Theatre Reviews

CONFRONTING THE AFRICAN NIGHTMARE: Yael Farber’s SeZaR
Commissioned production, Grahamstown National Festival of the Arts, 2001

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Yael Farber’s adaptation of Julius Caesar marks something of a breakthrough in South African Shakespeare productions. The key achievement is that the play is no longer about Rome or Renaissance England, nor is it about processes of cultural translation or trendy theatrical Africanisation, largely cosmetic. This production is, in a generous way, squarely and pointedly about Africa.

Whose Africa is a moot point. The play’s ‘Azania’ — Shakespeare’s Rome — could be anything from AZAPO’s visionary pan-African idyll, to some generic post-independence black state, to the scurrilous Azania of Waugh’s Black Mischief. What it is not is a neo-colonial appropriation of Shakespeare, making vague obeisance to metropolitan heritage by whimpering ‘me too!’

It would be easy enough to describe the production in postmodern jibber-jabber (‘the structuralist tension between synchrony and diachrony is here dismantled by a carefully orchestrated play of a-temporal hybridity in a setting marked visually and aurally by traces of failed master-narratives’). Let’s rather assume that this is a production of real interest to inquisitive theatre-goers.

The set is open and flexible. Two sawn-off tubular pyramidal towers on wheels, four-square, rather like stumpy electrical pylons, stand left and right of the acting space which extends over the theatre floor in front of the seating with the proscenium stage behind as a second level. The pylons clash noisily as they are smashed together during the battle of Philippi, which is choreographed to traditional stick-fighting in slow motion. A smallish turntable occupies center stage on the upper level with a similar one on the lower. (One thinks oddly of children’s merry-go-rounds.) Anything from Mad Max to Antigone or To Kill a Mocking Bird could take place in this space. A mobile arched wooden door, wheeled on to represent the entry to the Senate Chamber, looks like standard lacquered western pomp on the one side. Turn it about (for the inside view of the chamber, where the murder takes place), and it is seen to be covered with painted writhings of ghost-like grey figures, shades of past political intrigue, the whole eerily reminiscent of Rodin’s ‘The Gates of Hell.’

Costumes are generic African, with touches of ancient Egypt, Arab North Africa and a lingering flavour of Rome. The scarlet of SeZaR’s cloak counterpoints the rich tones of sandstone, ochre and tawny yellow that dominate the colour palate, all related to the rich brown skin-tones of the cast members. Props range from knobkerries to cigarettes, the latter used rather niftily to shift the characters out of their public personae and into moments of ordinary personhood, outside the flux of history. The piece is enriched with
passages of African dance. The acting is bold and large-scale. Menzi Ngubane’s Brutus is magnificent, and I also liked Mmabatho Mogomotsi’s poignant ‘Porshia.’

Shakespeare’s Soothsayer, represented here by Njkono (Mary Twala), could be seen as speaking for the dispossessed-of-the-dispossessed, those original human inhabitants of southern Africa, generically the Khoi-San. She forms a kind of prologue and chorus to the piece, entering before the performance-proper starts as an urban street-sweeper (‘hygiene technologist’ in labour-relations newspeak) clad in smart orange overalls and a doek, properly gloved and equipped with a supply of refuse bags tucked under her belt. Having symbolically (or literally, for that matter) swept the stage prior to the action, she utters her initial warnings from a seat in the audience, thus allying the spectators to all those who witness the African power-struggles.

The universalisability of the story is obvious. With local variations, the plot of Julius Caesar is played out round the world in national and local governments, boardrooms, mayoral elections, imbizos, team selections, PTA’s, churches and most other social organizations. The challenge of Faber’s SeZaR is that the play focuses its attention relentlessly and exclusively on Africa.

SeZaR (Hope Sprinter Sekgobela) returns in triumph from military victory, high in popular esteem, a candidate for political office, perhaps the top office? The rich overtones of the contrast between Brutus’s conscientious political prudence and SeZaR’s charismatic heroism resonate eerily as they have done down the ages in different climes and contexts. For South Africans, the assassination of Chris Hani may hover at the verges of consciousness. The commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the African National Congress, himself an admirer of Shakespeare, was gunned down before he could establish himself in the post-apartheid polity. And then perhaps the (utterly unsubstantiated) accusation earlier this year, tributary to the R48bn South African arms procurement fiasco, that President Mbeki had something to do with this earlier traumatic event may spring to mind. Or was it, ought it to have been, Mbeki himself who, like SeZaR, has been accused of being too involved with foreign affairs, too concerned with his own image, of not relating effectively to internal affairs of state) who most fittingly stands in the shoes of SeZaR? In which case, where are the plotters, where do we find our Brutus and Kassius? The media at the time, following off-the-cuff remarks by safety and security minister Steve Tshwete, put forward a brace of possible candidates. Mark Antony (‘Mark Anthony’ here) comes across as a hapless PR politico trying to spin-doctor the truth in an impossible situation — ‘honour’ translates rather freely into ‘public image’. Audiences from further north might have felt impelled to think of the late Laurent Kabila and his son Joseph in the DRC, or the struggle for democratic succession in Zambia, or Robert Mugabe’s desperate hanging on to power at any cost in Zimbabwe, Moise Tshombe, Patrice Lumumba, Idi Amin, Jerry Rawlings, Sierra Leone last year, Ruanda before that, Nigeria for the last twenty years, the list goes on. As Cassius puts it in Shakespeare’s text:

How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,
In states unborn and accents yet unknown.
Those accents were only marginally a problem mainly because they were generally intelligible, but also because verbal language was not of the essence. The message of the production was visual and dramatic. We empathised with the passion and spirit of these characters, their pride and ‘port’. The love scenes were moving, the communion with the ancestors powerful — a belief rendered actual by the substitution of African ritual in reading the entrails, gorily visible on stage — while the collapse into surreal slaughter at the end was captured in the piling up of chocolate-coloured limbs and torsos — window dummies — on the lower turntable and along the stage at the rear, a terrible sight reminiscent of Belsen or Ruanda. As for the helpless assertion of normalcy at the end, it was - well, feebly and appropriately inadequate.

Farber’s conscious decision to strip the verse ‘of its civility’ (programme notes) leaves us with a play far more raw and frantic than Shakespeare’s. It is no longer a tragedy, because tragedy requires an explicitly valued civility ripped through by the very forces it strives to contain. Farber’s Azania is the African nightmare sui generis. There are no excuses, no amelior-ative gestures towards the colonial legacy, the IMF or the World Bank. Equally, there is no explanation. This is what happens. Shakespeare’s language came second both as verbal substance in relation to the total impact of the play, and by virtue of the fact that it was only about 50% of the text used. The rest comes from Sol Plaatje’s 1937 Tswana translation (Dintshontsho tsa bo-Juliuse Kesara), workedhopped vernacular contributions from the Zulu, Pedi and Tswana-speaking cast-members, plus some interpolated media commentary slipped into the play through the sound system. This fictional radio reportage, not all of which is clearly audible or meant to be, conveys the bland dismissive-ness of international Afro-pessimism.

When I first saw the show, I was sitting next to a Tswana-speaking schoolgirl from Potchefstroom who chatted away about her experiences at the Festival. She was impressed by the play, particularly by the fact that ‘Sammy Chirendza’ (Tony Kgorogi playing Mark Anthony) and ‘Agnes Matibane’ (Keketso Semoko playing Kalphurnia) from the successful SABC television soapy Isindingo (The Need) were in the cast. She rolled along with the mixture of contemporary English, Shakespearean English, oldish Setswana and township argot as if to the manner born. There is enough of a scaffolding in English for the linguistically challenged to follow the play, and I suspect that the drift of events would be intelligible even if you didn’t know Shakespeare’s text. (Rumour has it that the production has attracted British and European attention — clearly theatre managements are not fazed at the thought of staging a play only half of which could be verbally intelligible to an overseas audience — witness the recent run of Umabatha at the Globe.)

This de-emphasizing of language in South African theatre, and elsewhere, at present is an intriguing phenomenon. On the one hand, it is deplorable because it constitutes a retreat into the felt but indefinable, the inexact and therefore incontrovertible. Where will we be without a strong element of contemplatio and its credible representation on stage? On the other, there is a sense in which the South Africa nation’s fragile sense of itself, its lack of
genuine self-awareness and articulate debate, is faithfully rendered in this triumph of ambiguous gesture over explicit articulation. Music unites, dance and physical theatre unite, the visual arts unite because they are sufficiently pure to be incontestable, except perhaps in formalist or ‘in-house’ terms. But say something clearly, precisely and you have no excuses, no hiding place. One day we will begin to edge once more towards the unblushing truth — this time in contestable verbal language. Till then, SeZaR is a remarkable portent.