

## CONCLUSION

### A play and interview with Breytenbach as a study for the argument against fixity

#### 7.1. The Interview - *Reflections on identity*.<sup>94</sup>

**There must be meaning. And meaning, of course, will be simple. We believe we are entitled to simple and meaningful ‘truths’. The dissident, he/she who brings doubt, must be ignored, ridiculed or chased away.** (Breyten Breytenbach in Sienaert 2000:104).

The main argument of this thesis is one of Breytenbach’s stance against fixity. The research involved notions of creativity, social and other forms of consciousness, Zen Buddhism, identity, reality and other aspects.

In the above-mentioned interview with Sienaert (2001:107), Breytenbach states that “the creative act, as displacement or extension of consciousness always has social resonances”. He elaborates on this notion by stating that, the creative act, or extension of consciousness, “relates to the rhythms, the flow and the breaks of the primordial movements and spaces, the need to placate and exorcise and escape and imitate, underlying human consciousness.”

Breytenbach comments on the attitude of fixity prevailing in South Africa that is historically, politically and culturally a construct. In this context the word “construct” infers closure.

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Interview with Breyten Breytenbach by Marilet Sienaert (Sienaert 2001:104-109). The reception by the public was oozed by remarks of not understanding the play. Breytenbach delivers a moving plea against meaning in *Reflection on Identity*. The constant search for meaning by the South African public, leads to the areas of non-fixity where bourgeois values wield the sceptre.

Breytenbach pleads for an understanding that it is in the cultural terrain, by means of creative acts, that the *deep* questions can be identified. Notions such as identity, memory, responsibility, hybridity, adversity, inclusive tolerance and the function of imagination, are part and parcel of the fluid terrain of non fixity. For Breytenbach, the fluidness of the creative act, is ideally, ethical. It is naked, and as close as possible to “truth” in experience and observation to carry its recognition and acceptance of responsibility. It does not conform to the constructs and discourses of public morality. In this case, stratified morality. “In fact,” Breytenbach says, “to be effective (heightening the awareness of texture) it will probably challenge those comforts.”

The thesis-argument furthermore involves the notion of the contingent nature of reality. Again in the above-mentioned interview, Breytenbach states that poetry and Zen are “faced with a similar conundrum: they try to convey the essence of reality directly (or experience)”(Sienaert:2001:106). He states that “in poetry, as in Zen, we doubt metaphor, possibly because it is so often only an approximation”. Zen philosophy emphasizes the inadequacy of language, and yet Zen endlessly produces verses of truth. Breytenbach further explains that “The task of realism [or New Realism or New Writing], in pursuing reality beyond metaphor will always be accompanied by endless battles against metaphor fought through metaphors.” What this infers is that even the metaphor must remain within the realms of that which is contingent.<sup>95</sup>

About the contingent nature of identity and consciousness, Breytenbach states that identity is the result of the process of awareness. “‘It’ comes into being through consciousness. For a person involved in the transformation and expansion of awareness, it is consciousness that matters, **the flow**...– not the successive stops and crutches and snatches of I”. Awareness is thus the important tool to obliterate the borders of fixity. Breytenbach says: “The awareness

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<sup>95</sup> Contingency, uncertainty and that which is random, belong to the argument against fixity.

of the changing, making and unmaking of ‘self’ is the dilation of emptiness. Putting it differently, one is always becoming death.” The thesis was seriously involved with the notion of the movement towards death. In contrast to Breytenbach’s view of the self which is the movement towards death, the stratified self is a way of being and of behaving. Identity for the stratified order is a mask imagined by communal traditions, conventions and expectations [notions of fixity].

## 7.2. The play - *Die Toneelstuk*<sup>96</sup>

**The purpose of the theatre is to shake people out of their bourgeois complacency.**

Dieter Reibler

During April 2001, Breyten Breytenbach’s war machine, *Die Toneelstuk*, was produced by Marthinus Basson. The master text is the South African society and the sub text is Breytenbach’s experience of being incarcerated. As previously in *Boklied* and *The Life and Times of Johnny Cockroach*, Breytenbach overturns traditional theatre conventions. According to Hambidge (Litnet 2001), the text is written as many of Federico Fellini’s (1920-1993) films, as film making-in-action. The theatregoer is reminded that *Die Toneelstuk* has never been written and in an introduction Breytenbach states that he lost the text. The reader of the published text and the theatergoer, thus walks around in the writer’s workshop of dreams.

If writing is the casting of a shadow, then Breytenbach becomes the metaphor of the great tree throwing his shadow over the “primitive” and parochial South African society. Breytenbach’s first volume of poetry, *Die ysterkoei moet sweet* (1964), threw a bludgeon against the public

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*Die Toneelstuk* by Breyten Breytenbach. Produced by Marthinus Basson. Players: Jan Ellis, Antoinette Kellerman, Chan Marti, Anton Smuts, Albert Martiz, Rob van Vuuren and Christopher Gxalaba.

genealogic tree. Nearly forty years later, during the devastating public reception of *Die Toneelstuk*, the continual key role played by Breytenbach in internal system polarization, was again highlighted. Since the Sixties Breytenbach has been shifting cultural and social political borders (Du Toit & Galloway Litnet: 2001).

According to Galloway (Litnet 2001) *Die Burger* sanctioned a national poll, after the performance of *Die Toneelstuk* at the *Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees*. The participants had the option of voting for the estrangement of Breytenbach. The artist, who does not play the correct political game, but chooses to confront the Afrikaner with his/her own dark side, is experienced as destabilizing the stratified order. The strategy chosen by the guardians of the stratified order to stabilize society are played out between the elimination of disturbers (through stereotypes and exile) and efforts to tolerate them. Over the past forty years a whole arsenal of preventive and stabilizing mechanisms have been put in place around Breytenbach as border-shifter and intellectual. Breytenbach adds to Galloway's insight regarding his role in society by identifying the twin notions of a scapegoat/icon. By experiencing and projecting stereotyped, in this case fixed, roles on the artist who chooses the ethical point of departure of presenting reality, a certain (fixed) portion of society, is banned to archetypal and inhuman terrains of unbearable tension.

Sienaert (2001:106- 108) in an interview with Breytenbach poses the question of scapegoat identity that he persistently emphasises in his recent work. Sienaert writes:

**Traditionally, of course, the scapegoat had a deceptive salutary role in society as it acted as receptacle for all our projected fears and hatred which could then seemingly be destroyed.**

To this argument, Breytenbach answers in the following way:

so we embellish the cult of ‘the strong man’ – as leader, prophet, saviour, he who can give *meaning* and show the way forward. There *must be meaning*. And meaning, of course, will be simple. We believe we are entitled to simple and meaningful ‘truths’. The dissident, he/she who brings doubt, must be ignored, ridiculed or chased away. The effect of this macho mumbo-jumbo is a brutalisation of public awareness, a dumbing down of shared intelligence, a reinforcement of our traditional patriarchal and hierarchical social structures, a confirmation of religious orthodoxies and political barbarism and cultural hegemonies, a renunciation of personal responsibility, an impediment to the development of vigorous civil societies, a repression of the creative power of hybridisation, a flourishing of hypocrisy. ... . The other side of the ‘scapegoat’ coin is the ‘icon’. If I may add a personal note: finding myself in the scapegoat/icon configuration, I notice that the possible area of perception of my work is putrid and poisoned, obliterating a critical reading and focussing in a pathological way on the person behind the work.

Breytenbach’s answer to Sienaert’s question is a strong argument condemning all forms of fixity.

Deleuze & Guattari (1986:15) stated that the war machine, and for our purpose, *Die Toneelstuk*, operates outside the control of the State order. It is a creative flight-line, a smooth space of displacement that leads to non-fixity. Smooth small and large deviations characterize space. There is no homogeneity between two indefinite random points. The example of Anna as Mama Jesus, illustrates the point of the argument. Chan Marti interprets both roles – she transforms from the one figure, the “corset-wearing” little whore to the Bride of Christ dressed in a white wedding dress. For the theatregoers who grew up in a patriarchal society where the female aspects (anima) of Christ were not acknowledged, it must have been shocking to experience and view this scene. This detail illustrates the working of the gear mechanism of the war machine that ruptures and which drives the imagination of the nomadic artist/dramatist. The war machine, for example Breytenbach’s *Die Toneelstuk* is characterized by the important feature of metamorphosis. Characters change into other characters. Dawid

becomes the Inquisitor, Anna becomes Mamma Jesus, the warder becomes Ivan and the Dog becomes *Alyosha*. In the play, Breytenbach subverts fixed values and replaces them with concepts, images and metaphors, related to the minor art of disruption.

*Die Toneelstuk*, is heterogeneous and hybrid if compared with the stable, the identical and constant which one finds in a play such as *The American Popess*<sup>97</sup> of the German dramatist, Esther Vilar. Vilar wrote this futuristic work in the seventies. It deals with the first woman who in 2033, was democratically chosen as Pope in the Roman Catholic Church. Du Toit (Litnet 2001) notes that in the new millennium the Roman Catholic Church has changed beyond recognition. After centuries the Church dogma and ritual were in disarray. One after the other enlightened Popes have sanctioned homosexuality, divorce, abortion and birth control. Even priestly marriages were allowed. It became a history of cosmic change and re-creation and modernization by which the Roman Catholic Church tried to remain actual. However, power has been constantly evolved in more subtle ways. The Popess completes the circle by reinstating the original power symbols. They reinitiated the absolute authority of the Pope. In the light of her own disbelief, Pope Joan II engages in a Messianic sacrifice. She relentlessly calls the Church to order and delivers an argumentative, worldwide television message. Pope Joan II dissects the collapse of the Church against the background of human fallibility and belief that cannot be negotiated. Without structure, freedom has no meaning.

In *Die Toneelstuk*, Breytenbach and the character, Dostoevsky, questions the aspect of human freedom, a burden which God has placed on man. In contrast to Vilar, Breytenbach's way of working is anarchical and revolutionary. Breytenbach creates images, identities and conditions of nomadic non-fixity in his work. The theatre is *par excellence* the medium for social commentary. It is also the task of *Die Toneelstuk*. One has to take into account that

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*The American Popess* by Esther Vilar. Produced by Opdrag Produksies. Directed by Mark Graham. Players Jana Celliers and Galeboe Moabi.

Breytenbach has been involved as conscious-maker, and as Marxist, with issues about social functioning. *Die Toneelstuk* is a shorthand approach that operates far outside the borders of the well-known bourgeois-reality. It is the theatre of the absurd, the grotesque (grotesque in the sense that it is about guilt and confession, tyranny of religious institutions and the Christian Church, for instance, the Inquisition), as well as the carnivalesque with its function of estrangement. Breytenbach's art, writing, dramas, aesthetics, revolutionary and other concepts, are enhanced by the images and notions of the *Tarot*, butterfly and *koan* in *Die Toneelstuk*.

After dreaming of him, Breytenbach introduced the audience to the naked twenty-first century's black Dostoevsky, who comes from the underground to perform as a character in a play. He comments in Xhosa on circumstances in South Africa. The confusion caused by the language, complicates matters for the theatergoer. For those operating the "war machine", there are no clear answers. We are living in the "underground" and the doorway to the underground is the mirror. Dostoevsky, mocks and confronts a Christian (stratified) audience with the *Tarot* card of the crucified Christ, the "nail-man" who died for their sins. According to Hambidge (Litnet 2001) Breytenbach refers to *le Pendu* or "the Hanged Man". It is a complex card and if drawn upside down refers to a state of imprisonment within a psyche or body. The *Tarot* and the twenty-three major arcana (Swords, Coins, Sticks and Cups) represent spiritual development from total innocence to spiritual maturity. Many speculations are regarding the origin of the *Tarot*. For the nineteenth century mystic, Eliphas Levi, it is possible to understand the complete universe even while in a state of solitary confinement. The world can be understood by reading the cards. At the outset, only the rich could afford the lovely hand-crafted cards. Some cards were available in woodcuts. Later, when it became more popular, the appearance of the cards changed. The cups became hearts, the swords, the knave of spades and queen of spades; the pentacles, diamonds and batons were changed to clubs.

In 2001 Breytenbach as dramatist used the events in the life of Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), his novel *The Brothers Karamazov* and possibly, the figure of the underling or the underground man from *Notes from the Underground*, as intertext. According to Steiner (1980:200), these works are brilliant, semi-deranged monologues and dialogues, where man dances around his own soul and the writer creates an occult ecstasy coming from life created through language. In *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoevsky (Steiner 1980:301) writes:

**Gentlemen, I would like to tell you why I could not become an insect. I hereby state that I would like to become an insect, but that I could never realize my dream.**

Dostoevsky's insect metaphor carries the seed of Kafka's metamorphosis that Breytenbach used in his drama, *Life and Times of Johnny Cockroach*. The old metaphor connected man with worms and maggots, representing mortality. In William Shakespeare's (baptised 1564-1616) *King Lear*, the mass deaths of flies are portrayed. Both Dostoevsky en Breytenbach transform this view to psychological realities and conditions of thought. The tragedy of the underling is that he literally turns his back on his own masculinity. The underling embodies the mystery of the absurd, long before the Existentialists voiced their views. The underling is the one cast out from society. In his sense of estrangement, the underling constantly talks to himself, even sees the "other" when looking into the mirror. The underling is necessary because he reminds us of our own mortality. He is the androgynous clown who talks about the truth and as painter Breytenbach portrays him as the one wearing the dunce's cap. The French poet, François Villon (1431-1463), Breytenbach's partner from his prison days, was the first voice from the underground. The "shitting", vomiting, grotesque character, (Breytenbach) who orders all the characters in *Die Toneelstuk* around in the first part, is the true underling.

In *Die Toneelstuk*, Breytenbach refers to butterflies. This insect is the metaphor that represents metamorphosis. It introduces the theatregoer to a new process, namely the interaction between



the audience and the production. On the cover of the prison poetry (*Yk*), the fourth volume of the “undanced dance” (1984), Breytenbach depicts the prisoner with a shaven head and a moth covering his eyes. The insect functions during the night, when vision is limited. Bangai Bird’s vision is limited. In the self-portrait on the back cover, the prisoner who is Breytenbach, presents himself with a butterfly over his eyes. The wound on his forehead indicates the presence of the third eye, which is the eye looking inward. He is now looking through this eye. The butterfly in *Die Toneelstuk*, invites the theatregoer to extend his/her limited views of things.

According to du Toit (Litnet 2001), the *koan*<sup>98</sup> is a paradoxical statement, which cannot be explained logically through language. It is a riddle given by the Zen-master to his pupil: engagement with a struggle for meaning, leads to enlightenment. Because the *koan* and for the argument of the thesis, *Die Toneelstuk* cannot be explained logically, thus avoiding the conscious reason, easing radical shifts in the unconscious is possible. Deep inner transformations are set aside by trying to find meaning for an artwork like *Die Toneelstuk*. The Westerner experiences unbearable uncomfot if he/she does not immediately understand art, drama, the novel and other life experiences. The stratified order operates through fixed notions. When those who belong to the order do not understand something, it is immediately rejected. What is rejected, is the mirror casting the riddle towards each of us.

Sienaert (2001:80) mentions that when Breytenbach writes, paints, and thinks, he does not turn to the traditional ancestor - although he wrote in an imaginative way about his grandfather, the *Boom Boer* (Tree Farmer). Breytenbach’s ancestors are Bosch, Breugel and Goya in the arts and Villon and Camiljoen in poetry. In *Lappesait Ten (BC-1)*, Breytenbach writes and paints

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The koan is an enigmatic riddle, characteristic of the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism, whereby abrupt awakening is achieved. A common example of a koan asks about the sound made by one hand clapping. The effort involved to “solve” a koan is intended to exhaust the analytical intellect and the egoistic will, preparing the mind to respond on the intuitive level.

the ancestor Kafka, and addresses him as father. In *Die Toneelstuk*, Dostoevsky is the ancestor. Both Dostoevsky and Breytenbach are endowed with exceptional strength, perseverance, and an animal hardiness. Both of them endured incarceration and created art in the aftermath. Both of them had to transform pain, imprisonment, rejection and exile by their relevant societies, turning it into art where reality, patterns and chaos are intensified through their thoughts. Paradoxically their vision penetrates chaos and the essential depth of contemporary experience in their relevant societies. Politics intrigues both writers.

During 1992 Breytenbach made a pencil drawing with collage, which for him represents fragmentation and disintegration. In the artwork of Dostoevsky, he places him in Africa. Dostoevsky is depicted in a flowered shirt. His small hands, which is Breytenbach's image of vulnerability, is already exposed to the process of decay. In the foreground, the artist depicts two African elephants using their trunks to embrace each other (BC-2). This work now belongs to Georges-Marie Lory, who translated Breytenbach's poetry in French.

Dostoevsky is regarded as one of the great Russian writers of the 19th century. According to Steiner (1980:204) his talent can be regarded as uncontrollable. He was born in a hospital for the poor in a slum outside Moscow. He began his career as military engineer, but left his chosen profession to write. His first novella, *Poor People*, was a success, but the reception of the following work was not good. He became interested in radical politics and was arrested together with the Petrefski-Ring in 1849. After a mock execution, he was condemned as prisoner and later as soldier to Siberia. Eight years of imprisonment left him with epileptic fits. He also developed compulsive gambling problems. His sensitivity for the extreme of human experience, the psychology of criminal behaviour and a growing insight for Pan Slavic Christianity, was explored in *The House of the Deaf*, *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamasov*.

“God-ridden” Russian thought confronted Dostoevsky. During this time there was the view that Russia had to play an important role in the threatening apocalypse. Dostoevsky met Christ in detrimental circumstances in a prison in Omsk. He made several studies for the depiction of Christ – Alexei Fyodorovich (Alyosha, Alyoshka, Alyoshenka, Alyoshechka, Alexeichic, Lyosha, Lyoshenka<sup>99</sup>) Karamasov, represented the canonical and traditional. The only depiction of Christ by Dostoevsky is in the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor. The Inquisitor questions violence and paradox on behalf of mankind. He opposes Christ, who cannot relate to mankind’s failure to deal with the excruciating pain of freedom. During 2001, Breytenbach as dramatist, used events in Dostoevsky’s life and his book, *The Brothers Karamasov*. This novel deals with collective - as opposed to individual guilt.

In the interview with Sienaert (2001:106), Breytenbach explains his views of guilt as follows:

‘Collective guilt’, however, is an a-historical enterprise ( one may even suggest that it is a-moral) to retro-actively impose a morality on the past in the light of present-day convictions and hypocrisies. Not only is it a self-indulgent effort to simplify complex processes, but this accusation of group guilt is a flimsy camouflaged power play), preferably addressed to those of another tribe and thus it becomes racist), is also intended to paint those of us on ‘the right side’ a paler shade of snow. ‘Collective guilt’ promotes amnesia; it obfuscates the understanding of how and why oppressive systems and regimes came about; it obliterates the demarcation between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ because the criminally responsible actors can now be seen as products of group characteristics; it takes away personal responsibility. Consciousness is thought and action, at least potentially. As a conscious human being making my own decision, I reject the notion of shared guilt, and this the need to confess and retribute, defined and confined solely by a share colour and culture.

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According to the Russian tradition, these are all diminutives of the name Alexei. Breytenbach uses the diminutive, Alyosha in *Die Toneelstuk*.

In *Die Toneelstuk* Breytenbach rejected the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He also rejects group guilt as moral fascism and refuses to see himself as a victim. Breytenbach's country has rot in his guts and he experiences a deep inner bleeding. Everything he believed in (also freedom), was an illusion.

*Die Toneelstuk* is a memory-work, and a prison ritual that should bring healing. The actors recite the words as if they are partaking in a ritual – movement by the actors seem absurd and without meaning. The repetition of the drama is played out in a prison with the political prisoner, Dawid as central figure and the woman Anna, as co-player. Baba Halfjan ridicules the writer – Breytenbach in his own way has been ridiculing the role of the writer for years. The ritualistic nature of Breytenbach's play, probably echoes certain aspects of the Russian Orthodox Church to which Dostoevsky belonged.

In *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche ponders on the audiences' excitement when confronted by pain. The public eye is the crystal ball where pain and suffering are transformed to sadistic pleasure. The fixed eye ('I') has become used to everything. It has become nearly impossible to extend the barrier because the worse that can happen has already been seen. The production of *Die Toneelstuk* by Marthinus Basson and the players – Jan Ellis (Dawid/Grand Inquisitor, Antoinette Kellerman (Martiens), Chan Marti (Anna/Mamma Jesus), Anton Smuts (Baba Halfjan), Albert Marits (Warder/Ivan), Rob van Vuuren (*Dog/Alyosha*) en Christopher Gxalaba (Dostoevsky) became the war machine that disrupts the safe, fixed order of society. Dissonant energies are set free. The Dog of Pain is the important (invisible) character in this play. He lifts his head and howls when listening to the "gallows-songs" of those passing Breytenbach's cell next to the place of execution.

The howl of the main character at the end of the play, is the cry of one who has seen and experienced too much. Breytenbach as war machine refuses to become the integrated well-

balanced citizen of the stratified order. With the epiphanic Dostoevsky, he shares the ability to experience pain.

The thesis – **Against fixity: a hybrid reading of Breyten Breytenbach’s art, poetry, writing, aesthetics and philosophy**, is a comparative study, which revealed the artist/writer’s constant stance against the stratification of societies and that of South Africa in particular. It is not a critical study, but comparative. Breytenbach seems to be consequent in his arguments against fixity.

In conclusion some very important suggestions with regards to further research on Breytenbach’s work must be suggested. In the first place a critical evaluation of his work might be done in the field of gender studies. An interesting aspect to look into would be Breytenbach’s welcoming the woman as the Other.

A further suggestion lies in the section of philosophical studies. A comparative study could be made between Breytenbach as a thinker of concepts and similar notions by Deleuze & Guattari.

In Art History a comparative study could be made between Breytenbach as *New Realist* and the *Nouveau Realisme* or the Fluxus movements. The artist, Johan Cage, Henry Flynt and the composer, George Maciunas are important. Concepts and practices of postwar avant-garde, for example concrete art, conceptual art, and the promoting of art and aesthetics as anti-art, can be examined.