

Who Needs Parables?

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THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES

Delivered at

Oxford University

May 3 and 4, 1995

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LECTURE I.
OTHELLO IN SOUTH AFRICA

For as many years as my memory goes back, I have had two vultures sitting on my shoulders. Heavy, filthy weights, their wrinkled necks craning to spy out the carrion my country was providing for their vile attention. Guilt, I suppose you'd call the one, and the other, perhaps, sorrow. They've flown away now, headed towards some other misguided country where the pickings will be tragically lush, but how can I help feeling light-hearted now that they've quit their old posts?

You will understand, then, that it is strange, but wonderful, to be standing here thankfully disburdened now, to remind you, as I have to remind myself, of what South Africa once used to be. It is also a great honour for me to have been invited here today; and perhaps most poignantly so with reminders coming thick and fast, in this fiftieth anniversary year of the end of the war, that "never again" must forever be the watchword.

The year I take us back to is 1987. April. Johannesburg —the town where I was born. A full three years before Nelson Mandela walked free.

I have a friend who lives there; a friend of some twenty-five years standing. Name of John Kani, actor, executive director of The Market Theatre, artistic guerilla fighter, Tony Award winner. In totalitarian regimes, an actor becomes more than an actor, he becomes an activist. He is required, every day of his life, to make moral choices denied the softer existence of your common or garden "luvvie." (Detestable epithet!) The effort is always towards finding a piece of work that reflects the quality of that life, since to do otherwise would be to abrogate all responsibility, in a profession supposedly devoted to "show virtue her own feature,

scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.”

I had first met John, in the late sixties, at a party in Athol Fugard’s house near Port Elizabeth. Athol was the prime mover behind a company of black actors, founded in the early sixties, calling themselves The Serpent Players, and probably the most memorable of those early productions was *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*, which had a long life both at home and internationally, and for which John had won his Tony on Broadway. He is probably one of the most articulate people I know, and as he moved, in the seventies, from Port Elizabeth to the newly founded, nonracial, Market Theatre in Johannesburg, that impassioned, and often angry, articulacy served him well in building bridges between the black and the white communities that The Market Theatre wished to serve.

In 1976, he and I had done a production of Edward Albee’s *The Death of Bessie Smith*, with another Serpent player, Winston Ntshona. It was one of the inaugural events of the new Market, and it made us eager to go on finding plays we could collaborate on in the future. If there was a future; it was always touch and go. It proved difficult; either he was busy, or I was, and we were choosy about the plays. Still, here I was, a little over a decade later, sitting in my beloved Market Theatre, and watching my friend in a piece of agit-prop. The atmosphere was bad in that year; unrest, as the government liked to call it, was hotting up. And certainly no one had any idea that secret, if tentative talks had already begun between the world’s most famous prisoner and the government. No, what we knew was that the country was a ghastly mess, and, in our neck o’ the woods, a cultural boycott was sapping its heart and head. I watched restlessly; I couldn’t keep my mind on the play. I kept thinking, “This is not good enough for you, my friend. You deserve better.”

And then, from left field, an idea popped into my head that would not go away. I looked at John anew; I gazed at the theatre itself, which began to turn into the great Globe itself before my

very eyes. The idea was so obvious I couldn't imagine why it hadn't occurred before. I said nothing to him at the end, and took the notion home with me to sleep on it. It was persistent; it stuck overnight, growing in stature like a fat fledgling, and was ready to take wing by morning. I found myself impelled to speak.

Wandering across the sunny precinct of The Market the next morning, I took John's arm, to absorb his shock I think, and put two questions to him: would he consider playing *Othello*, and would he consider me to direct it? He just laughed. I waited. He gulped. I waited. He went silent. I waited. Then he took a deep breath and he agreed. Now we both laughed.

I explained why I thought we should embark on this. There are many forms that protest theatre can take, but one that makes use of a past masterpiece to examine a present tragedy was not the usual Market fare in those years. Indigenous writing was quite properly their remit, and John a constant champion and participant. But the story of a black man and a white girl who fall irretrievably in love, and who then commit the unforgivable sin — to a prejudiced society — of sealing that love with marriage vows, was surely germane to South Africa. That the marriage is then systematically destroyed, on, when you think about it, no more than an evil caprice, made *Othello* not only germane, but essential to our purpose. Whether it would be politically feasible with a boycott in place was something we would have to explore. He couldn't but agree; we had found the meat we'd been searching for all these years.

For a man who had never uttered a line of iambic verse in his life, it was a brave decision. For me, who had never directed a paper bag, it was lunatic. However, I have to confess that turning myself into a director overnight seemed perfectly in order. The fact that I had never been in the play simply added to my excitement — brand new territory and I couldn't wait to explore it.

First and foremost there was a case to be argued with the still exiled African National Congress (ANC) that this production

would not be in breach of the cultural boycott. Neither John nor I considered myself to be a bona fide expatriate, since my involvement with The Market Theatre had been active and ongoing throughout the boycott years. The public footpath had been kept in usage, if you like, and we hoped that the ANC would see it that way. We decided that channels of communication should be initiated between ourselves and the ANC at home and abroad at once, and that in the meantime we should get on with preparing the ground for the production willy-nilly. There was a slot in September and we should have to start casting right now.

It might prove a little difficult to argue that Shakespeare would be part of “the people’s culture” that Oliver Tambo (the then president of the ANC) spoke of. But, as it turned out, in June of 1987, delivering the Canon Collins Memorial Lecture in London, he indicated that the ANC’s three-decade-old commitment to a blanket boycott of all cultural and academic links with South Africa was to be modified for the first time. We felt heartened. It was made clear that anti-apartheid artists might now be able to perform “under certain conditions” in South Africa. What those conditions were exactly and who might be exempt were part of an ongoing and heated debate between the ANC, the UDF (United Democratic Front), the Anti-Apartheid Movement, Azapo, the Pan-Africanists, and various cultural groups in South Africa itself. But perhaps it might be possible to put forward a case for the great classics to be absolved when performed by any of “the people” —and especially this one, which seemed to be addressing itself to the status quo so pertinently.

So it proved; John Kani’s fierce support for the project eventually prevailed, and the green light was given — or rather we seemed able to slip under the wire as these heated debates raged over our heads. The Market Theatre’s proven opposition to the government of the day was thereby, in some sense, informally acknowledged. There was one worried phone call from Wally Serote (cultural attaché of the ANC in London), who was con-

cerned that there were to be so many white actors in the production, and only one “representative of the people,” but I assured him that “the people” were indeed to be represented, in the part of Othello, as a victim of white oppression, and that the oppressor, represented by Iago, got his comeuppance. I convinced him that it would be useful to think of this play as being a reminder of Shakespeare’s inexhaustible relevance, rather than to downgrade it, by the fashionable theorising of certain pundits, as merely a cultural imposition from the white man’s canon. It was difficult to avoid jargon, since it was such a crucially important debate at the time, and a far cry from the more pernicky political correctness that strangles rigorous critical thinking today. It was also brave and enlightened of the ANC, in my view, to allow it to go ahead, considering the time and the place.

And so the most important hurdle was, after a time, duly jumped, and the production was allowed to proceed. I was pleased; I have always thought, with Shelley, that “Art ought not to go about doing good by direct moral precept but should content itself with invigorating people’s imaginations and trust the invigorated imagination to do the moral good afterwards.”

But I jump the gun. “Considering the time and the place” — it may be as well to remind ourselves that these were still the days of the vultures in South Africa, and that the draining battle to retain a hold on human values sapped the strength of those who lived there. What seems ordinary here was always extraordinary there; like running a theatre — a common or garden theatre — in which the humanity of human beings is meant to be celebrated. Such was the aim of *The Market*, founded by a small group of like-minded people in 1976. It was, in a way, the New South Africa: we dreamed up a nonracial microcosmos, and it was turned into a reality.

It sat there in a sleazy area of downtown Johannesburg, loomed over by the forbidding concrete of the Lubianka’s terrible twin, John Vorster Square. Around it swirled the quotidian indig-

nities of apartheid SA, while inside that grey police building, those same indignities were punctiliously monitored; apartheid was put to work, with all the ghastly mechanisms of repression, and torture, and wrongful arrest, that were considered the requisites of a “civilised” white Afrikaner state.

Inside The Market meanwhile, another agenda altogether was being enacted. The policemen didn’t know, and maybe wouldn’t have cared, so secure did they feel, that just a stone’s throw away, they were being so thoroughly mocked.

Of course the work The Market pursued sometimes attracted the attention of the powers that be, when it inevitably fell foul of the censorship laws; laws so puerile that laughter was often the only reaction possible. A Spike Milligan piece, for example, where Harold Macmillan was presented as a parrot, which fell off its perch, died squawking, and was then cooked and eaten, and in which God was represented as an old codger in a white beard and striped pyjamas, was deemed to contravene the laws on both cannibalism and blasphemy. The theatre naturally appealed against the order. One famous night, a magistrate was hauled out of bed to attend a performance put on specially for him. Stranded grumpily in mid-stalls at midnight, the poor fellow was required to view this ridiculous but funny play, quite alone. As his jaundiced eye surveyed the antics of loony actors consuming broiled Macmillan with great relish, common sense for once prevailed and the banning was duly lifted the next morning. It did the box-office no harm at all, and Spike Milligan assumed heroic stature for all of a day, but what a waste of time.

But that was apartheid for you; it wasted everybody’s precious time every minute of the day. There was never any room in its demented agenda for common decency or common sense or common humanity. It was also the most expensive of follies; no nation can afford to have *two* sets of rules and regulations governing the lives of its people.

It was, let us remind ourselves, during these insane years that a notice appeared in *The Government Gazette* banning *Black Beauty*. So much for the literacy of officialdom, or rather the literal-minded idiocy of officialdom, or rather the unique idiocy of South African officialdom, for I am not at all sure that such ludicrous mistakes would have been made in the Communist world, where, in Russia at any rate, culture was taken seriously.

I don't believe there were gulags full of poets and writers languishing behind barbed wire at the bottom end of Africa—but then the bottom end of Africa, like the rest of Africa, is comparatively innocent of the power of the printed word. Africa's legacy is a different one; its story-telling traditions are aural, rather than bookish. And anyway, the white frontier folk, the Huguenot settlers from the seventeenth century onwards, were not renowned for being great thinkers or philosophers, but rather people looking for space to practise their reformist religions in some sort of peace. Their nearest equivalents were, I suppose, the Pilgrim Fathers, who hoed and planted, and thumped their family Bibles over in New England.

The great difference was a geographical isolation; as the Afrikaners drew ever deeper into the interior to get away from the liberalising Cape, the New England puritans were slowly but surely diluted by the hordes of adventurers and immigrants bombarding the coasts of the new America. While great arcs of light, emanating from the barricades of Paris, and the mountains of Virginia, began to penetrate the dark corners of religiously fixated minds, bands of marauders and Trekkers called themselves The Doppers (literally the candle-snuffers) to suppress and deny the irradiating flames of the Enlightenment. Dangerous stuff they considered it all to be, and continued with the more gratifying sport of thumping the locals, as well as their Bibles.

The heirs of the basest of these people, getting up to terrible things in John Vorster Square several generations later, were not

about to have inherited any particularly healthy respect for the arts. Their fugitive history had little time to engender a state of mind that would see the arts as an important weapon of dissent. Show a cop an AK-47, or a political tract, and he'd jump to it; show him a poem, and he'd probably just shrug — while you watched his lips move. At the risk of generalising, the Afrikaners are not a deeply poetic people, as you might say, again at the risk of generalising, the Russian peoples are. There was not a thriving *samizdat* in South Africa; no poet — like Irina Ratushinskaya in the USSR — was imprisoned simply for the crime of writing poetry. But still, let's be fair — South Africa was not formed by intellectual patricians like the Founding Fathers, but by yeoman peasants searching for a place in the sun. They are, on the whole, a courteous and hard-working people, and many were undoubtedly unhappy with the suffering caused by apartheid. The terms “verligte” (enlightened doves) and “verkrampte” (the hawkish opposite) attempt to describe the moral dichotomy sitting heavily in the verligte Afrikaner stomach.

Certainly artists were disempowered politically, psychologically, and economically through the politicisation of the allocation of resources; through the criminalisation or marginalisation of dissent; and through the submission of their interests to the politician-defined “greater political good.”

Artists were alienated from processes of social change, and by the eighties had become reluctant to antagonise an ascendant black consciousness by challenging their newly militant ideas of what constituted politically correct “art.” Since artists are always, almost by definition, to the left of the establishment, it was these newly vociferous voices, emanating from the ANC Culture Desk, that they heeded. Culture is not definable, but still, the attempt had to be made.

There was, during these tumultuous times, the danger that in leaving aside one set of strictures, another set would take its place. However, that was an understood revolutionary process, and the

hope is now that the Government of National Unity will bestow resources on those who choose to challenge the status quo just as much as on those who support it. There is cause for optimism: the new Ministry of Arts has just awarded The Market the first grant in its history. The minister himself, Dr. Ben Ngubane, accompanied this grant with a statement saying that “The Market has played a major and principled role in nurturing, developing, promoting and internationalising the theatre arts, which had its origins in the lives, struggles and hopes of the majority . . . so that it is now fitting to honour it . . . by giving it a grant-in-aid which will enable it to grow and become a giant symbol of the new non-racial, non-sexist, democratic order for which it so valiantly held a banner in the past.” We never dreamed we’d hear such words back in the vulture days.

In 1987, with that longed-for freedom still three years away, it might be salutary to remind ourselves just which Acts of Parliament, empowering our illiterate cops and our parrot persecutors, were still in place on the statute books:

1. The Population Registration Act
2. The Separate Amenities Act
3. The Group Areas Act
4. The Land Acts

These were the pillars upon which the regime rested the governance of the old SA. Together, let us remind ourselves, they meant that people who happened to be born without a white skin could not live where they chose, educate their children at a school of their choice, dream on a park bench, hop on any old bus that came along, call an ambulance, or even have a blood transfusion from a bottle with a white label. If you were not white you had to walk through a separate door to buy stamps. If you were not white you could travel only in the rear coaches of a train. If you were not white you had to search for a specially designated public convenience if you were caught short. If you were not white you could

be bulldozed brutally from your home, shack though it was, and plonked down on barren ground in some godforsaken waterless spot miles from it: no explanations or reparations offered.

The daily humiliations stretched out to the crack of doom, and were exacerbated by the fact that you could be arrested on the spot for any supposed infringement, and held without trial almost indefinitely. If that phrase seems contradictory, then it merely reflects the topsy-turvy madness that held my country in thrall for forty years. Every single South African lived in an insane world. Insane because it denied and confused our greatest gift: the equality of our humanity. We were forced to behave as if cultural differences were stigmas. We were forced into the view that curiosity and passion were crimes. We were forcibly denied the dignity of even attempting to comprehend the lives being lived alongside us.

It is hardly surprising that the prison population was the highest per capita of any country in the world, and the majority of them not criminals, just people who got found out. It is equally unsurprising that caught in this trawling net were the finest minds and the most courageous on the whole continent, some of whom, by the collective strength of their most deeply held convictions, turned their sentences into university courses, and emerged from captivity with the degrees that they might not have had the time for at liberty. Nelson Mandela emerged with a clarity of purpose and a nobility of heart that seemed to have been honed in prison, as if his humanity had been somehow perfected in his isolation. It is scarcely going too far to concur with Wole Soyinka when he calls Mandela an avatar, and even if the presidential halo slips a little, he remains a great man. There can be few countries where the government in exile had so many years of enforced leisure to think about policy-making. With hindsight, one might say that the University of Robben Island bestowed an education on its inmates that would prove providential.

In 1987, the only Act of Parliament that would have successfully put paid to a production of *Othello* would have been that

most notorious of acts that dealt specifically with love across the colour bar: the Immorality Act. That iniquitous thing was removed two years before, in 1985, which is why, apart from the cultural boycott, we were able to contemplate a production of the play.

Virtually the only really safe areas for The Market Theatre to operate in were the classics. They could provide the framework for commenting on the state of the nation without being overtly polemic. Having been forced, via the good offices of those vile acts enumerated above, to see each other as enemies and aliens, The Market was about the only place where people of whatever colour could gather to take a gander at what the country was getting up to. Some years earlier, there had been a daring (for SA) production of *Miss Julie* with an Afrikaans actress, Sandra Prinsloo, and this same John Kani. It was the actress, paradoxically, who had to hire bodyguards to protect her from the censure of her deeply offended *volk*, some of whom felt she had betrayed the purity of Afrikaner womanhood by canoodling with a black valet.

It is pretty remarkable that South African theatre has developed, during these years, so discernable a style; it's a black style. Here I have to admit my ignorance of Afrikaans theatre, which, to be fair, I have been told is rather good. I wouldn't know; I've never seen any. Even in South Africa, Afrikaans keeps a modest profile in the theatre arts, since most plays are in English, or versions of it. Certainly there are some very fine poets and writers and painters, and there were, I'm told, some good plays cropping up every so often during the vulturous years, though none, perhaps, so fine as Athol Fugard's. Afrikaner intellectual dissent was enlivened in the sixties by the birth of an impassioned group of writers opposing the status quo and calling themselves the "Sestigers" (literally the "sixtiers"). It is significant that three of the internationally best known writers today are the Afrikaners Breyten Breytenbach, Andre Brink, and J. M. Coetzee preeminently. It is also worth noting that Coetzee writes in English, a

language he probably finds more suited to the richness and complexity of his bleak scenarios, though I wouldn't presume to hazard that that is the sole reason.

It would not be a generalisation to say that most Afrikaners can speak English, and that comparatively few English-speaking South Africans can speak Afrikaans. This, in spite of the fact that we were all subjected to eleven years of Afrikaans as a compulsory second language; a waste of time and trouble for someone never likely to use it in the big wide world. When I was at school, no African language was ever taught; a shameful omission. The new SA has begun to amend that deliberate oversight. What it meant was that the black population had the distinct advantage of being able to understand their "masters," while the whites were kept estranged from the people they relied on, and ruled over. Fear took the place of familiarity.

That language holds a very subtle place in the minds of non-Afrikaners; it was the language of the oppressor and it provoked the children's revolution of June 1976, when black youngsters refused to be taught through the medium of Afrikaans in schools. It is a language that provides hooks on which to hang satiric hats for those who don't speak it, but who know which words can evoke a merry mocking scenario. A whole series of racist jokes from English-speakers were part of the SA scene, which are the exact equivalent of Polish jokes in America, or Irish jokes in England. They are the van der Merve stories, where a dim but endearingly naive thicko is made an ass of. Here's one: van der Merve sees a group of nuns attempting to cross a busy road, so he goes up to them most politely and ushers them across. The Mother Superior thanks him warmly for his gallantry, and he shyly replies: "Oh, that's OK, any friend of Batman is a friend of mine."

It is impossible to convey the ponderous accents of Afrikaans in writing, but the thicker the accent the funnier these jokes are. The purport of these stories is not difficult to discern: "we are being ruled by idiots." Lest I be accused of too much frivolity

here, it might be just as well to recall that it was an Afrikaner, and a very conservative one at that, who saw the writing on the wall, and, urged to do so by pragmatic colleagues in government, acted upon that vision none too soon, and with courage: F. W. de Klerk. It is probable that neither he nor his twin spirit, Mikhail Gorbachev, knew quite what forces they were unleashing, but we have witnessed the perestroika of one becoming the abolition of the other. Well, you cannot amend an evil system; you can only abolish it, and the world's first negotiated revolution was thus able to begin its work.

But this, of course, is the point; however risible the ruling Afrikaner, however loathed and mocked, it was he who was in power, it was his language deciding the fates of millions, it was his Calvinist ethic that ran the country with a rod of iron, and logically it was he who had to be dealt with. The black man and woman knew their enemy. There was no doubt in their minds where they stood in the Afrikaner pantheon. It was harsh, but it was clear. The English-speakers were as mosquitoes, buzzing about and sucking blood with the best of 'em, but not a serious contender.

However much the government of the day attempted to disguise its damnable work in euphemism, it was still clear as daylight to the oppressed what it thought of them. In 1959, when I was a student at Witwatersrand University, the government introduced the preposterously named Extension of University Education Act. "Extension" my foot! — we called it the Academic Apartheid Bill and that is precisely what it was. They had decided, with lagoid capriciousness, that no more black students were to be admitted to sully the pure air of the "open" universities. In defiance of sustained and massive opposition the bill was passed, and generations of young people, white and black, found it expedient to leave the country; I was one.

When, years later, my Aunt Helen wagged her finger angrily in Parliament at the Old Crocodile, President P. W. Botha (for

that was what he was, not altogether affectionately, called) and accused him of being responsible for a brain-drain the country simply could not afford, his reply was typical: “Good riddance!” he growled. (She is also famous for remarking that Botha was the only man in the world who could smile downwards.) It was typical because here was an Afrikaner making no bones about how much he disliked anyone who wasn’t Afrikaans. It was harsh, but it was indeed clear.

English, as we know, is a language that is made of elastic; it can expand and contract. It’s made of sponge; it can absorb exogynous words and ideas. It’s made of plasticene; it can be fashioned into any shape by those who speak it well — or ill. So English was the obvious choice for a polyglot theatre to use. Starting off with those early productions under the guidance of Athol Fugard in Port Elizabeth, and then at a small multiracial venue in Capetown called The Place, which eventually could not survive, and finally at The Market in Johannesburg, the actors and directors used improvisation around their own life stories, and the endless absurdities those stories provided under apartheid, to construct their scenarios. *Sizwe Banzi*, *Asinamale*, *Born in the RSA*, *Woza Albert!*, and *Bopha!* used mime, music, bantering humour, danced interpolation, and street-wise slang in a lively mixture of Afrikaans, Zulu, Sotho, Tswana, Xhosa, all bundled humorously together — with English as its binding element.

It was Barney Simon, the artistic director of The Market, who is the king of workshopped pieces like these.* He is, I suppose, the Peter Brook of the southern hemisphere. What do I mean by that? There are some people, very few, who retain an integrity in their work, which pushes them always towards finding the most unadorned way of realising the piece they have chosen to work on.

* Since I wrote this, Barney Simon has died of a heart condition — far too young and well before his time. It is, as Athol Fugard has said, an “unacceptable death.” However, the ethos of his work, in those of us who were profoundly influenced by him over the years, lives on. For that reason, I have retained the present tense in talking about him here.

The emphasis is always on the actor and the situation, rather than extravagant design, since Peter Brook and Barney Simon have a respect for the actor as both artist and craftsman — a salute which is inclined to bring the best out in a performer. Brook and Simon have a strong sense that the theatre is a collective activity not solely directed towards the soul-constricting horizon of box-office returns. They prefer to examine the human condition through invention and improvisation rather than through written texts. That means using actors who are physically and emotionally free of preconceptions. In Brook's case that entails forming a company of actors from all corners of the globe who do not represent one culture only, but who bring to their work all their disparate identities, thereby enriching the mixture. For Simon, it entails using mainly black actors unencumbered with the accretions of white Western culture.

The greatest divide between the two of them is the atmosphere in which their work takes place. Brook works in France, where he has the blessing of a country in which a passion for debate and disputation is delectated as much as haute cuisine; he is smiled on by a benevolent ministry, which doesn't view the funding of artistic ventures as being peculiarly wimpish and soft-centred, unlike their Tory counterparts across the Channel. Which is no doubt why, significantly, he chose to work in France.

Simon, by contrast, lived and worked in a country where freedom through legislation has come suddenly. That in itself is cause for celebration. But freedom of the heart and mind, as he once pointed out, lags far behind. If one of the functions of theatre is to move people toward empathy with others, to celebrate that common humanity so long denied by the apartheid state, then Simon's work was an indispensable addition to the sum of South Africa's slow recovery from a terrible disease of separation and mutual despal. But there is a kind of post-natal depression, culturally speaking, afflicting South Africa now, as if the long years of deprivation have exhausted people quite. Nobody wants to go

to the theatre —it's too expensive; it's too dangerous to go out at night; films are more fun. Writers have gone quiet as they sit and think of what to protest about, now that the parameters have changed.

The same stasis has beset the broken shards of the USSR. But in Moscow, in 1982, I pulled every string I could find to get a seat for the Taganka Theatre's *Three Sisters* —and failed. In countries deprived of freedom, a play with references to dreams of a new life, and unattainable ideals, gushes through the parched soul like fresh water. *Richard III* in a police state, is bound to to a winner. *Hamlet* becomes the universal meditation on elusive revenge. A politically hungry audience will sniff out double meanings like starved dogs. Perhaps I generalise; perhaps it is only in countries with a disputatious and entrenched intellectual elite where metaphorical thinking is the going semaphore.

In South Africa, so divided intellectually and socially by its apartheid past, literacy is a luxury. There are fine poets, but no Pushkin. There are fine novelists, but no Tolstoy; there is popular music, but no Shostakovich. Johannesburg is a city founded on a greedy rush for gold, and not one dreamed into existence by a czar in love with beauty, like St. Petersburg. The excitement of an intellectual cauldron was enjoyed briefly in Alexandra Township in the fifties, revolving around writers like Can Themba, before the place was bulldozed out of existence by a vengeful regime, and its best and brightest fled the country, or broke stones on Robben Island, or died of drink and grief.

But the whirligig of time brings in its revenges: Russia, a deeply poetic nation, may well fail at democracy, never having known it; South Africa, its polar opposite, might well succeed, having known a semblance of it acted out by an uncultured white elite. For the "let's pretend we're a democracy" farce was played out right from the top, with the old regime's House of Assembly a carbon copy of the Palace of Westminster —Speaker, mace, Question Time, Hansard, an' all.

But still, during that period, Barney Simon and The Market delivered play after play, where everyday atrocities could be recognised in dramatic form, and made risible — for laughter was the great survival mechanism. The Market's audience were the liberals keeping faith, hard-core left-wingers, the curious, and those who wanted to forget where they lived for a few short hours over a congenial drink.

There is no such thing as a theatre-going public in South Africa of any regularity, or size. I'd bet my bottom dollar that a production of *Three Sisters*, however good, would yield a seat to a determined punter. Too many of the whites are philistines, and too many blacks are deprived. The whites go to white plays. The blacks, if they can afford it, and if they can get there, go to black plays. In the townships of Johannesburg, there was, and is, a writer/manager called Gibson Kente who provided a prolific number of what we might snobbishly call pot-boilers, but, which offered a black audience what they wanted in the way of popular entertainment. He is generally acknowledged as the father of black theatre, and is affectionately called Bra Gib.

Only very rarely did the two groups merge. Blacks were, and indeed are, not inclined to go to Eurocentric white plays of any description. Whites would go to black shows when there was beautiful singing, and reassuring doses of joie de vivre, and heroic triumphing over the odds, enough to tempt the thoughtless and the jaded. In the sixties, *King Kong*, the story of a black boxer, and *Umabatha*, a Zulu adaptation of *Macbeth*, were damn fine exports; *Ipi n'Tombi*, more of a girly cabaret than a musical, was not so fine. And then down clanged the cultural boycott, and South Africa was obliged to contemplate its own rather unprepossessing navel for years and years.

The attrition, over these years of cultural depletion, has been terrible. The boycott was an absolutely necessary fist-wave from a West sick to the gills with apartheid's seeming stamina. The only doubts were that such a boycott played into the hands of the re-

gime so neatly. The government was quite happy that everyone should turn into intellectual vegetables. And in any case, as I have pointed out, they didn't give a fig for the mind or the soul; the rugger field and the pocket were what they cared about. It worried me very much that only the most crass and anodyne TV programmes and films would get through, and that the boycott was, in essence, a form of censorship, since you are prevented from seeing what you otherwise might choose to. I got depressed when I heard stories of the rich importing videos by the ton from overseas; pirating was rife, academic textbooks were either outlandishly expensive or out-of-date, standards of debate on the television deplorable. It would appear that my worst fears are justified; the present cultural inertia is largely engendered by people who have developed a taste for rubbish. It will take a long time for the ignorance clouding the brains of the populace, compounded by isolation and authoritarianism, to be dispelled.

The Market was about the only place where standards (whatever those might be) didn't in fact fall. Although living playwrights denied it their work, dead ones didn't, but mostly it took pride in writing its own. Shakespeare in particular is always a useful writer to have up your sleeve, sanctioned as he is by his historically unassailable position as the world's greatest playwright. Not even the most punctilious civil servant could find a clause in any Act of Parliament that specifically banned Shakespeare from being performed. During the Nationalist years, there was not a loophole left in the daily conduct of life that had not been filled by some act or other. Sometimes one wondered what on earth there was left to do when the House sat to debate its nefarious business. I have often been asked how it could happen that *Othello* was not banned when we did it, but that is to misunderstand the law-abiding and limited nature of your government bureaucrat, who will do nothing unless it is clearly specified in clause something, subsection something else.

I'm not saying everything The Market did was wonderful. Rather like the Moscow Art Theatre, it did what it could to remain a centre of excellence in the sea of political banditry that surrounded it. Its carefully improvised plays —living newspapers, theatre poems —became a sort of spiritual and political thermometer, registering the fluctuating fever of a stricken country. Western tragedy was not at home here; extended strophes of self-examination were a luxury that people living on the edge of tragedy every day had no taste for. Black South Africans gave poetic introspection a wide berth lest, I suppose, it hurt too much.

In Europe theatre-going has, over the centuries, accrued to itself a sense of decorum that is quite at odds with the jolly atmosphere that prevails in Africa. This is partly because the theatre is a language medium, and to listen properly, silent concentration is a requisite. The highest accolade you can offer to a good night out in a London theatre is to say “you could have heard a pin drop.” Pin-drop silence is threatening to a black audience, as if the lights had fused. A black audience likes to participate, and respond. I daresay that used to be the case in Europe before politeness became *de rigueur*, and I like to think that a sunny afternoon at The Globe on Bankside was a fairly noisy affair. But that, of course, would have been at a time when complex language was the normal means of communication in a theatre.

The Elizabethan actor would have been schooled in literary devices, and would know instinctively when he was knocking his shins against a simile, a metaphor, a conceit, a pun, an antithesis, or a double meaning. Blank verse was the element he swam in, dolphin-like, and his response to those rhythms would have been easy and expert. People would have gone to a theatre knowing perfectly well that what was going to be dished up to them was heightened speech. They hadn't yet been muddled with the concept that theatre could also be “realistic,” which of course it never is. The idea that the theatre is a medium where human beings

speak in a manner quite unlike their everyday selves was accepted in 1601, but four hundred years later, films have entrenched the expectation that vernacular speech is the only believable form, and that anything else is difficult, or, worse, “arty.”

It must be said, though, that there is nothing more depressing than an audience sitting in a miasma of respectful silence, being bored to extinction by what they are desperately hoping will improve them. It is even more depressing to see people who have paid a fortune to watch one of those opulent musicals that are now the answer to a maiden’s prayer, being bored to extinction by what they are desperately hoping will entertain them. The gap between “culture” and “entertainment” has never been wider.

But why should it matter? It is so hard to justify expenditure on the arts when other things seem to matter more: education, health, housing, services, and so on. It is dispiriting to make laundry lists of why; it’s meant to be self-evident that yearnings towards things greater than ourselves are as much a necessity as is the desire to acquire material wealth. The imagination is as necessary to the survival of the human species as food. We expect to learn something in a theatre; and if we accept that learning is experimentation in a risk-free environment, theatre provides just that. In it we can explore the implications of the most unimaginable of human transgressions. Theatre provides us with metaphors for dealing with the hopes and fears of everyday life. Because a play does not take place in real time, and because our imaginations are ready to be exercised, by virtue of the very act of attending a theatre, a forum exists in which the realities of the day are sloughed off.

To paraphrase Carl Jung: artists often serve their cultures and epochs in ways that are veiled and not immediately understood; art is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up forms in which the age is most lacking, and compensating for the onesidedness of the present. Precisely because the arts may serve or counter the moral, ideological, and intellectual hegemony

of various social and political forces, they are themselves the subject and arena of political and ideological debate.

In my next lecture I shall describe to you the strange journey we undertook in unearthing meanings and reverberations from a text that seems familiar enough until it was examined under the harsh sunlight of an African city, and most particularly of the painful journey of one courageous man, John Kani, who helped to scare away the vultures.

LECTURE II.

SOUTH AFRICA IN *OTHELLO*

Yesterday I told you of the foul wind prevailing in South Africa in the year 1987, and I described how I broke the news to John Kani that a project seemed to have found its time, and would not be denied. It seems so odd standing here all these years later to think that the mere idea of doing *Othello* should seem in any way remarkable. But ours was then a country not in its right mind; stringent censorship laws, an international cultural boycott in place, and every law of the land bent implacably towards denying mankind its proper study.

Running in parallel importance to the political implications of the play in regard to South Africa were the sexual implications inherent in it. *Othello* is —no denying it —a pretty steamy play, since the whole plot hinges on the idea of sexual betrayal. There are some critics and editors who, because of the complicated double time scheme in the play, have championed the notion that Othello and Desdemona never actually found the time to go to bed together. It's charming, but it's piffle; an extended essay on sexual jealousy of this order is hardly likely to retain our belief if sex is merely an informing idea rather than a reality. Othello's jealousy is scarcely the bourgeois Victorian version that drives Anthony Trollope's obsessive husband to an early death in *He*

Knew He Was Right. Rather, it is a jealousy compounded by all the insecurities of a black man in a white world, of an older man with a much younger wife, of a warrior unfamiliar with the rules of engagement of love and marriage, and of a foreigner hired to defend a society he has no part in.

This last became increasingly important to me as I walked away from my initial meeting with John. My admiration for his brave decision to play the part increased with every step I took across that sunny precinct. He, at that stage, didn't know what I knew: that sustaining a Shakespearean role of that size in a language that is not your mother tongue was going to be a gargantuan task. There have been many black Othellos before John, from Ira Aldrich in 1833, who was the very first, through Paul Robeson in 1933, and many others after him, but they were all American, and English was their only language. To ask a man who dreams in Xhosa to play the single most poetic role in all of Shakespeare was unfair, to say the least. But I also thought that even if I didn't, as yet, have a clue how to direct this mighty play, I could, at least, help him to speak the verse.

My way was towards the bookshop across the railway bridge; I needed a copy of the play. It had all happened so fast I was quite unprepared. I suppose I should not have been surprised that there was not an edition of *Othello* to be found, and this, mark you, was the university bookshop. Either, I concluded, it was entirely sold out due to popular demand of the English Department at Wits (the University of the Witwatersrand — my alma mater) or the bookshop was not ordering it — that is, it was implicitly banned. The assistant confirmed the latter assumption; "*Othello?* No, not a play which is often called for here" — a wry glimmer from him. "And anyway books are so expensive these days the students can't afford them new; they just borrow each other's old copies. We can't shift this," and he waved a weary hand over the entire shop. I could see his bookseller's nightmare — no books coming in, none going out. Of course I knew he wasn't only talking about English

Department stock, he was talking about science and physics and history and technology; the academic boycott had bitten deep as well. What I did unearth, lurking at the bottom of a dusty pile in a corner, was a perfectly dreadful comic-strip version of *Othello*, in lurid colour, with bubbles popping out of the grimacing mouths of the characters. The kids it was aimed at would have run a mile in sheer fright! I thought it might be a good joke to give it to John to deflate the enormity of the enterprise. As for me, I had some hard thinking to do on a play I knew not at all, so that night I had to content myself with struggling through a florid folio edition in my mother's library, *fs* and all.

In saying I knew the play not at all, I mean I had never been in it, or worked on it, though I had, of course, seen it; a sadly empty matinee with James Earl Jones being rather wonderful, and I don't remember who else, and I had also seen Laurence Olivier's with Frank Finlay and Maggie Smith. It was a performance to be admired for its physical daring and its vivid dexterity with the poetry, but at no time was I truly moved by it. On thinking about why that should be, now that I was embarked on unearthing the play's mysteries, it seems to me that no one who was so much of a sophisticate through and through, as Olivier was, could convey fully the vulnerable innocence of a man who has been conned—conned unto death. When, at the end, *Othello*, quite unable to look at Iago, asks of Cassio:

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnar'd my soul and body?

it seems to me a howl from a soul in torment, a soul that has been gulled by a mind whose machinations are utterly incomprehensible to him. It cannot be considered the cry of a worldly man.

Olivier was always in control —wild, dangerous, elegant, but never really out of his depth. I knew that in John, whatever technical expertise might be wanting, would nevertheless be an *Othello* that had that rarest of qualities: innocence. I don't mean naive,

and I certainly don't mean dim, but rather a man whose nature would respond to betrayal without self-consciousness. Olivier was an actor who studied himself at every turn and produced effects so powerful that resistance was useless. His genius was to act with his body as an equal partner to his mind, which in the English is rare. His physical assumption of a black man, unfurling pink palms and all, had been truly Protean. Ah, but . . . but . . . but. John was the real thing.

John had strayed far from his African roots, physically speaking, but I was eager to find out just how far. If, beneath my articulate, politically impassioned, urbane friend — if, I say, there lurked the race memory of generations of warriors, and of centuries of smoky African nights beneath a glittering dipping Southern Cross, and of natures generous and quick to light up, and of warm brown skins impatient of the borrowed panoply of constricting uniforms, I'd cheer. It was going to be up to me to release that memory, via the incomparable verse of the DWEM of all DWEMs. What a gorgeous paradox!

For Olivier was, beneath his buffed black makeup, a white man, because he thought white, and Shakespeare, I felt sure, was thinking of a black man. I so wanted a foreigner at the Venetian court; a man who could say “rude am I in my speech” and not just be referring to his want of romantic vocabulary; a man whose origins were a mystery to his masters (what slavery was he sold into, and how was he redeemed from it?); a man who had witchcraft in his history, the “wheeling stranger of here and everywhere” that Iago describes. I wanted, too, a man who could embrace his Desdemona without the fear of leaving smudges on the alabaster skin.

For that, of course, is always the lurking problem with white chaps playing the part; it forces them to be rather formal, physically speaking, to strike passionate attitudes, thus portraying the relationship as iconographic, rather than the hot-blooded thing it actually is. Iago is not, after all, closely observing a relationship

that is exactly arid, sexually speaking. He has noted the steam rising, and acts upon the premise. It enrages him to observe one of his very own Venetian girls subsumed by a mutual carnality, just as it enraged those Afrikaner fundamentalists who saw Ms. Prinsloo as betraying her people in *Miss Julie*.

It was, you will have gathered, important to me that both the sexual and the political content in the play should be attended to, because in the South Africa of the time, they went hand in hand; sexuality was a political matter. I believe that a protracted screen kiss between black and white protagonists has never been allowed in Hollywood —correct me if I'm wrong. How much more proscribed might such an event be in South Africa? The repeal of the infamous Immorality Act only meant that consenting adults of a different race could no longer be arrested for consorting in *private*. Who knew what a public display would provoke? We would have to wait and see.

As to the political content, as yet I had only the vaguest feeling that it would yield what I needed. It was not a central issue in the productions I had seen, since *Othello* is always considered a domestic tragedy, and not a play with the deepest possible social reverberations for the audience watching it.

I read the play three times that night, and each time a certain speech leaped out of the page at me, shouting and waving. I had found, to my surprise, what I needed almost instantly. I called it the “dominee” speech; a dominee is a preacher in the Dutch Reformed Church; a dominee represents the tight-lipped doctrinaire Calvinism of liberal nightmares. The speech is from Act III, Scene 3: Iago is drip-feeding his poison into Othello's innocent ear; “Look to your wife,” he has said,

Observe her well with Cassio.
Wear your eye thus, not jealous nor secure.
I would not have your free and noble nature,
Out of self-bounty, be abused. Look to't.
I know our country disposition well.

In Venice they do let God see the pranks
 They dare not show their husbands. Their best conscience
 Is not to leave't undone but keep't unknown.

Othello's response is the wide-eyed shock of a visitor to Venice, unfamiliar with its sophisticates: "Dost thou say so?"

"She did deceive her father marrying you," Iago reminds Othello obligingly, tacking close to the truth, as he always does, the better to bait his hook. Othello has to agree.

"Cassio's my trusty friend," Iago goes on, observing the wound in Othello beginning to seep blood as the hook bites; "My lord, I see you're moved."

Othello, sinking fast, says:

No, not much moved.
 I do not think but Desdemona's honest.

Iago: "Long live she so! And long live you to think so!"

Othello: "And yet how nature erring from itself —" ("nature erring from itself" — we shall come back to that anon).

And here's the speech. Iago replies:

Ay, there's the point — as to be bold with you
 Not to affect many proposèd matches
 Of her own clime, complexion and degree,
 Whereto we see in all things nature tends.
 Fie! We may smell in such a will, most rank
 Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.

There's my dominee, not thundering from a pulpit, but insinuating his poison about sticking to your own with repellent subtlety: "Don't consort with anyone who is not of your own country, your own race, your own rank. All of nature bears out this exclusivity. To do otherwise is unnatural; it is sexually and socially aberrant. Not to put too fine a point on it, it stinks." Short of quoting directly on the theme of "hewers of wood and drawers of water," this is pure Old Testament dogma, so beloved of Afrikaner demagogues in justifying a doctrine that they were dead

keen to sanctify, since it was so patently unjustifiable in any other terms.

Well, I ask you—is there a subject on earth which Shakespeare hasn't thought of first? It is as if he is toying with the theory of apartheid four hundred years before the policy was cooked up. And indeed, as I combed the play, this central theme of the unnaturalness of Othello and Desdemona's marriage is taken up by her father again and again, in just the manner of kindly old liberals anywhere, for whom it is alright to invite a black man to dinner, but woe betide he should marry your daughter. Combined with that is the old white fear of the black man's fabled sexual prowess, and the terrors they entertain of an unknown set of values, which, out of ignorance, they presume to be at best savage, or at worst inferior, and you have a pretty fair reflection of white South Africa's prevailing mentality.

Indeed, it seemed to me that the play's characters divide pretty neatly into a microcosm of not only South Africa, but any society in the West; the out-and-out bigots (Iago, Roderigo—for it is he who dubs Othello "the thick lips"), the armchair liberals (Brabantio, Gratiano), the pragmatists who judge things on their merits (Emilia, Lodovico), and those who simply don't see colour at all (Desdemona, Cassio).

Brabantio, brutally shocked by his daughter's sudden elopement, can only imagine that she has been jinxed, forced, magicked into such an adventure, and his language reflects this extremity. It doesn't have the vicious bigotry of Iago's foul imagery (he has a whole bestiary of filth, obsessed as he is by the "two-backed beast")—but for a mild old codger it's pretty extreme all the same.

Is there not charms
By which the property of youth and maidhood
May be abused?

He asks how could she have

Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou —to fear not to delight

and accuses Othello of being

An abuser of the world, a practiser
Of arts inhibited.

He defies “the Duke himself, or any of my brothers of the state” not to feel this wrong as “’twere their own,” else they must surely be “bondslaves and pagans.”

Centuries of white domination, aeons of paternal power, course fiercely through his furred old veins — for he will die of a broken heart in the end (for a broken heart read cardiac arrest) when he cries to the Duke of Venice for justice:

For nature so preposterously to err,
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense
Sans witchcraft could not.

Yet again the theme of going against nature is reiterated by Brabantio (1.3.95) :

. . . and she, in spite of nature
Of years, of country, credit, everything
To fall in love with what she feared to look on?
It is a judgement maimed and most imperfect
That will confess perfection so could err
Against all rules of nature, and must be driven
To find out practises of cunning hell.

Poor Othello drinks in all this vitriol, and it is regurgitated 200 lines later, when Iago, as we have seen, touches the spot, by insinuating a dishonesty in her that Othello cannot bear to believe: “And yet how nature erring from itself . . .”

As for Iago, it was becoming clear to me that he could be seen as the spitting image of extreme Afrikanerdom’s very own icon, Eugene Terreblanche. With this difference: where Terreblanche (and consider please the irony of his name) was blunt, Iago was subtle. For the rest they seemed twinned: both military men, both having a way with words, both possessing an unmistakable streak

of vulgarity, both brutal men and racists, both proposing miscegenation as a sin, and both purporting to be trustworthy. Both, in short, the type from whom you would buy any amount of second-hand cars.

As luck would have it, the best actor in South Africa, Richard Haines, was free, willing, and eager to explore this interpretation. John Kani is smallish, compact: my Othello was going to side with Alexander, Napoleon, Montgomery, rather than a Sherman tank. His heart would respond as swiftly as his sword arm. On the contrary, it was Iago, alias Eugene Terreblanche, that I wanted to be large —as comfortingly large as a Boer general —and in six-foot Richard I had found just the fellow.

Richard was to be easily the most accomplished and experienced actor in the company, and was to prove invaluable in a largely young and classically inexperienced cast: always helpful, always inventive, with a mind as quick and retentive as only the most talented people have. It gives me great pain to be writing about him all these years later, for that great spirit, long before his time, died of a brain tumour only three short years after *Othello*. He had come to London to seek his fortune, and the Royal Shakespeare Company had seen him flower with a studio production of *King Lear* in which it was clear he was well on his way to being a very major actor indeed. And then he was dead. Still, I'm glad that he was so excited at the time to be breaking ground that had lain untilled in our benighted country, and that I can say now, as I did then, that without him I would not have accomplished a thing. Was it an entirely apocryphal story that had Olivier confiding to an intimate that he would not play Othello "until I find an Iago I can crush underfoot"?

With my two major protagonists in place, and with a clearer idea of our dramatic remit, I could now go about trawling the depleted pool of actors still at work in SA for the rest of the cast. Desdemona was a question mark in my mind; it was clear that she was not simply a biddable young lass, nor was she a ninny pas-

sively awaiting her doom. That she could defy society's, and her father's, values to follow her own marked her out as having the sort of moral bravery I had sometimes seen in my own generation at university, who risked their freedom for the beliefs they held.

That she could say "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" marked her out, too, as a person of spiritual substance. In a Daz-white environment, to see the quality of someone's mind before and above any physical attribute must, I thought, be a sign of singularity. It is not easy to sail against the prevailing wind. Young she should be, much younger than her husband; young enough for Emilia to feel protective about her, young enough for Iago to insinuate that she was playing the field and be believed. Blonde would be best, I felt, but no dumb blonde. As so often in Shakespeare he is making a statement about opposites in this play; the blackness of Othello and the whiteness of Desdemona, just as in Antony and Cleopatra he is drawing the most extended comparisons between the pallid rigour of political Rome and the tawny pleasures of hedonistic Egypt.

Increasingly I saw in the part as I read it a very rare and mature sort of fatalism emerging from her, born of her goodness of heart and her deep love of the man that she married against all odds. She seems to know she is going to die, and does not flinch from it, except to protest her innocence with all the strength she has. When Emilia finishes her great, and commensensical, diatribe about violence breeding violence, Desdemona turns away from her to face what she must, with this couplet:

Good night, good night. God me such uses send,
Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend.

There is a decent optimism there that is courageous, and a far cry from her Verdian sister, who, during this same crisis, turns to the Virgin Mary for help. But of course, that is Shakespeare the great humanist, who knows that it is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are thus and thus. Just so does Iago make a dark

inversion of the Biblical enigma with a bone-shivering “I am not what I am,” rather than laying the blame for his nature at the feet of his Maker, as he does in the opera. (I know there are some people around who consider the opera libretto an improvement on the play, but we will let that pass; they don’t know the play, that’s all).

Up on Mount Olympus they must have been having forty winks, for, having found Iago, luck came my way again. The day after John, with a nod of his Rubens head, had signed away his peace of mind, I was introduced to a tall young girl slouching her way towards a rehearsal room at The Market. Yes, she’d come back at five to audition, and no, she’d never spoken a word of blank verse in her life. Well, that at least makes the match a fair one, I thought. She was shy, blonde, bejeaned, thoroughly modern. Her brief audition was good enough to tell me we had something here, but the decisive factor was that John’s one good eye (he’d lost the other years ago in a police raid) positively lit up when he read with her. Chemistry! — we were home.

An Emilia of power and passion turned up at the general auditions I started holding on day three, of an age to be Desdemona’s friend and guardian rather than a nanny, and my main foursome was set.

I had only another two days to cast before returning to the UK, and managed to find a handsome Cassio, a dupe of a Roderigo, a spitfire of a Bianca, and all the other uncles and soldiers who peopled the rich State of Highveld Venice. When I got back to London, I learned that a boy called Simon Heale, cast as one of the officers, Montano, had just been called up for military service in the South African Defence Force, and that rather than go to fight a senseless war in Namibia he was, unwillingly, going to leave the country. These are the realities of working in such a place; art gives way to life.

Meanwhile, I was having quite a time of it deciding how the thing should look. My designer, Johan Engles, an Afrikaner ex-

patriate working for the Royal Shakespeare Company, was excited by the idea that The Market's octagonal shape (it had been an Indian fruit and meat market before it was a theatre) would transform itself into the perfect wooden *O*, upper gallery, inner stage, and all. That predicated an unprecedented, for The Market, Elizabethan feel to it, and, best of all, no sets. The paltry budget would like that.

We debated modern dress; it would have been so easy, and so obvious, to cross the *t*s and dot the *i*s by putting Iago in neo-Nazi fatigues, and stick the red flash of a mock-swastika on his arm, so he could wear "his heart on his sleeve for daws to peck at." But how would Desdemona's constant soul submit itself to its destiny, were she an emancipated modern youngster? And if she were one, how could Emilia let rip to those astonished young ears her own sudden apprehension of a very modern feminism with any surprise? In any case, a modern Emilia would probably have upped and left wife-beating Iago years ago, enmeshed though she is in the web of abuse. How would fidelity in marriage have its full weight when fidelity is nowadays so disposable? How, without being risible in the eyes of an urban black audience, could Othello discard, in the final act, his borrowed finery to revert to his unprotected African self? And so on, and so on . . .

The finger began to point irrevocably to Elizabethan dress. It should be remembered that Elizabethan clothes are not exactly traditional to a Sowetan audience. They would be, on the contrary, the stuff of fairy-tales—of parables even, and exert the same imaginative power. Since theatre is metaphorical, and need not be confined by an imposed realism, we decided that nothing like that should take people's minds off the dreadful story, nor should we adopt any trendy contemporary anachronisms that might limit their self-recognition. The set itself would be an empty space with a simple central podium, which could become a chair or a bed—what you will—to afford the actors maximum prominence. It all felt right. When, much later, I was asked, predictably enough,

why I hadn't updated the setting, it was easy to reply: "Where do you suggest —pre-revolutionary Pretoria?"

That was in April. In July I returned to begin work on the play. From then on, life and art were continually at odds, but continually feeding each other. I remember a Saturday morning when the very first run-through of the play had to be postponed because John was unable to attend. The funeral of a murdered activist was to take place in Soweto, and the police had thrown a cordon round it, preventing anyone from entering or leaving.

Indeed, John, living as he then did in Soweto, had to run the gamut of police roadblocks every day, and he would come into the hot rehearsal room, peeling off his sweatshirt ready for work—cool as a cucumber. Underneath it was a SUPPORT THE ANC T-shirt; "Can't let the Boers see this one" he'd say with a wicked grin. Again and again, time was lost during rehearsals, either because of John, or because the white actors had to take quick commercial jobs whenever they could to bolster their meagre Market pay. And although the cast was very close and mutually supportive, John's agenda served to underline his, and Othello's, essentially separate position in a white society. It was very salutary for all of us to be so closely involved with the diurnal indignities of township life. White South Africa was always ignorant of the burden.

Another time, a bomb went off near Johannesburg, at a barracks. The talk was that it was done by the suspected third force, to polarise and destabilise —the usual. When I talked to my Aunt Helen on the phone, she sounded depressed for the first time, seeing no hope and even predicting martial law to contain the growing civil "unrest" (the regime's favourite euphemism) in the radicalised townships. "Although," she said, "I think the government is beginning to see that they will (expletive deleted) have to improve the quality of life for the people" (Helen was always nothing if not to the point). She thought there was no hope and it was all going to get much worse. As I said earlier, the tentative talks

between Mandela and the government were a very well-kept secret. (By the way, if you are interested in the astonishing inside story of South Africa's negotiated revolution, I urge you to read Allister Spark's account: *Tomorrow is Another Country*.)

Daily, the world intruded into the rehearsals. We wanted change, but when people got killed it depressed us too. "Really," I said to John, "this is all we can do. We can only do the work in hand."

It was hell for John. I could see he was torn; the activist wanted to be on the streets, the actor wanted to be in the play. When, one day, we were far enough along to start working on the intense physical relationship between Othello and Desdemona, John was holding back, attractive though she was. These things are delicate matters at the best of times, but I could sense not only the natural shyness of the man, but a whole world of barriers he was having to fight through. I didn't force it, but came back to it every day little by little, and we kept our lines of talk open all the time. "I can understand the agony, but I can't do the love," he said to me one day. "I was taught to hate those white bastards when I was a kid."

"You must try to forget all that, John," I said, "this is only a play."

"I can't forget," he replied, "these things go into our work."

I teased him: "Just remember you were the one whose eye lit up when you saw her. We hardly even auditioned her, remember? 'That's the one,' you said."

"And so I did." He laughed. Indoctrination was gradually quelled by natural instincts from then on. Apartheid can work both ways.

I saw, too, that he was having great trouble with the first half of the play—the noble half if you like, the Venetian half, the Europeanised Othello, before jealousy strips away all pretension, and divides the man into two warring creatures, the mad one and

the repentant one. Sometimes a simple thing can turn a key for an actor, and I suggested that perhaps, instead of sneakers, he should wear a pair of boots to rehearse in. I hoped that this would help to earth him, as it were. Nodding his head across the room at Richard, who had taken to boots for Iago, he replied rather crossly: "These white chaps wear boots for their army service; I don't have boots." I let it lie, but the next day he had raided the costume department, and came in, endearingly sheepish, in boots. That small act of courage made all the difference, and seemed to release a more martial, even patrician, quality in him.

The hardest hurdles to leap were, in some sense, those put in the way of his art rather than his life. John was attempting to do in five weeks what should have taken him five years. That was true of everyone in the cast, it's true, but as I said, the rhythms of the language were theirs to begin with. If an English-speaker were to gush at some unsuspecting idol, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" he might suspect the content but not the form; the iambic pentameter is as natural to English as a rumination on the weather. John was not only fighting the mis-scansions that the spoken rhythms of his own language predicated, but also the highly wrought poetic imagery and complex conceits of Elizabethan poetry. I soon realised something I had only half suspected before: it is the vowels in English verse that are the conduits of the emotions. Clip them, strangle them, and you have a very emotionally constipated voyage. The Xhosa accent in English tends to halve diphthongs: "eth" for "earth," "stet" for "state," and so on.

Now, right at the beginning of our work, I had decided to forego one whole week of rehearsal, in order to do intense verse work with the cast. It was a big sacrifice, because only five weeks for a play of this calibre is way too little. Six is the absolute minimum to get anywhere with such a play. Eight or ten weeks would be what the RSC or The National would plan for. But on a Market Theatre budget, we were forced to run the race we had to run.

I knew I must take the plunge, even though it left me with only a month, a little month, to discover the play itself.

It paid remarkable dividends, not least in that the cast learned not to be frightened of verse. They began to see how enjoyable it is to play with such powerful words and concepts. They began to see that speaking poetry has nothing to do with poetical speaking. They began to feel the rush of blood that wonderful writing engenders in the acting animal. They began to play with words, and to enjoy feeling the arc of large emotions bolstered with all the rich detail that Shakespeare provides to express them. They began to see that to respond to the rhythms, rather than trying to naturalise them, released the sense, instead of obfuscating it with a deceptively demotic gloss. For passion and intellect are symbiotically entwined in great writing.

John possessed both alright, but now I had to point to the trick that would help him to release what he could discern, but not yet express: the emotional life of Othello. It was a big step, to decide that he was going to be in charge of the language, not it in charge of him. He had to change the speech patterns of a lifetime — elongate those recalcitrant vowels, stretch them to breaking point. I knew I would have to risk his murdering me rather than Desdemona, and nagged him mercilessly. After weeks of struggling to monitor his own speaking, the gradual change was miraculous. Othello began to emerge, delectating his liberation; the emotions he was discovering could now course unhindered through the words. The play itself began to find its centre; the other actors began to respond to their eponymous hero in ways they could not have done before. I felt that now we might just get there.

That began to take care of the passion, but the intellect still had a fight on. One day we were working on the great speech that marks Othello's transition to an avenging angel: "O blood, Iago, blood!" he cries, and my hair stood on end as John found its measure. (There was no shortchange on those vowels; blood was a word immune from diminishment in our blood-boltered country.)

Iago, backing off, but only a little, from this gratifying extremity he has unleashed, tries to calm him: “Patience, I say. Your mind perhaps may change.”

Never, Iago. Eike to the Pontic sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont,
Even so my bloody thoughts with violent pace
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up. Now by yond marble heaven,
I here engage my words.

“Where’s the Pontic sea? Where the Propontic, the Hellespont? Why them? What do they mean? Why marble heaven?—it’s not made of stone!” John’s questions were fired in a sort of glowing rage, and as I tried to explain the cultural implications that classical mythology holds in the European collective psyche, his anger suddenly snapped. He kicked a chair plumb across the room, yelling, “Damn my bloody education! Damn effing Bantu Education! I was never allowed to learn an effing thing! How the eff am I supposed to know what all this is about?” I know you will forgive the language, but extremity calls on extremity, and it nearly broke my heart. But I was damned if I was going to allow apartheid its victory, and together we crossed that particular bridge dividing our cultures, and found a deeper empathy with Othello’s world.

But still there was another Rubicon to cross; the titanic struggle was not over. Through pain and effort he was reaching the heart of Othello, and I couldn’t help thinking that this was the proper way; technical expertise and talent alone, though comfortably professional, were less involving of the whole person than the lonely voyage that John was having to take. Of course he was learning that to sustain a part of this size and complexity takes an unrelenting commitment and concentration. One day he said

to me, “I can’t just go into a scene if I’ve been sitting here with the others talking and laughing. I must prepare.” I urged him to find a quiet corner before a scene; I was so glad it had come from him. An actor has to prepare mentally just like a musician or an athlete. I thought, well —the bigger the building, the deeper the foundations have to be —that’s what keeps it up.

He still found the physical relaxation of Othello an elusive thing; his mind had so many elements to pull together, no wonder his body was feeling the strain. One day Barney Simon, popping in to cast an eye on his charges, quietly suggested he go to do a warm-up with a group of fellow actors reviving a play called *Woza Albert*, which was rehearsing nearby. When he came back, he was much happier, much looser. I realised, as wise Barney had, that he needed to touch base with his brothers; too much of whitey was unsettling him.

Another day, I was privately worried after a run-through, since I felt there was still something in John holding him back from yielding to the extreme emotions Othello experiences when Iago makes his vile insinuations. In Shakespeare, extreme things happen very quickly; there is hardly ever time to prepare for them. When Iago lays his trap and asks Othello if Cassio knew of their love, Othello replies: “He did, from first to last. Why dost thou ask?”

Iago: But for a satisfaction of my thought — No further harm.

Othello: Why of thy thought, Iago?

Iago: I did not think he had been acquainted with her.

Othello: O yes, and went between us very oft.

Iago: Indeed!

Othello: Indeed? Ay, indeed. Discern’st thou aught in that?
Is he not honest?

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the last moment in the play in which you might say Othello is a happy man. You see how

devilishly quickly the poison works? It takes a mere seven lines for Othello's perception of his world to change irrevocably. Oh, John could understand the jealousy alright; African men make notoriously jealous husbands. But the possibility of tears, before the onset of thoughts that lie too deep for tears? No, that he could not do. "Why? You're an actor; go with Othello." "I can't. I was brought up to take care of twelve people; I was taught not to cry." Well, OK, I had to go along with that —for the moment.

And then one wonderful day, John pulled it out of the bag, and none too soon. We had arrived at a run-through only one week before moving into the theatre for technical rehearsals, then three previews, and then opening to the critics and the world. Time was short; I was edgy, knowing we still hadn't struck gold. John found it that day. He was amazing. My pen, frantically scribbling notes, stopped in mid-air. I gave myself over to this longed-for transition now unfolding itself before my eyes. I wept. Then I cheered. Everybody rose to the challenge; it was a detailed and thrilling performance.

When the dust had cleared, and we had all gone off for a celebratory drink, he told me that that very morning he was on the phone to Winnie Mandela. The Winnie we know now had not yet emerged; she was still then the Mother of the Nation, revered for being the great Mandela's representative on earth. She was a powerful and influential figure. Still deeply worried about the cultural boycott, even though we had been given the green light, he had been talking to her about his fears. She said to him: "What you are doing is noble; it is enhancing your reputation, and therefore it is enhancing the reputation of the black people whom you represent." The albatross of comradeship he was secretly bearing fell from him from that day onward.

It had nothing to do with me; it is she who turned the key. I shall always be grateful to her for that unwitting intervention.

I have had to leave out so much; other revelatory journeys were taken by us all —the actors, myself —in our attempt to realise

this great play, but there is simply no time to elaborate on them here. None, I suspect, were quite so personally crucial as John's. Suffice it to say that the proof was in the pudding; the sensuality of the love affair that oils the play's headlong rush into chaos, and the paternalistic and utterly ruthless psychosis of Iago's undoing of their happiness, seemed to touch a nerve in the audience. Bookings, healthy enough before we opened, were positively manic afterwards.

Before our first public preview, the management of *The Market* panicked. The running time of the play was just over three hours, and I was digging in my heels; I refused to cut another word. "But people have buses to catch. They won't stay. They'll walk out before the end. Johannesburg can't take this length; they're not used to it." "It lasts as long as it lasts," I said, stubborn to the last. "If it's working they'll stay. I'm not budging." I bit my nails to the quick that night, but I have to tell you, with some pride, that not one person left before the end. And by the third preview, the nine o'clock show, they were on their feet, cheering the actors to the rafters at past midnight on a Saturday.

The reviews were really good on the whole; some for John, some against. Likewise with Richard. But there seemed to be an impetus that nothing they wrote about could impair. I began to see that for the first time in years, a protest play (for that's how we chose to see it) was not deliberately popularising itself; its story-line was uncompromisingly rich; its dialogue unconfined by jargon. Great language was heady stuff to an audience so long a stranger to it. It was the only one of Shakespeare's plays that could describe, with such pertinence and power, what it felt like to be destroyed, on —when you analyse it —a mere whim. Iago offers up a handful of reasons for his vengeance, none of which hold enough water. In the end —one is forced to face the fact — it is because he simply cannot bear the happiness of the lovers; the couple, Cassio-like, have "a daily beauty in their lives, that makes him ugly." Just so, I hoped, would the unreasonable vindictive-

ness of apartheid appear to its victims —the black audience. And its accomplices in crime, the white audience, could side with whom-ever they liked.

What was so fascinating to me, bred on a biddable and educated public in Britain, was how divided on some night the audience was. Factions would start up sometimes; a white hissing “shush” to a noisily participating black. Sometimes the black punters would laugh in the most serious bits, as if the tragedy in their own lives could not be matched by that onstage; or as if laughter were the only way to stave off the tears they had enough of in reality. Who knows why? Sometimes there would be a shout of “Look out behind you!” to Emilia as Iago stabs her in the back. Pin-drop silence, as I have said, is unfamiliar in Africa in any case. The actors had to learn to control this wayward beast; I could only advise them to go very quiet when they felt mayhem coming on, so as to force people to listen hard.

What was really good, though, was how funny the play is when it wants to be. Iago’s eight soliloquies (many more than Hamlet’s) were a delight to the audience; they loved the direct contact with the actor. They loved being taken into Iago’s confidence. This, of course, is why Olivier said what he did about a crushable Iago, since his audience contact is indeed a threat to the actor struggling with Othello’s gullibility. However, such is the structure of the play that Othello’s tragedy soars into its proper prominence in the final act, and he is able to redeem his damaged nobility. For a black audience teetering on the verge of contempt for him, the hero of Aleppo snatches back his selfhood just in time. It is a dangerous piece of writing that can play cat and mouse with an audience’s loyalties so flamboyantly. There is even time, in that act, for Emilia to achieve tragic status, as she frees herself from a lifetime of moral cowardice, and dies telling the truth for the first, and last, time.

Sure, a few people walked out in dudgeon when Othello and Desdemona first kiss. Hate-mail was duly penned, from the usual

fringe of lunatic hard-liners who had never set foot in a theatre. But as the run progressed, The Market's normal 10 to 15 percent black audience for a European play jumped to an unprecedented 40, 50, and then 60 percent. Every age and colour poured in to see this dreadful tragedy unfold. I suspect that it will not happen again; it was a play that had found its time and place. The readiness was all. It hit the press internationally too, which only goes to show how South Africa festered in the consciousness of the world. It will be difficult, now that democracy has come, to find another play with all the reverberations that this one possessed. With the enemy gone, how do you define yourself? It will be fascinating to watch how writers will adjust to this new, and thrilling, dispensation. Heavens! — they might even write about ordinary people instead of the extraordinary policies they make.

We could have run for six months, but six weeks was all we had, such were the initial doubts about Mr. Shakespeare's box-office clout. And that is why, not having the funds to tour the production to every corner of our riven land, I decided we must film it for television. The gods were still having a siesta; we taped this giant play in six days flat. As I recorded John for posterity, I recall thinking with a wild anger that apartheid was a monster, begot upon itself, born of itself, and of itself one day it would die. Well, it has.

It is perhaps worth remarking, in conclusion, as the new government in South Africa prepares the way for its own neo-Nuremberg trials, that Shakespeare gives Iago, in the end, no defense, just as the old regime bothered with none to justify its own atrocities. To the terrible question that Othello puts to Cassio, these are Iago's final words:

Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.
From this time forth, I never will speak word.

Ladies and gentlemen, I submit that the metaphor of the play stands.