kustow, though, treats this "rich-looking white man" dismissively, and gives him a miniature version of the lecture on Elizabethan original pronunciation that John Barton gave the *Titus* cast during their UK workshop.

If this "resentment" was real, it was also misplaced. The "post-colonial cultural reflexes" of South African whites needed to be reformed, not respected. "After years of cultural isolation," Kustow elaborated:

It is not surprising that South African whites should want to make up for what they have been deprived of: well-spoken English versions of the Bard, presented as if he were grand opera. But Sher and his colleagues have tried for something more dangerous, more urgent, as befits the Elizabethan roughness and vitality of the Market Theatre itself, which would have been a good neighbour to the Globe on Bankside. Quite simply, they have sidestepped all the

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<sup>548</sup> Kustow, [Features] 1.

19th-century wrappings in which an older idea of Britishness embalmed Shakespeare. And it works.<sup>549</sup>

South Africans not only needed “Royal Shakespeare” more than they knew, but they failed to appreciate the opportunity their violent society afforded them to experience Shakespeare in his full, Kottian resonance. Shakespeare was truly their “contemporary.” Sher and Doran had demonstrated this remarkably with their localization of *Titus Andronicus*, even if their efforts fell on blind eyes.

Sher and Doran’s successful representation of South African society by the terms of “Royal Shakespeare,” and the racially driven cultural incompetence of their white South African audiences, remained the dominant reading strategy of the British press. For *The Times*, Benedict Nightingale enthused:

You see why Sher and his friends chose the play? What makes it preposterous is precisely what made it suitable for presentation in a South Africa still licking its wounds. It is a crazy piece for a crazy place. It is Shakespeare’s *Ubu Roi* and performed as such here.<sup>550</sup>

Particularly in the performance of Sello’s Aaron, “the parallels between Rome then and South Africa now are unmissable and exact.”<sup>551</sup> Arden Shakespeare editor Jonathan Bate also detected clear “parallelism” between *Titus Andronicus* and South Africa that made the pairing an excellent candidate for Sher and Doran’s ‘royal’ treatment of the script.

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<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>550</sup> Nightingale, Benedict. “Tyranny Lives in Every Century.” *The Times* 14 Jul. 1995: [Features] 6.

<sup>551</sup> Nightingale, [Features] 6.

Reviewing two productions of *Titus Andronicus* in his article, including a performance directed by Silviu Purcarete for the National Theatre of Craiova in Romania, Bate claimed that Sher and Doran got the recipe for “Royal Shakespeare” just right— relevance without polemic:

Both productions are profoundly contemporary, yet neither is crudely allegorical – they are not overtly “about” post-Ceausescu Romania and the new South Africa. Doran’s young, multiracial company consists predominantly of actors unaccustomed to Shakespeare; the resultant over-deliberation in the line endings and occasional lack of clarity in the speaking are a price worth paying for the freshness and commitment which they bring to their work.<sup>552</sup>

Two years later, in his favorable book review of *Woza Shakespeare!*, Bate offered an even stronger endorsement of the production and Doran’s role in its execution: “Doran trained his young multiracial company to speak in their own voices, in what Sher calls ‘an accent that isn’t all smooth and rounded, but full of muscle and edges – an earth accent, a root accent, instead of one that floats and flutters around in the air.’” Doran, unlike white South African critics, “understands the play perfectly.”<sup>553</sup> Together with Antony Sher’s performance, this production was a worthy successor to the great productions of Peter Brook of 1955 and Deborah Warner in 1987. That is to say, although it was not produced by the RSC, their efforts deserved to be canonized alongside these shows as part of that company’s distinctive genealogy of performance.

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<sup>552</sup> Bate, Jonathan. “Conquering Despair: Parallelism and Inversion: The Bloody Politics of *Titus Andronicus*.” *TLS* 28 Jul. 1995: 18 – 19.

<sup>553</sup> Bate, 18.

Perhaps the most influential British notice published, however, was distinguished critic Michael Billington's piece for *The Guardian*, appropriately titled "Sher's 'Titus Africanus' Hailed."<sup>554</sup> Like the other cited reviewers, Billington argued that the production achieved the right blend of local reference and universal generality. Praising Sher and Doran's conceptualization of the text as "a highly consistent, beautifully executed reading," he insisted, like Jonathan Bate, that this "Titus Africanus" confirms status of this play as "Shakespeare's first masterwork."<sup>555</sup>

Unlike Sher's more strident boosters, Billington thoughtfully conceded that the political parallels this production drew between Shakespeare's text and South Africa were "not exact," and that the element of race in Titus "is hardly a key theme." He even referred to Doran's reassignment of Marcus's conciliatory speech to the end of the performance script as "textual fiddling."<sup>556</sup> As Billington further noted, certain moments of Doran's direction "veer[ed] awkwardly between realism and stylization," such as his staging of Lavinia's rape and Saturninus's appearance on a toilet, a gimmicky device that Billington quipped "seems to fall between two stools."<sup>557</sup> In short, by the highest standards of contemporary Shakespeare production, Doran's inexperience was occasionally visible.

Aside from these minor complaints, Billington claimed that it was the *gestalt* of the director's vision for the play, coupled with Antony Sher's "rigorous and impressive" performance, that elevated the production to the heights of Kottian relevance: the temporal ecstasy in which Shakespearean past and the immediacy of the present converge. As Billington

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<sup>554</sup> Billington, Michael. "Sher's 'Titus Africanus' Hailed." *Mail & Guardian* 28 July-3 Aug. 1995: 29.

<sup>555</sup> Billington, 29.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*

warmed to this argument, he acknowledged, “it does make a kind of sense for the Roman ruling elite to be seen as fractious Afrikaners, the captive Goths to be invading guerilla forces and Aaron to be less an incorrigible black villain than a man driven to blood and revenge by an amoral society.”<sup>558</sup> More urgently, these South African associations communicated the play’s original, and entirely sobering, obsessions with “violence, anarchy and stoicism in the face of unspeakable cruelty.”<sup>559</sup> More than South Africa, the Bard was best served by this retelling of *Titus*.

Antony Sher’s performance was the “key” to the production’s success. Billington’s argument, however, was more subtle than those offered by other critics in the British press. Rather than hang all of his analysis on the mysteries of the actor’s celebrity, Billington explained that Sher’s adoption of Afrikaner given circumstances helped him to convincingly fashion an emotional journey for *Titus* that, while always inherent to text, resisted expression. As written by Shakespeare, *Titus* is a vehicle for “confront[ing] the outer limits of grief.”<sup>560</sup> What makes this character such an effective subject for this exploration is the fact that *Titus*, at the outset of the tragedy, appears to be well-armored against grief, since he has already achieved a state of Senecan equanimity towards his staggering personal losses in Rome’s wars.

For contemporary directors, the question then becomes, how best to represent a *Titus* that so foreign to modern ethical sensibilities as to seem borderline inhuman. While one might think that the history of British stiff upper lipped imperialism (think Lord Kitchener), Billington claimed that portraying *Titus* as a “Pretoria Patton” was a perfect answer to this question. As a

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<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>559</sup> Asquith, Clare, *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2005: 90-104.

<sup>560</sup> Billington, 29.

“consummate combat-fatigued old soldier, seemingly inured to sorrow,” Sher’s Afrikaner Titus was hardened by the “militaristic spirit” to require a full five acts to “crack.” Playing him as a grizzled Boer also made Titus’s gradual “retreat into glazed rhetoric in the face of pure, motiveless horror,” more emotionally convincing than it might otherwise have seemed. A Patton from Pretoria is believable as a man of few – and rote – words. Thus ‘Africanized,’ this production, and Sher’s individual performance, was “anything but a pale imitation of British Shakespeare.”<sup>561</sup>

With only a few exceptions, British theatre critics concurred: Sher and Doran’s *Titus Andronicus* was an authentically South African theatre experience that had been “imported” to the UK.<sup>562</sup> This claim ultimately rested on Antony Sher’s self-presentation as a South African still fully versed in that country’s “local knowledge” and connected to its national aspirations. Significantly, these same British reviewers insisted on this claim even though they were fully aware that most South Africans themselves had overwhelmingly disavowed both the show and Sher. There was a *defiant* quality to British estimations of *Titus* – an attitude they felt a moral

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<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>562</sup> The theatre critic for the *Evening Standard*, Nick Curtis, argued that the relevance chosen for the production more than explained why “the black population stayed away from this ragged but powerful South Africanized version of Shakespeare’s orgiastic melodrama.” Why would they want to be made to feel sympathy for a Titus who “is the spitting image of that crashing Boer, white supremacist Eugene Terre Blanche?” Despite Antony Sher’s “fiery, operatic performance,” the production’s adoption of an “Afrikaner tone” was “politically naïve.” (Nick Curtis. “Classic Colonized In Clumsy Fashion,” the *Evening Standard* July 19, 1995: 44). *Business Day*’s Charles Spencer, while “reluctant to rub salt into the wound,” wrote that “one can understand why South Africans stayed away in droves.” Or as he elucidated: “You would have to search long and hard to find a less appropriate play with which to celebrate the transformation of SA. *Titus Andronicus* is a revolting piece of work, and its slavering relish for bloodshed and revenge seems grotesquely at odds with the spirit of courage and reconciliation that has been achieved under Mandela.” Like Digby Ricci, Spencer found Gregory Doran’s ‘tampering’ with the script to be “a doomed attempt to make it more “relevant.” This quality of forced relevance was nowhere more apparent, Spencer argued than during the curtain call. “The show ends with a celebratory dance,” Spencer noted, “which seems peculiarly crass considering the play we have just witnessed. What next? A hokey pokey after Hamlet?” His notice concluded: “Apart from Sher’s performance there is very little to celebrate in this misconceived production.” (Charles Spencer, “Revolting – and Quite Inappropriate.” *Business Day*, 28 Jul. 1995: 6.) Both of these reviews, however, shifted the weight of blame onto Doran’s direction, rather than Antony Sher’s performance, despite the fact that Sher was credited with having co-conceived it.

right to assert since white South Africans had proven themselves to be the same racist philistines they had been during the apartheid era. Not only Antony Sher, but also trusted arts journalists, like Michael Kustow, who had traveled to Johannesburg specifically to tell them. After good reviews and full houses in Leeds and London, *Titus 'Africanus'* had its final performance at the in Spain. What had been intended as a possible one-way, triumphal homecoming in South Africa had been transformed into a return-ticket back to the UK and a moderately successful production of more “Royal Shakespeare.” With the statures of him and his partner Gregory Doran thus increased, Antony Sher bounded himself ever tighter to the British theatre establishment, and watched his stock as a stage celebrity soar. He was awarded a knighthood by the Queen in 2000—as a British national, not as a citizen of South Africa.

And there the matter of *Titus Andronicus* might have rested, with Antony Sher still tenuously connected to South African audiences through the foreign success of the production and, perhaps, the initiation of new theatrical joint-ventures. Instead, two years later, Antony Sher and Gregory Doran published book on the affair that, in the form of confessional diary entries, was self-exculpatory and, too often, vituperative. *Woza Shakespeare!*, as it was called, had barbs aplenty for everyone involved in their production of *Titus Andronicus*. In particular, the pair complained long and loudly about the incompetence of the Mark Theatre staff—a line of attack and, arguably, ingratitude, that virtually guaranteed a defensive response from that institution’s protectors in Johannesburg.

Sher and Doran also employed *Woza* to recount, for the first time, an event at the Market Theatre that possessed exceptional pertinence to a reception study of *Titus*: a one-time matinee performance for an audience of township blacks. “Afterwards standing in the bar, one of them comes up to us [Doran and British theatre critic Michael Kustow]. ‘I didn't understand it all

here,' he says, pointing to his head. Then he bangs his chest. 'But I understood it here.'"<sup>563</sup>

The scene is striking, not least because it captures a breakthrough performance in which Sher's intentions finally, if fleetingly, connected with what he and Doran had identified as their target audience. If this happened one time, it could have, and should have, happened several times over, if only the Market Theatre's publicity and box office staff had made the necessary arrangements. The fact that these audiences cheered Aaron's apparent villainy with "yebo!," or that an illiterate black could claim a passionately intuitive understanding of this Titus meant that Sher and Doran's pursuit of "relevance" had not been wrong in South Africa. Indeed, these were signs that their vision of Titus was vindicated.

#### *UK Woza Reviews*

Once again, most British theatre critics used their book reviews of *Woza Shakespeare!* to confirm Sher and Doran's version of *Titus Andronicus*' reception in South Africa. (Other reviews emphasized the couple's courage to write so openly about being a gay couple.<sup>564</sup>) Jonathan Bate's notice in the *Times Literary Supplement*, "Root Accents and the Beloved Country," is representative of these. His summary, assembled solely from the selective evidence provided by Sher and Doran, was blunt:

Did Shakespeare receive a roaring welcome in the new South Africa? Emphatically not. The white reviewers were prejudiced against *Titus* from the start. They wanted *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. And they wanted the tones of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Doran trained his young multiracial company to speak in their own

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<sup>563</sup> Sher and Doran, 213.

<sup>564</sup> Benedict, David. "Share and Sher Alike." *The Independent* 25 Nov. 1996: [Features] 6.

voices, in what Sher calls “an accent that isn’t all smooth and rounded, but full of muscle and edges – an earth accent, a root accent, instead of one that floats and flitters around in the air.” For his pains, he was rewarded with a panning in the Johannesburg papers and a run in front of half-empty houses.<sup>565</sup>

Even though the majority of the South African production reviews were favorable-to-mixed (Mark Gevisser’s included) Bate most accurately conveys the gist of Sher and Doran’s side of the story. All of the “white” critics in Johannesburg were “prejudiced,” the force of which fell on a “young multiracial company” trying to speak, with the instruction of Gregory Doran, “in their own voices.”<sup>566</sup> Leaving aside the fact that most of the South African cast was older – even much older – than the director, and that most of the cast was white, the unmistakable impression left by Bate is that white Johannesburg racists used philistinism as a weapon against the cultural emergence of the New South Africa. The proof for this last and damning accusation was the same episode with chest-thumping audience member from Soweto. As Bate repeated the story: “An audience member came up to Doran in the bar after the show and said, pointing to his head, ‘I didn’t understand it all here.’ Then he banged his chest: ‘But I understood it here.’” Bate’s response to this man’s reported lack, rather than loss, of language typifies the historiographical distortions created by *Woza Shakespeare!*’s intention to serve as the *last word* on the production controversy. “What that man cannot say,” Bate asserted, “Doran understands [...] perfectly.”<sup>567</sup> Or as he approvingly quoted Doran:

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<sup>565</sup> Bate, Jonathan. “Root Accents and the Beloved Country.” *TLS* 24 Jan. 1997: 19.

<sup>566</sup> Bate, 19.

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid.*

It's about our capacity for cruelty, and for our capacity for survival; about the way violence breeds violence; about the search for justice in a brutal universe. It's about a world I recognize around me, particularly here in Africa.<sup>568</sup>

Unable, or not allowed to fully represent himself, Bate is satisfied that Doran, and the South African-born Sher, *can* speak for South African blacks, and that this anecdote accurately stands in for how all black audiences responded to the production.

“By the end of the book,” Bate concluded, “Sher has been abused of his fantasy of a permanent return to South Africa. [...] It cannot be home for an actor who craves the oxyhydrogenous flame.”<sup>569</sup> The blowtorch metaphor, which is entirely Jonathan Bate's invention, seems to express a sentiment recorded by other UK theatre critics: a sigh of relief and a gesture of gratitude that Antony Sher planned to rededicate himself to strengthening his connections to the British theatre-going public. These reviews also seemed keen to launch Gregory Doran's star. Undoubtedly, they helped. After *Titus*, Doran became a regular director for the RSC, and in 1999, became one of its Associate Artistic Directors—a leadership post that he still retains as of 2008. Antony Sher was knighted (KBE) as a British national in 2000.

Predictably, *Woza Shakespeare!* ignited another small firestorm in the South African press. As a group, these book reviews are striking for their extraordinary display of personal bitterness towards Antony Sher; indeed, difficult to imagine major newspapers in the UK or the United States running essays quite as invidious, or revealing, as these texts. All of them directly challenge Sher's connection to South Africa, and self-professed status as a cultural authority on the country.

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<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*

Consider the book review published by the *Sunday Times*, one of the prominent newspapers in the *Titus Andronicus* controversy: “Sulky Sher Says SA is Just Not Smart Enough,” by Phylicia Oppelt and Gillian Anstey.<sup>570</sup> “Eighteen months since flopping in South Africa,” Oppelt and Anstey wrote:

Shakespearian actor Antony Sher is blaming “inefficiency” at one of this country’s leading theatres for his show’s failure. In *Woza Shakespeare!*, co-written with Gregory Doran, director of *Titus Andronicus* at the Market last year, Sher claims that the theatre’s amateurishness and inexperience, and the SA media, were responsible for the show’s failure at the box office. Adding cheek to insult, they have sent a copy of their book to John Kani, the Market’s managing trustee, with an inscription reading, “Love and Thanks from Tony and Greg.”<sup>571</sup>

Unusual also for a book review, the authors conducted a little investigative journalism by interviewing several of these maligned staff members. For example, they quoted Market staffer Nico Brits as saying:

Although the Market did appoint a publicist to work on the production, what Antony Sher needed was media manipulators, not publicists, as he was one of the most unco-operative people that the media or I have had to deal with for a long time. I received

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<sup>570</sup> Oppelt, Phylicia and Gillian Anstey. “Sulky Sher Says SA is Just Not Smart Enough.” *Sunday Times* (SA) 15 Dec. 1996: 5.

<sup>571</sup> Oppelt and Anstey, 5.

numerous complaints from the media – electronic and print – about Sher’s attitude and his not being forthcoming in interviews.<sup>572</sup>

They also interviewed John Kani, whose remarks, while more diplomatic, were equally dismissive. (I shall return to Kani’s specific observations at the end of the chapter.) For further emphasis, the *Sunday Times* ran an unflattering photograph of Antony Sher with the book review. The caption read, “OH TO BE IN ENGLAND . . . Antony Sher, born in Cape Town but more famous in London.”

The height, or depth, of invective is a book review in the form of a doggerel verse play by Humphrey Carpenter with the extravagantly catty title, “From Titus to Tutu, All the World’s a Stage for the Whining Thespian Homeboy Antony Sher.”<sup>573</sup> Carpenter satirized every episode in the plot of Sher and Doran’s excursus to Johannesburg:

Act One

*(A Street in Johannesburg. Autumn 1994. Enter Sher, a South African-born actor, and Doran, and English theatre director.)*

DORAN:                    Now brightly burns this country’s hope anew.

                                 Thou wert an exile: how is’t to be back?

SHER:                     Faith, ‘tis most strange.

                                 Our Workshop hath disclos’d

                                 Amazing talent ‘mongst the local thesp.

DORAN:                    ‘Tis true. And hast thou notic’d, when they speak

                                 The words of Shakespeare in the local twang,

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<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>573</sup> Carpenter, Humphrey. “From Titus to Tutu, All the World’s a Stage.” *The Sunday Independent* (SA) 15 Dec. 1996: [Features] 18.

It sounds much better than the RSC?

SHER: Aye, and the Market Theatre, Jo'burg's best,  
Beateth the Barbican on a winter night.  
What say we two return here i' the spring,  
And stage the tale Titus?  
You direct,  
I'll play the lead, the locals do the rest.

DORAN: Titus Andronicus?  
Why the gory play?

SHER: This country hath seen violence 10 times worse  
Than Tutu's tragedy<sup>574</sup> doth show on stage.  
And now Mandela hath th' imperial crown,  
The moment's ripe to dramatise the past.

This presentation of Sher as South African-born “exile” and Doran as “English” establishes them as ridiculous pair of cultural tourists. Mocking the couple’s association with the RSC, and framing their admiration of the “local twang” as barely concealed condescension, Humphrey’s innovative interpretation was to frame Titus as an unpleasant anticipation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (i.e., “Tutu’s tragedy.”) In contrast to the upbeat coverage the TRC received in the international press, most South Africans considered the work of this body to have been an acrimonious failure. By 1997, the *Titus Andronicus* controversy was linked to the post-

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<sup>574</sup> “Tutu’s tragedy” refers to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) which operated from 1996 – 1998.

apartheid 'hang-over.'<sup>575</sup> Humphrey also satirized Sher and Doran's responses to the production's poor reception:

Act Four

*(Front of house at the market Theatre. The end of the first night. Champagne is being served to the well-dressed, all-white audience. Sher and Doran are mingling.)*

A WOMAN (coming up to Sher, and speaking in a strong South African accent):

I really liked the show,  
But one thing worried me.  
Why did you use  
That awful accent for dear  
Shakespeare's verse?

SHER: The awful accent ma'am, is but thine own.

DORAN: The critic for the Jo'burg Weekly Mail  
Says just the same; he writes that we're "perverse"  
To use the vowels of South Africa.

SHER: Once more into the breach! I'll pick a fight,  
Give interviews to all the local press,  
Berate Johannesburg for lack of taste,  
Anatomize its cultural poverty.  
A phone! A phone!

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<sup>575</sup> See Kay Schaffer's "Memory, Narrative and Forgiveness: Reflecting on Ten Years of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Borderlands* Vol. 5, No. 3 (2006). In this conference report on South Africa's most famous post-mortem on the TRC, Schaffer observed that the proceedings were so contentious that one was forced to conclude that "reconciliation is and remains a fractured process."

My kingdom for a phone!

(He storms out.)

Obviously, this is a stunningly unflattering portrait of Sher and Doran that impugns their motives from the beginning of their RNT-sponsored visit to Johannesburg in 1994. The line “Anatomize its cultural poverty” particularly stands out as an accusation of bad faith, before the review partially consumes itself in the self-mockery of a stale Richard III joke.

The Johannesburg theatre critic upon whom Sher and Doran heaped the most abuse, Digby Ricci also reviewed *Woza Shakespeare!* Ricci called the book “a failed polemic.”<sup>576</sup> Their failure was related to what Alan Sinfield has identified as the rhetorical evasion of “relevant” Shakespeare; or, the ‘deliberate imprecision’ of social reference historically practiced at the RSC. As Ricci notes, this language game was played by Doran when he broadcast that “he had no desire to ‘create specious parallels’” in his conceptualization of the play. Ricci was unconvinced:

This is rich considering his choice of caricatured Afrikaans accents for Shakespeare’s Romans and Sher’s presentation of Titus as a Eugene Terre Blanche clone. Both Greg and Tony profess to be free of England uber alles prejudices but, when challenged, they resort to Anglo-Saxon posturing worthy of a Joseph Chamberlain. “Nobody is demanding the crystalline opinions of a Kenneth Tynan or a Harold Hobson from a local critic,” sneers Tony. Scratch a trendy leftist actor and you get a Colonel Blimp.<sup>577</sup>

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<sup>576</sup> Ricci, Digby. “Someone Tell Tony It’s Time to Give Up on ‘Titus.’” *The Star Tonight* 16 Jan. 1997: 4.  
<sup>577</sup> Ricci, 4.

Confronted with an image of Titus as Eugene Terre'Blanche, Ricci was unable and unwilling to suspend his disbelief that Antony Sher and Gregory Doran were imposing a political allegory on their South African audiences. (Reading for political allegory is precisely what authorized readers of "Royal Shakespeare" had trained themselves *not* to do in the UK.)

Sher's exclusive appeal to British interpretive authorities only exacerbated the problem. If he had been more rhetorically clever, instead of insisting on the Englishness of their conceptual warrants, on "Royal Shakespeare," Sher might have appealed to international trends in the use of "eclectic anachronism" common to what Dennis Kennedy has called "foreign Shakespeare,"<sup>578</sup> which I discussed in Chapter 1. Instead, and entirely keeping with Sher and Doran's ceaseless identification with the RSC, Ricci viewed *Woza Shakespeare!* as a throwback document of English nationalism. Left-over colonial prejudice and exoticism is also how Ricci accounted for the production's success in the UK. "It is very likely," Ricci theorized, "that the British audiences that loved Titus were succumbing to a flavor of the month attitude towards things South African."<sup>579</sup>

South Africa's complicated attitude towards the UK was also at the heart of Stephen Gray's critique of Sher and Doran in his review of *Woza* for the *Mail & Guardian*. One of South Africa's most eminent Anglophone authors and literary critics, Gray repeatedly attacked Antony Sher's slipshod grasp of local knowledge about the country of his birth.<sup>580</sup> For starters, Gray thought the title of their book was presumptuous and misleading:

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<sup>578</sup> Kennedy, Dennis. *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-century Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.

<sup>579</sup> Ricci, 4.

<sup>580</sup> Stephen Gray, "Not a Sher-Fire Hit," *Mail & Guardian* 10 Jan. 1997: [Arts] 26.

Some would say using “Woza” (meaning come or arise) in their title takes nerve, but as Sher is South African-born, perhaps he has the right. My own feeling is that, since he doesn’t bother to spell any other South African word correctly, he should forfeit it. But that is not a serious matter.<sup>581</sup>

Rather, the serious matter is that Sher and Doran were associating their post-apartheid *Titus Andronicus* with one of the most daring shows to have been staged at the Market Theatre during the worst, most dangerous years of National Party rule. Did they have the right to make such a comparison? Furthermore:

What is it that, out of absolutely nothing but talent, the original *Woza Albert!* kept all of unfunded, censorship-darkened anti-apartheid theatre going for decades. All the Sher-Doran mess has managed to do is collapse it.<sup>582</sup>

“Our Market Theatre,” Gray added with the same sense of protectiveness exhibited by other Johannesburg critics, “still has not recovered” from the lingering alienation of its audience base. “Now,” he added, “to have the book of it, with lots of cheap retaliation for their bad reception, is almost too much.”<sup>583</sup>

While he thought the conception of the production to have been “poor,” like other South African theatre critics at the time, Gray claimed that another event that happened during the run of *Titus Andronicus* in the spring of 1995: Queen Elizabeth II’s first visit to that country since it

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<sup>581</sup> Gray, 26.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>583</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

became a republic in 1962. Like Antony Sher's homecoming narrative, the British press also expected her official state visit to be a triumphal return. Contrary to the Queen's expectations, her welcome was less than warm.<sup>584</sup> Calling Queen Elizabeth's South African tour a "double-act" with that of the RSC-identified Sher and Doran, Gray asserted that both were "flops" because, now that his country was a "world leader in democratic procedures," South Africans had "become bored with moldy royals patronizing them."<sup>585</sup> The "royal" in "Royal Shakespeare" that generated such a strong current of nationalistic identification in the UK – "connection" that off-set and balanced the Company's occasional radicalism – no longer plugged into a complementary circuit in this former, but boycotted, Commonwealth nation.

Gray seems to have wished that these first efforts to reconnect Anglophone South Africans with the UK had been conducted with greater humility and sensitivity on the part of returning expatriates and visiting Britons. As for the *Titus Andronicus* episode, Gray expresses his qualified regret in the "local twang":

There is a fine South African exclamation to express human sympathy – "ag shame." Said with a certain tone, it also means "look what you deserve!" Here are poor Tony and Greg, mounting their big Shakespeare number in Africa, and didn't they have a tough time? Well, ag shame.<sup>586</sup>

With the publication of *Woza!*, though, Gray seemed to suggest Sher had once again burnt his South African 'passport.' If he were to return, Antony Sher would literally need to learn the local language all over again.

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<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

### *Black Perspective*

The raw emotion evident in book reviews of *Woza Shakespeare!* by white critics indicates the intensity of their one-time bond with Antony Sher. I have endeavored to represent their perspectives sympathetically, but this does not mean the suspicion that British critics manifested towards the unconscious political dispositions of *Titus'* white audiences was not unfounded. As beneficiaries of apartheid, if not proponents of the National Party, privileged white liberals in South Africa have been placed under close public scrutiny in the New South Africa, particularly by a newly empowered class of black cultural critics. In fact, since the end of apartheid, the word "liberal," associated with that country's Anglophone elite, has become a term of abuse. In 1999, President Thabo Mbeki even stated in a speech that old Afrikaner nationalists were assimilating into the New South Africa than Johannesburg's northern suburbs set. These pressures, combined with the omnipresent threat of violent crime radiating from the "edgy city" have, since the mid 1990s, prompted almost a million Anglophone South Africans to emigrate from the country, such as the Nobel Prize-winning novelist J.M. Coetzee, who left after his Booker Prize-winning novel about the New South Africa, *Disgrace*, was labeled "racist" by an official representative of the ANC. According to the latest census in that country, the number of whites in South Africa as a percentage of the national population has fallen from [10%] to [7%] and is projected to keep falling.

Given these historical factors, already visible on the horizon in 1995, Antony Sher and Gregory Doran were surely right to insist that "black voices" needed to be heard if the *Titus Andronicus* controversy was to be placed in a fully meaningful context. However, it is not clear that they listened to these voices any more attentively than the more numerous white

perspectives in the South African press. Leaving aside the lobby anecdote inserted very late into the debate over *Titus*, it is curious how little either Sher or Doran engaged with Israel Motlhabane's editorial for the *Sunday Times*.

While professing some respect for his "radical proposal" to build new performing arts complexes in South Africa's township communities, Doran otherwise diminished Motlhabane's essay by referring to it as an "impassioned diatribe," i.e., as an argument not fully reasoned or informed.<sup>587</sup> Completely eliding his remarks on the popularity of Gibson Kente's musicals, Doran wrote that, by "proclaiming provocatively that 'to the theatre lover in the townships, Shakespeare is sawdust,'" Motlhabane had shown his "true colors."<sup>588</sup> This begs the question: what were his 'true colors'?

There are several possible ways to fill in this interpretive blank. The most likely candidate, though, is simply this one: it was not possible for Sher or Doran to conceive that Gibson Kente might be more relevant to South Africa than Shakespeare; or, further, that Shakespeare might possibly be irrelevant, and an offensive reminder of European colonialism as it operated in southern Africa, then lingered on in a refracted state by apartheid. Having been thoroughly indoctrinated in the universalism of the Bard – an assumption that is the common currency of the world community of Anglophone nations – Sher and Doran were, from this perspective, thoroughly united with the white South Africans they disparaged; their quarrel was principally one of "means" of aesthetic production, not the "ends" of Shakespeare as a summit experience of what Alan Sinfield called "culturism."

Put another way, both Antony Sher and his white South African critics viewed the failure of *Titus Andronicus* as a loss, since its poor reception threatened to devalue, one might say after

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<sup>587</sup> Sher and Doran, 225.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid*, 225.

Pierre Bourdieu, the “cultural capital” of Shakespeare in a rapidly de-colonizing society like the New South Africa. But Mtholbane was far from being the only black South African to express a more dismissive judgment on this physically quiet, yet lengthy, verbose and injurious theatre riot. This is why I want to conclude this chapter with a close reading of John Matshikiza’s book review entitled “Sher’s and Doran’s Feelings of Betrayal After the Flop of *Titus* Are More Farce Than Tragedy,” which as published in the South African *Sunday Independent*.<sup>589</sup> A writer, stage director and critic who spent most the 1980s living as an exile in London, Matshikiza returned to South Africa in 1991 where he worked for SABC television and, on occasion, the Market Theatre. A member of the New South Africa’s black intelligentsia, Mr. Matshikiza was also conversant with the British stage – a background that invests his assessment of the *Titus* controversy with unique authority.

Matshikiza’s essay recapitulates several points of criticism raised by other reviewers. Like Stephen Gray, Matshikiza found the title affronting:

What are they trying to say? Do they think that throwing in a bit of Zulu next to his name will give Shakespeare some post-Madiba Afro-credibility? Or that, in the more literal sense, as in the *Woza, Albert!* from which their title is opportunistically derived, a Shakespearean revival is what South African theatre, and South Africa, desperately needs? Or, indeed, that what Sher and Doran did with *Titus Andronicus* in Johannesburg was that messianic act

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<sup>589</sup> Matshikiza, John. “Sher’s and Doran’s Feelings of Betrayal After the Flop of *Titus* Are More Farce Than Tragedy.” *The Sunday Independent* 20 Jan. 1997: 22.

of resurrection, and that they, like all good messiahs, were spurned  
by the barbarians for whom they performed this selfless act?<sup>590</sup>

Matshikiza's shares Gray's offense at the way the title implies an equation between Sher and Doran's efforts in 1995 to the work of the Market Theatre during apartheid. However, in a reading that also touches upon Mtholbane's op-ed two years earlier, Matshikiza takes additional umbrage at the implied notion that Shakespeare should now supplant the kind of township-generated performance that *Woza, Albert!* represented. Finally, Matshikiza frankly resents the appropriation of the African social drama associated with the command "woza," less because of the Eurocentricity of "Shakespeare," and more to do with the false mantle of authority it was meant to bestow on Sher and Doran. Not being black South Africans, they had no right this language.

According to Matshikiza, the book title's convergence of fragmentary local knowledge and presumed connection typified Sher and Doran's entire work ethic in South Africa. Perhaps some places might be more tolerant of such cultural tourism. Johannesburg, on the other hand, was a "jungle" whose theatre culture consisted of an "inner minefield" and "arenas of warfare that don't treat wide-eyed newcomers kindly[:] to walk into this town and, in a matter of days, try to impose some sort of meaning on to the catalogue of violence, mutilations, rapes and political shenanigans that are its very life-blood, is folly."<sup>591</sup> There might have been a way to fashion a relevant *Titus* that reflected these actual patterns of symbolic violence. Not interested in the advice that local informants had offered them, (such as the burning issue of accommodating Zulu nationalism within the New South Africa), Sher and Doran "missed the

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<sup>590</sup> Matzukaze, 22.

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

point, and so missed all the startling insights that *Titus Andronicus*, with its parallel catalogue of violence, could have given.”<sup>592</sup> From this perspective, *Titus* was a missed opportunity.

*More Farce than Tragedy*

Yet, Matshikiza does not hold fast to this melancholic view in the same manner that characterized so many of Antony Sher’s white South African critics. As an exile living in London during the 1980s with a lively interest in theatre, this critic argued that, Sher’s homecoming narrative notwithstanding, his *Titus* project could not be decoupled from his self-marketing in the UK. Since first rising to stage stardom at the RSC in the 1980s, “Antony Sher has made it a point [ . . . ] of sharing each intimate moment of his actor’s life with the world.”<sup>593</sup>

Having established a series of publications chronicling his acting career for the British public, for Sher “not to regale us with the injustice of his fall from grace as Titus, another of the great tragic kings, and in Africa, no, would have been too much for the gods to endure.” Some form of *Woza Shakespeare!* was always going to be written, and principally for the same British readership that had made *Year of the King* a commercial success.<sup>594</sup>

Matshikiza emphasized for his South African readers that Antony Sher was a celebrity in the UK and, more specifically, within a field of artistic activity with its own particular rules and rewards. “If you are prepared to stay with it, and read between the lines,” he suggested, *Woza Shakespeare!* will “transport you into the fairytale world he inhabits with his director, co-author and life partner Gregory Doran”:

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<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*

It's the world of the thespian, but, more specifically, the English actor: that never-never land where, for a few heady hours as you strut your stuff across the stage, you hold mortality and history in the palm of your hand. In that world, the smell of the grease-paint and the roar of the crowd are drugs more devastating than crack—especially for a star. And Antony Sher, on the English stage, is a star. *Woza Shakespeare!* Is a star's diary.<sup>595</sup>

In other words, the significance of this production journal exists within an articulated “field of cultural production” (Bourdieu) located, almost hermetically, in the UK, in spite of Antony Sher's protestations that his primary concern was with the social and artistic well-being of his fellow South Africans.

Still a basic question about this book remained:

Why could their failed African adventure not simply be left to lie in the mud of memory? A bad experience in the theatre is something you want to run away from forever and hope that no one brings it up the next time you bump into them in the supermarket. So here we have the blow-by-blow chronicle of a disaster: how Sher and Doran arrived in Jo'burg, thought that it would be the perfect setting for Shakespeare's most violent play and proceeded with reckless speed to put their dream on to the stage of the Market Theatre.<sup>596</sup>

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<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid.*

How could it benefit Antony Sher's (and Gregory Doran's) stardom to memorialize events that, again from a South African perspective, seemed to underscore, even exaggerate, the degree to which the actor was rejected and reviled by Johannesburgers? Intuitively, the critic implied, this is a self-defeating gesture.

But Matshikha explains that intuition, in this case, would be wrong, because South Africans were never Sher and Doran's actual target audience for *Titus Andronicus*, or stopped being so as soon as it became apparent that the show was not to their taste. Or, to be more exact, this *Titus* was not designed as an entertainment for South African audiences, so much as an act of public "service." The *pleasure* of the production, however, was always already attuned to the expectations of British audiences—a fact that the Market's leadership understood well in advance, but attempted to ignore in their desperation to attract new sources of funding for the perennially, financially-strapped theatre. 'In the end,' Matzu concluded:

This book is a story about mismatched desires. Sher and Doran never intended their *Titus* to be anything more than a stage in their English careers. The Market Theatre played along and should have known better. That the Sher-Dorans and the Joburg glitterati felt betrayed by the bad marriage is more farce than tragedy, which comes out resoundingly in these pages. The last part of the diary recounts the triumphal resurrection Sher and Doran hoped for at the beginning of the saga. *Titus Andronicus*, back on its native English soil, with its semi- South African cast, suddenly became an attractive, exciting piece of theatre. It was, after all, being played for the kind of audience for which it was originally intended – an

audience that was happy to have its preconceptions about Africa, an endlessly inexplicable bed of mystery and mayhem, reinforced. So, ultimately, all that can be said is that *Woza Shakespeare!* ain't Shakespeare, but it's at least true to its own agenda.<sup>597</sup>

Sher and Doran knew that their "relevant" *Titus* would be anathema to white South African audiences. But confident that it would also be well-received in the UK, where it would simply be appreciated as a new "flavor" (Ricci) of "Royal Shakespeare," the pair decided to risk imposing the production on Johannesburgers as a necessary act of 're-education.' British audiences, though, would be spared this cultural scolding since the same production merely performed a Dark Continent variation on the logic of Orientalism, i.e. the "strange reversal" of the performance text that safely naturalized Africa as the locus of political and racial violence. And this does not exhaust the cynicism of Matzushiki's evaluation of the controversy.

### *Loser Wins*

The American philosopher Donald Davidson is well known for his contention that "radical interpretation" should be tempered by the "principle of charity," by which he meant the imputation of rationality, coherence and interest to a speaker's body of utterances.<sup>598</sup> A kind of important of rule utilitarianism into the theory of hermeneutics, Davidson argued that charitable interpretations maximized the possibility of shared understanding while minimizing the tendency to uncritically dismiss and demonize 'Others.' Viewed in this light, the principle of charity might

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<sup>597</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>598</sup> I am indebted to Michael Quinn's application of this concept in his chapter "Theatricality, Convention, and the Principle of Charity." In *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance, and Philosophy*, David Krasner and David Z. Saltz, eds. (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2006): 301 – 316.

also be seen as one the unacknowledged “virtues” of connected criticism, save this one difference: Walzer reminds that it oftentimes desirable to be charitable towards one’s “own,” as well.

Charity will govern my concluding analysis of the *Titus Andronicus* controversy. Unfortunately, Sher himself did not follow this same principle, unleashing responses from South African critics that sometimes read like the projections of their worst fears and anxieties than sober analysis. However, John Matzishinki – the lone black voice to speak up against *Woza Shakespeare!* – accused Antony Sher and Gregory Doran of pursuing a careerist “agenda;” this is also a rational, coherent and interesting argument. Therefore, it may be useful to restate his case with a supplemental hypothesis, or what I shall call the “bait and switch” interpretation of these events.

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of “cultural capital” does not require an extended summary. The notion that artistic practices, for example, tend to circulate like market commodities, interact with society on the basis of relative scarcity, and are convertible into different currencies of power has served as one of the methodological foundations of theatre studies for some time.<sup>599</sup> In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu posits one formation of cultural behavior to which Matzushinki could be referring: the artistic stratagem, or game, that Bourdieu calls “loser wins.”

The avant-garde arts circulate differently from “bourgeois” and popular aesthetic commodities. According to Bourdieu, the former “is based on, as in a generalized game of ‘loser wins,’ on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies [...];”<sup>600</sup>

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<sup>599</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993): 39.

<sup>600</sup> Bourdieu, 39.

it is an “upside down economic world.”<sup>601</sup> His point is not at all difficult to grasp. The value of a popular Hollywood romantic comedy is determined, by producers and audiences alike, primarily by its success at the box office. This is not necessarily so with “art house” films, such as those of David Lynch. In cases such as these, popular “success is often seen [...] as ‘the mark of intellectual inferiority.’” Or as Bourdieu elaborates: “We are indeed in the economic world reversed, a game in which the loser wins: the artist can triumph on the symbolic terrain only to the extent that he loses on the economic one, and vice versa.”<sup>602</sup> Failure in the material realm is the risky prerequisite for accumulating what, in this economy, can become very high sums of symbolic capital.

How this form of value is converted into economic capital is an important part of this familiar story. The avant-gardist must be prepared to accept a term of poverty, or a “time-lag that is necessary for [her] works to impose the norms of perceptions they bring along.”<sup>603</sup> Thus, “in contrast to ‘bourgeois artists,’ assured of immediate customers,” the avant-gardist is “destined to deferred economic gratification.”<sup>604</sup> This is recognizable as the ‘starving’ phase of being an artist. But Bourdieu claims this is still not enough to protect or develop one’s career investment:

The artist invents himself in *suffering*, in revolt, against the bourgeois, against money, by inventing a separate world where the laws of economic necessity are suspended, at least for a while, and where value is not measured by commercial success.<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.  
<sup>602</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.  
<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*

In a neat conjunction of Nietzsche and Marx, asceticism and capital accumulation are shown to be mutually complimentary practices—in the long-term.

Before the pay-off comes the rack. The most famous artists provoke it by “refut[ing] every kind of reference to the audience’s expectations”<sup>606</sup> They “push” the “bon bourgeois to admit who he is: a bon bourgeois, a person unworthy of aesthetic feelings, deaf and blind to all pure beauty”<sup>607</sup> And they not only welcome their symbolic retaliation, but as Bourdieu would frame the dynamic, such an artist has a material interest in doing so. Some artists, of course, find gleeful indifference to the scandals they create to be an effective tactic for playing this game of “loser wins.” However, as the terms of this cultural sport have historically been weighted by, well, ‘suffering’ and ‘losing,’ victimization is often the surer route to eventual valorization and compensation.

Let us be clear: too-often, oppositional artists are the victims of real violence; their moral courage in the face of adversity may explode the, sometimes reductive, economism of Bourdieu’s model. Still, whether “real” or not, Bourdieu is surely on firmer ground when he claims the social actors become framed by social metaphors that come to govern, and contain, the meaning of their life and work. “Thus the Christ-like mystique of the *artiste maudit*,” Bourdieu writes of the well-worn Romantic adaptation of a sacred narrative, “sacrificed in this world and consecrated in the next.”<sup>608</sup> Elsewhere, Bourdieu refers to this recurrent drama as the “charismatic economy,” in which the artist’s “pursuit of the riskiest positions” generates cycles of punishment and reward.<sup>609</sup>

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<sup>606</sup> *Ibid*, 168

<sup>607</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>609</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

Bourdieu's description of this "loser wins" game of accumulating high-end artistic and cultural capital may not be universally applicable; for example, most of his evidence is drawn from the high tide of European modernism. Still, this is the narrative that Matzushiniki implicitly applies to Antony Sher, with a post-colonial twist. By portraying himself as an *acteur maudite*, Sher fits himself into a familiar mode of artistic heroism and "sacrifice" at the hands of an aesthetically "deaf and blind" bourgeoisie. So framed, Sher had every interest in provoking Johannesburg's Anglophone elite whenever he had the chance. More, his well-established writing career provided the ready means to disseminate his "suffering." And this was not the first time to publicly share his pain. Among the "intimate" aspects of his life that Sher published was the complicated pain of being a white South African – suffering that was welcomed by many in that country as tendrils of connection. (If one wished to pursue this line of argument further, one could also discuss Sher's revelations about the physical rigors of playing Richard III as related to his various struggles with being Jewish, Gay and, for many years, a cocaine addict.)

This game of "loser wins," though, was carried out in two countries with a complicated past—"post-colonial" probably does not do justice to the complexities of this relationship. This is where Matzushingi is most suggestive. Bourgeois philistinism in South Africa became, through Sher's insertion of the "cultural boycott" issue, *racist* philistinism. Conversely, Sher's bourgeois acolytes in Britain were positioned as the artist's secret sharers and fellow provocateurs in a melodramatic, and by South African standards, absurdly belated coda to the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s—a fund of images and slogans that is still the main source of "preconceptions" about that country.

The slight flaw in applying Bourdieu's model to the case of Sher and Doran's *Titus* is the expectation that there must be a "time lag" between riposte and reward. But as Matzuke

ironically observes, the show “suddenly became an attractive, exciting piece of theatre” because now it was “being played for the kind of audience for which it was originally intended.”<sup>610</sup> The fact that the UK was a bourgeois market that had already caught up with Sher’s bravura appropriation of “Royal Shakespeare” and “reconciliation” politics meant one thing: that *jet lag*, not “time lag,” was the temporary impediment to reaping the symbolic and professional benefits of having confronted white Johannesburgers’ violent array of prejudices.

Sher’s bad faith in all of this was to act as though his primary motivation, i.e., his “agenda,” was disinterested service to the New South Africa and, particularly to its black majority. Neither Matzukizi, nor Israel Mtholbane perceived any benefit from Sher and Doran’s sacrificial cry for Shakespeare to “arise” in South Africa. Nor, finally, did John Kani himself, who, speaking directly of Antony Sher and the controversy, said:

People like him . . . think that during the years of isolation we were sitting on our butts doing nothing. When they arrive here and realize how much we have done – all of us, black and white – they cannot deal with how far behind in their thinking they are.<sup>611</sup>

What Matzukini identified, with his bemused stamp of cultural materialism, is that being “behind in their thinking” was precisely the precondition of Antony Sher’s triumphant *re*-expatriation to the London stage.

What Matzukini identified, with his bemused stamp of cultural materialism, is that what always lay “behind in their thinking” was Antony Sher’s triumphant re-expatriation to the London stage. In other words, Johannesburg had been deliberately subjected to a “bait-and-

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<sup>610</sup> Matzukaze, 22.

<sup>611</sup> Oppelt and Anstey, 5.

switch" routine. Promised a theatre experience designed primarily for South Africa's domestic consumption, Sher and Doran had always intended to roll out an "export" model.<sup>612</sup>

Other commentators on Antony Sher and Gregory Doran's *Titus Andronicus* would draw similar conclusions to Matzukizi's, as I shall survey this dissertation's concluding, analytical postscript. Although such an interpretation makes sense of the evidence, it only does so on the basis of thoroughly disregarding Antony Sher's voluminous production of connected criticism of South Africa during the years leading up to the failed *Titus* experiment – and the years after, as Sher has continued a volume of artistic and journalistic engagement with that country. Advocating a more charitable lens through which to view his intentions and efforts, I will advance a more complex narrative of projection, professional faith and painful disillusionment.

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<sup>612</sup> See: Thurmann, Christopher. "Sher and Doran's *Titus Andronicus* (1995): Importing Shakespeare, Exporting South Africa." *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 18 (2006): 29 - 36.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

The one great consolation for the defeated is their faith in their cultural and moral superiority over the newly empowered who have ousted them.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch<sup>613</sup>

John Matshikiza is correct to assert that the *Titus Andronicus* controversy “is a story of mismatched desires.” As I have attempted to demonstrate in this dissertation, however, the categories of motive and expectation are more complex than Matshikiza’s plausible, yet, reductive interpretation suggests. Although Antony Sher’s post-premiere accusations of philistinism and latent bigotry understandably cast him in the worst possible light amongst South Africans, most of the available evidence illuminates a different, even diametrically opposed, set of intentions. Indeed, if there is an almost tragic aspect to this event, it is to be found precisely in Sher’s original self-conception as a champion of South African national culture and would-be liberator of its white elite from their (imputed) paralyzing sense of shame.

From the moment an acting student expressed his wish to perform Shakespeare “in my own voice” in a 1994 workshop held at the Market Theatre, Sher became seized by an *idée fixe*: the cultural malaise South Africans faced, particularly whites, was one he himself had struggled to overcome; they were collectively “devoiced.” From that point forward, Sher decided to use Shakespeare as a means of administering Rodenburgian “deep voice work” to that country, the outcome of which would be the seed of a new “community of voices” that would supplement the

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<sup>613</sup> Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning and Recovery*. New York: Henry Holt, 2003.

emergent post-apartheid political order. After several years of fashioning himself into a “connected critic,” Sher possessed the prerequisite local knowledge to pursue a communitarian project like this, and his supporters at Johannesburg’s Market Theatre were eager for him to try.

The execution of this project, though, failed to complete this circuit of reciprocal desire for reasons tied directly to the complicated aesthetic and ideological forces associated with Shakespeare. Drawing heavily upon the theatrical formation that Alan Sinfield calls “Royal Shakespeare,” Sher and his English collaborator, Gregory Doran, added layers of “eclectic stylization” to the show that Johannesburg critics and audiences found, at best, to be a ‘thin’ description of the country’s multi-racial human fabric, or, at worst, a belated anti-apartheid screed. After decades of theatre spectatorship defined by the “cryptic mode” of communication, Sher and Doran’s depiction of the Andronici as right-wing Afrikaner militarists unintentionally framed their *Titus* as a muddled political allegory; their protestations, couched in the “politico-theatrical rhetoric” of the RSC, were powerless to alter this reading strategy. The twin genealogies of state censorship at home and the cultural boycott imposed from abroad created habits of South African reception that were highly resistant to quick alteration.

By way of immanent critique of Sher and Doran’s project, it is also arguable their eventual quest for visual “relevance” (probably driven by the latter’s limitations as a neophyte director) defeated their original purpose of performing libratory “deep voice work” by directing the cast of *Titus* to adopt stage dialects that corresponded to conceptual schema rather than the actors’ natural patterns of speech. Market Theatre audiences may not have wholly approved of Shakespeare spoken in these accents either, but it would have lent credibility to Sher’s repeated claims of possessing a good-faith intention to present South Africa to itself. Instead, the sound of Anglophone actors trying to sound like Afrikaners, for instance, left many audience members

feeling misrepresented and mocked. Sher's own decision to play Titus with an Afrikaans accent far different from his own normal speaking voice, which has been English for decades, cast this paradox in bold relief. How could Sher and Doran sustain the fiction of freeing the authentic voice of Shakespeare and the South African people when the star of the production could not sustain a consistent Afrikaner accent?

Antony Sher held other, broader assumptions that did not serve him well as his hopes for creating a Peter Brook-like *Dream* of ecstatic community were confronted by a backlash of anger and indifference. First, he never seriously questioned his belief that most South African whites were ashamed, as he had been, and longed to speak in a new, post-colonial and African voice. For the most part, the opposite was true: Johannesburg's white liberals were proud of their resistance to the politics of Afrikaner nationalism. The apartheid era, it should be noted, was also defined by Pretoria's heavy-handed efforts to impose Afrikaans as the country's lingua franca. (This policy did, after all, spark the Soweto massacre of 1976.) Despite the ANC government's official recognition of eleven South African languages, the defeat of Afrikaner rule was a victory for the English language in that country. White liberals were *proud* of the custodial service they supplied to this language. In brief, if a certain measure of psychological projection had served Sher when he began to write fiction aimed towards a South African readership well during the waning years of apartheid, this sentiment lagged behind the times in 1995. South African whites did not feel "devoiced" by shame, but by the new cultural policies of the ANC.

Second, neither Sher nor Doran ever considered the paradox of using the supreme cultural symbol of British imperial rule to free South Africans from the "vocal imperialism" they inherited not only from the same empire, but by the same symbol, Shakespeare. Superficially, it was an effort that, to paraphrase Audre Lorde, could be compared to using 'the master's tools to

dismantle the master's house.' Acknowledgement of their project's apparent incongruities – awareness that one might have thought readily available to the pair in 1995 – might have allowed Sher and Doran to publicly confront these earlier manifestations of “Shakespeare” and portray them as misappropriations. (This is exactly what Michael Walzer tried to accomplish in his revisionist interpretation of *Exodus*.) Instead, both men held fast to the Kottian axiom that Shakespeare is a universal cultural artifact that radiates a transcendent humanism. Hence, there was no contradiction in employing the English national poet to facilitate the expression of an authentic South African voice. In Sher and Doran's defense, though, many of the best-known theatre critics and Shakespeare scholars in the UK lent their vigorous assent to this Bardolatrous contention.

Taken together, these two assumptions reinforced Sher's subsequent rhetoric of hectoring white South Africans for their latent bigotry (how could they not be ashamed of themselves?) and their manifest philistinism (how could they not appreciate Shakespeare's universal adaptability?) Sher's publication of “SA Theatre in Deep Trouble” marks the moment when the actor decided to give up on “connection” and don the robes of what Walzer calls ‘imperial judgment.’ Writing about the seductions and pathologies of engaging in clandestine political activity, Breyten Breytenbach noted “how groups become a law unto themselves, so infatuated with their own analysis, so turned in upon themselves and so cornered when these analyses prove to be incorrect, that the only way out seems to be [more and more] vigorous forms of terrorism.”<sup>614</sup> The catch-all explanation of the “cultural boycott” served as this analysis, becoming the basis for a series of symbolic actions of aggression against critics Digby Ricci

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<sup>614</sup> Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Basic Books, 2002: 215.

(‘Digby Wigby’) and Mark Gevisser (Mark ‘Gevicious’) who were effectively scapegoated for the production’s failure.

It was also during this later unfolding of the production controversy that Sher attempted to rebrand *Titus* as an effort that was ‘always already’ designed for the consumption of South Africa’s black majority—a rhetorical sleight of hand that culminated in the title of Sher and Doran’s book about the affair, *Woza Shakespeare!*. Aside from one matinee performance in which a black church group may or may not have been deeply engaged by the performance (John Kani disputes this), Sher had little positive evidence to prove this contention. But citing the preponderance of theatre reviews by white journalists, and the negative facts of black poverty and the poor infrastructure linking townships to Johannesburg’s central business district, Sher was able to suggest that it was the legacy of apartheid that prevented *Titus* from being a runaway hit in South Africa. Despite a few black voices who contested this interpretation of the event, the British press repeated Sher’s surmise, rewarding him with a kind of ‘red badge of courage’ for his African errand.

#### *A “Culture of Defeat”*

It is easy to be dismissive of the ‘mismatched desire’ of Johannesburg’s Anglophone elite. For example, South African scholar Martin Orkin has chosen the word “colonial” as the aegis that best describes this audience’s relationship to Shakespeare over the *longue duree*, dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Or as Orkin explains:

In South Africa as often elsewhere in colonial and post-colonial worlds, Shakespeare has been primarily appropriated by most amongst the English-speaking educated members of the ruling

classes as a means of evidencing their affiliation with the imperial and colonial centers. Possession and knowledge of Shakespeare texts becomes evidence of empowerment.<sup>615</sup>

One can observe the outlines of this colonial reflex at play in the reception of *Titus* in Johannesburg. Advance publicity articles stressed Sher's successful assimilation to the UK's "world class" standards of artistic excellent, and theatre critics – even by those such as Mary Jordan, who labored to offer a sympathetic account of the show – more or less pined for the Received Pronunciation of yesteryear.

While acknowledging the presence of this long-term factor, the explosiveness with which so many white Johannesburgers responded to Sher and Doran's effort may be better accounted for by noting more proximal forces at work in 1995—forces that were rapidly *disempowering* this group.<sup>616</sup> For although the ANC successfully, perhaps brilliantly, managed the South African 'miracle,' it was still a social revolution brought about by years of open warfare. Therefore in order to properly and, I would argue, charitably historicize the outlook of white South Africans upon the occasion of Sher's return, one must note that by the spring of 1995, the euphoria of Nelson Mandela's election had begun to wane and a new moment of soft "Terror" - to use Crane Brinton's morphology of revolutionary eras<sup>617</sup> - had begun to overtake South African whites:

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<sup>615</sup> Quoted in Susan Bennett's *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996: 28.

<sup>616</sup> Another argument against the uncritical application of Orkin's post-colonial model is that, by the end of the 20th century, London was a source of liberal, not imperial ideology. This does not mean that liberalism is above criticism. The point is, rather, that the conflation of colonialism with liberalism is too crude and ahistorical to serve as anything more than a blunt tool for analysis. In this case, it specifically fails to account for the fact that London was the center of the global anti-apartheid movement and provided the ideological seedbed of numerous second-generation ANC political leaders, such as Nelson Mandela's successor as State President, Thabo Mbeki who, for example, earned his MA in Economics at the University of Sussex. For more on the vexed status of liberal political thought in South Africa, see James Barber's "South Africa: The Search for an Identity." *International Affairs* Vol. 70, No.1 (1994): 67 – 82.

<sup>617</sup> Brinton, Crane. *The Anatomy of Revolution*. New York: Vintage Books, 1965.

their traditional entertainment district in Johannesburg had become the heart of the “edgy city;” their primary news outlet, SABC1 was refashioned overnight into the multi-racial “SAfm;” and the new regime’s decision to launch the Truth and Reconciliation Committee signaled its readiness to switch from emphasizing the rhetoric of national unity to performing the more divisive, if undoubtedly necessary, rites of lustration.

Thus, rather than frame white South Africans as colonial masters trapped in amber, perhaps one should see them as having operated within what Wolfgang Schivelbusch has identified as a “culture of defeat,” the historian’s expression for the social psychological stages that a vanquished nation traverses as it negotiates the sudden loss of its hegemony. Of particular relevance is Schivelbusch’s observation that defeated peoples tend to see their loss of power as both a “moral purification” and an opportunity to “lay claim to spiritual and moral leadership,” particularly by rededicating themselves to cultural artifacts from their “glorious past” that predated “the path that led [them] to war and defeat.”<sup>618</sup> Johannesburg’s liberal elite saw themselves in a similar light. The conjunction of Shakespeare with the celebrity of Antony Sher promised to function as a kind of court masque, celebrating their apartheid-era function as an umbilical cord to the West and legitimating their rightful place at the winner’s table of the new political dispensation.

Did the geriatric *haut monde* of the northern suburb have the moral right to see themselves in such favorable light? Sher and Doran’s *Titus* suggested otherwise. In an almost uncanny fashion, the production virtually reveled in what this elite feared most, presenting it with the graphic sights and radio sounds of their lost hegemony while giving them a demoralizing preview of the limitless atrocities the TRC would put on public display for the next three years. Therefore, even if white liberals had needed to scrutinize themselves more

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<sup>618</sup> Schivelbusch, 31.

penetratingly than they had previously, it does not follow that they should have been expected to enjoy the Shakespeare Sher and Doran served up to them. This *Titus* presented the end of white rule in South Africa as just and final. The desire of a defeated people for the “great consolation” of experiencing “cultural and moral superiority” was forcefully denied.

These same people could be forgiven, though, for feeling misled; for this was not the theatre experience Antony Sher had promised them. For Sher’s part, one repeatedly reads from his own pen how much he wished to ease their psychological burdens and show them how to become better celebrants of the New South Africa. But he could not operate beyond the bounds of his training in “Royal Shakespeare,” and consequently fashioned an event whose offensiveness he was institutionally blind to perceive. In this way, one can view this production of *Titus Andronicus* in Johannesburg as a missed connection. Contrary to Sher’s self-presentation as a victim of this misadventure, white South Africans – and Shakespeare – got the worst of it.

The metropolitan prestige of Antony Sher did help the Market Theatre secure a large state subsidy in the spring of 1995, but that gave the theatre no cause for celebration. His production of *Titus* also corresponded with a precipitous decline in audience attendance for the Market that lasted until 2002: a patronage base that, as Loren Kruger has reported, consisted primarily of “[white] intellectuals or committed theatergoers for whom the question ‘Can you imagine Johannesburg without the Market?’ Could only be answered, emphatically, ‘No!’”<sup>619</sup> Following “the murky years of transition, the crime-fear wave of the 1990s” and the decision of white liberal playwrights like Athol Fugard to stage their plays in other venues, this audience had largely ceased to identify with either the Market Theatre or downtown Johannesburg itself.<sup>620</sup>

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<sup>619</sup> Kruger, Loren. “Market Forces.” *Theater Journal* Vol. 38, No.1 (2008): 20.

<sup>620</sup> Kruger, 21.

Instead, as the institution's current artistic director (Malcolm Purkey) explained to Kruger, the "core audience [has] largely gone and been replaced by a new audience of young blacks who want new work and are extremely quick to voice their disapproval of anything 'Eurocentric.'"<sup>621</sup> Purkey paints a vivid portrait of the Market Theatre's contemporary ticket-holder:

I am confronted daily in the precinct area between the theatre proper and our administrative offices by groups of young black aspirants whom I call the precinct intellectuals because they are largely graduates of the Market Laboratory school for actors, directors and designers, rather than the universities. [...] They have strong views about who owns the Market and who should determine its profile. The precinct intellectuals are self-appointed watchdogs of the Market's mission. They demand work that represents experience rooted in the townships and sharply criticize anything that reflects the tastes of white Europhiles or the upwardly mobile blacks they call maBenzi [Mercedes-Benz] for the cars they allegedly drive.<sup>622</sup>

The Market Theatre has recovered from its long slump during the late 1990s, but like the rest of South Africa, its audiences and repertory have undergone a profound transformation.

Given that Shakespeare may be considered synonymous with "the tastes of white Europhiles," it may not be surprising that *Titus* was the last play by Shakespeare to be staged at the Market. This fact actually points towards a much larger battle that has taken place over

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<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>622</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 – 23.

Shakespeare's relevance to post-apartheid South Africa. It is a battle that the pro-Shakespeare forces are losing, despite Nelson Mandela's highly personal efforts to restrain the ANC's educational and cultural ministries from eliminating Shakespeare from school curricula and consideration for arts funding.<sup>623</sup> In 2006, the Humanities faculty at the University of Cape Town even decided to drop Shakespeare from its core curriculum classes, a victim, as columnist Robert Kirby put it, of AIDS: "Artistic Import Dependency Syndrome."<sup>624</sup> Perhaps the clearest expression of this emergent cultural formation is David Macfarlane's irate critique of a recent book by a white South African who advocates, much as Sher and Doran did, Shakespeare's special "relevance" for that country. "This is the colonialist mindset par excellence," Macfarlane argues:

To get to the colonial periphery, whether literally or imaginatively, you have to go via the imperial or metropolitan center – even, apparently, if you're already on the periphery. And what you'll find there will no doubt be informed by and subordinated to the centre.<sup>625</sup>

One suspects that even if Sher and Doran's *Titus* had achieved some measure of success in 1995, it would have had little impact on a national wave of Afrocentric sentiment that has, with the exception of a handful of rear-guard actions, loudly proclaimed the irrelevance of Shakespeare to South Africa.

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<sup>623</sup> During the worst years of their imprisonment on the notorious Robben Island, Nelson Mandela and other ANC leaders illegally circulated a copy of the complete works of William Shakespeare disguised as *The Bhagavad Gita*. Affectionately known as the "Robben Island Bible," the existence of this document has provided one of the last defenses against arguments that Shakespeare is entirely irrelevant to the New South Africa. See Anthony Sampson's "O, What Men Dare Do." *The Observer* 22 Apr. 2001: 26.

<sup>624</sup> Kirby, Robert. "Eurocentricity in Easy Steps." *Mail & Guardian* 9 June 2006: 19.

<sup>625</sup> Macfarlane, David. "The Role of Shakespeare in Africa." *Mail & Guardian* 17 Jul. 2007: 12.

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