

# SHAKESPEARE - NOT OF AN AGE, BUT FOR ALL TIME

Extracts from a presentation a commemoration of the

**QUARTERCENTENNIAL OF SHAKESPEARE'S DEATH**

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Shakespeare's very TIMELINESS [being in time] contributes to his TIMELESSNESS... AND THIS IS WHY SHAKESPEARE TRAVELS...

It is precisely because of the way Shakespeare critiqued his own time and place, that he is so portable. Professor Isabel Hofmeyr, from Wits University, has written about the "PORTABLE BUNYAN" [*The Portable Bunyan - A Transnational History of the Pilgrim's Progress*, 2004] - of the way *PILGRIM'S PROGRESS* has travelled to the four corners of the world. This is certainly true of SHAKESPEARE as well.

A recent *Time Magazine* article shows us one interesting way in which SHAKESPEARE has TRAVELLED in the past 400 years. It presents a list of the many ways in which the different Shakespeare plays are echoed – in opera, plays, novels, poetry, musicals, film, TV, spoof or parody, and in real life [adverts].

I hope that Professor Brian Pearce, who is here tonight, will give us a lecture on how Shakespeare is reflected in novels, plays and poems over the past 400 years. He wrote an excellent article [“The After-life of Books : Metaphors of Reality”], incidentally, on the way various works of literature deal with the theme of books, and their meanings, and this was published in our journal, *English Academy Review - Southern African Journal of English Studies* [Vol 32 [1], May 2015].

I would like to mention, very quickly, another space into which Shakespeare has recently travelled – and that is SHAKESPEARE IN THE BOARDROOM. Given the presence of so many leaders in various sectors here tonight, I thought I should mention this in passing [but we could pursue this on another occasion]. There is a book called SHAKESPEARE IN CHARGE - *THE BARD’S GUIDE TO LEADING AND SUCCEEDING ON THE BUSINESS STAGE* [Augustine and Adelman, 1999]. These projects have been commended by The Wharton Business School, and the Harvard Kennedy School. You will be pleased to know that RICHARD GIELGUD, the son of the famous Shakespearean actor, SIR JOHN GIELGUD, heads the initiative, SHAKESPEARE IN THE BOARDROOM [See also, Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*, 2009].

WE HAVE, of course, an important EXAMPLE OF HOW AND WHERE SHAKESPEARE TRAVELLED... and this is related to Shakespeare on ROBBEN ISLAND...

How did the prisoners survive the gulag of Robben Island? How did they cope with a place that was calculated, like all political banishment, to consign them to a barren wilderness when only their barest material needs were met, and where they were robbed of every shred of dignity and decorum?

How did they assail the dark, impregnable prison walls that surrounded them, to allow a little sunlight to seep through?

THEY READ. THEY READ SHAKESPEARE...

*Reading Revolution – Shakespeare on Robben Island*, by Ashwin Desai [2012], describes in vivid detail how the political prisoners on Robben Island assisted one another in acquiring books, sometimes surreptitiously, to create a vibrant subterranean and subversive world.

And it is here, that SHAKESPEARE was pre-eminent on their reading list.

We must remember that Shakespeare, in particular, was seen as pivotal in the civilizing mission of the colonial powers. Our shared intellectual heritage, and our penchant for Shakespeare in particular, for example, is shaped and fed in a common colonial matrix. Shakespeare was always revered in Black education [indeed, in the entire colonial world], and occupied an iconic status. One of our first Black writers, and founder member of the ANC, Sol Plaatjie, wrote in an imperious Shakespearean style, in his novel *Mhudi* [published in the early 1900's].

Yet, while Shakespeare was an intrinsic part of the strategy of “the pacification of the natives” [I used this phrase deliberately, and advisedly, coming as it does from Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*],



the Calibans of the post-colonial world were using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house. [Of course, while this is all true, it is far more complicated than I am sweepingly suggesting here, especially if you read *Shakespeare and the Coconuts : On Post-Apartheid South African Culture*, by Natasha Distiller [2012, Wits University].

The central narrative, which is also the most moving and evocative, in *Reading Revolution*, is of a battered but treasured copy of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, owned by Sunny Venkatrathnam, with sections signed by his fellow inmates: Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Neville Alexander, Ahmed Kathrada, Strini Moodley, Walter Sisulu, and others. Sunny’s pasting of a Diwali card with the image of a Hindu deity [to distract the prison warders] on the cover of

his “Robben Island Bible”, is a marvelous subversion of dominant culture, while yet holding it in his hand!

Their precious copy of Shakespeare was passed from hand to hand. There is something poignantly sacramental about this sharing and breaking of the Word, which fed their spirits, and lifted them above the sordid and grim reality of their sparse cells.

The valiant and heroic ways in which the Island prisoners take up their struggles in prison shows that the view - that “unaccommodated man is no more ....[than] ....a poor, bare, forked animal...” [King Lear] -- can be turned on its head...

In the face of the rampant depravity and degradation of prison life – with solitary confinement, hard labour, torture, criminal and discriminatory rationing of food and clothes [as Idres Naidoo’s prison memoir, *Island in Chains* [2012] among others, tells us] - the prisoners strove to resist the assault on the imagination; and transported themselves to other universes. Vervoerd’s “hewers of wood” were, in fact, Biko’s Black brothers pumping back life into their empty shells and infusing themselves with pride and dignity.

Indeed, *Reading Revolution –Shakespeare on Robben* shows that in the contact zone of the prison landscape we are confronted with two competing worlds. On the one hand we see, through the oppressive role of the prison warders, the apartheid regime’s systematic and calculated attempt to create docile bodies and docile minds. On the other, we see the prisoners’ resilience in their search for re-imagining and for transcendence, and Shakespeare, among others, providing this...

Shakespeare himself captures opposing and competing attributes in human nature when he writes: “*What a piece of work is a man, how noble in Reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable. In action how like an angel; in apprehension how like a god, the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals, and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust.*” [Hamlet]

Shakespeare reminds us that we are part of “kingdoms clay”...

But *Reading Revolution – Shakespeare on Robben Island* reminds us of the idealism, the lofty moral values that undergirded the freedom struggle in South Africa. It tells of a time when life was lived in the future, in the eschatological hope that change will - and must come. It tells of a time when the impossible was imagined and suffered for...

Yes, Shakespeare also reminds us that we are part of kingdoms of gold...

Of course, that long-awaited future is now the present and, with Shakespeare, we cannot ignore the fact that aspects of the present give us concern...for... [as we are reminded in *Macbeth*]

*Each new morn,*

*New widows howl, new*

*Orphans cry, new sorrows*

*Strike heaven in the face*

