

## REVIEW: *The Robben Island Shakespeare* by Matthew Hahn

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Matthew Hahn, *The Robben Island Shakespeare* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017).  
ISBN-10: 147428387X / ISBN-13: 978-1474283878

Sonny Venkatrathnam's 'Robben Island Bible' or 'Robben Island Shakespeare' has captured the public imagination. The book is a tangible marker of resistance and, for many, an affirmation of the relevance of Shakespeare to a South African context. Venkatrathnam was arrested in 1972 under the under the infamous Terrorist Act and imprisoned on Robben Island. The story of how he obtained a copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* and his ingenious tactics to reclaim and keep it after it was impounded, is well documented. After he convinced a warden that the book was a Hindu Bible by William Shakespeare, it reportedly became a catalytic force in creating a community of learning around political thought on the island. Before his release, he asked prisoners in the single cells to mark a passage of significance to them and sign it. Venkatrathnam's 'souvenir' memorialises an assumed relationship between – amongst others – Mandela, Mbeki, Sisulu, Kathrada and Shakespeare.

The contested position of Shakespeare in South Africa foregrounds an ambiguous synthesis of memory, ideology, coercion and power that is compounded by the *Robben Island Bible*. Amongst the multiple translations, adaptations and transpositions of Shakespearean texts in South Africa and indeed the continent, questions about the extent to which a canonical text can be divorced from its ideological anchors, be divested of authority and transcend a dominant representational or interpretive centre, remain. Venkatrathnam's book offers a compelling invitation to (re)engage with revisionist impulses; the complexities of context and canon; and imaginings of a decolonised Shakespeare.

American-born producer, playwright, lecturer, director and facilitator Matthew Hahn responded to this invitation. He created a play interweaving historical events, documentary material, the marked text and interviews with some of the surviving former political prisoners. These are Sonny Venkatrathnam, Saths Cooper, Eddie Daniels, Theo Cholo, Michael Dingake, Ahmed Kathrada and Andrew Mlangeni. Hahn also interviewed Venkatrathnam's wife, Theresa. Hahn's *The Robben Island Shakespeare* presents an "amalgamation of the interviewees",<sup>1</sup> as well as verbatim accounts of the interviews Hahn conducted. The play offers an account of the personal struggles of the political prisoners through the reflections of the prisoners on their experiences as liberation activists at the time of their incarceration. Flash forward to twenty years later, and the same characters contemplate the aftermath of their involvement in the liberation movement. The play provides a glimpse into their lived experiences and their struggles to make sense of the tension between the ideals of the past and the reality of the present.

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1 Matthew Hahn, *The Robben Island Shakespeare* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), p.4.

In reviewing the play, I simultaneously act as reader and imaginer – reading the play whilst visualising it as a staged work. In doing so, I conflate my position as a reader of a literary text with that of an audience member looking at an imagined performance. This conflation is indicated as ‘reader/audience’. Whilst I acknowledge the problematics of such a conflation, I understand the conflation as a mode of subjectivisation. The common threads between the multiple interpretations of this term<sup>2</sup> are the ideas of continuous slippage, being ‘betwixt’, a process of *becoming* – the malleability of not fully realising any position.

Using elements of documentary and verbatim theatre, the play seeks to present a broad picture of the socio-political climate between 1972 and 1978 whilst foregrounding individual narratives. The play centralises the tensions between the apartheid system and the political prisoners; the warders and prisoners; and divergence in thinking about the liberation struggle. Although the way in which the play is constructed allows it to be read as a dramatic work complete in itself, knowledge of the history that the play is located in will assist in gaining a better understanding of the context of the play and in enhancing appreciation of both the content of the play and its means of production.

The character of Sonny drives the narrative and uses the book to activate a narrative point of view, offering a clear point of entry into the text. The book acts as a mnemonic device to evoke images, stories and experiences tied to the period of his incarceration on Robben Island. Through reading, translating and performing Shakespeare’s works, the characters explore subversive re-inscriptions of the self and mobilise the texts towards visioning a political future. The extent to which the prisoners engaged with the full texts or the depth of their engagement with the texts is of little importance to the play. As Hahn points out, the play emphasises the personal relevance that the textual fragments, passages or pages held for the prisoners in a particular moment in time.<sup>3</sup> The choices hint at a frame of mind, a pattern of thought or a felt experience. Though the link between the Shakespearean text and the rest of the play seems somewhat tenuous in a few instances, the Shakespearean text serves to emphasise feelings, comment on ideas, extend an argument or offer an observation in response to the preceding dialogue or monologue. There is no interrogation of the truth-value of narratives. Rather, the play focusses on the dramatic and emotive potential of the narratives. The documentary and verbatim elements in the play suggest the ‘truthfulness’ of what is revealed by the play and could easily be read as an attempt at masking artistic intervention. Binding verbatim accounts and documentary material to theatre creates a continuous slippage between competing orders of narrative (fact/fiction, documentary/dramatic). This slippage reveals the process of fictionalisation that shifts illustration to dramatisation.

The mode of performance described in the production notes further draws attention to the artifice of the play and invokes a dramatic paradox that encourages a reflexive oscillation between the symbolic world of the play and the world(s) outside of the play. This oscillation draws attention to the relational engagement of these worlds and the constitutive power of an oppressive system. Direct addresses to the audience and the leaps in time and space (lawyer’s office, school, cells, undefined spaces, flash forward and backward) create a kind of ‘historical intercutting’ and temporal displacement that juxtaposes the history the play cites with the positioning of that history in the present. This positioning allows for reflective and critical distance on the part of the reader/audience. The shifting reading/viewing frames facilitated by the continual interchange between ‘storying’ and character engagement within the world of the play, and the conversational (if not confessional) addresses to the audience/reader position them at times as complicit in an ‘apartheid gaze’; a witness to a testimony, a co-conspirator and a reflexive observer/reader. In doing so, the play offers an inquiry into the structure of social reality and the relationship of self to society for both characters and readers/audiences.

The play also draws attention to the forced and shifting subject positions of the prisoners. The differing ideological repertoires of the wardens and prisoners is made manifest in the dialogue and action, and reinforced by the shadow of apartheid that frames the play, as well as relationships between characters that constrain the prisoners’ possibilities for action. Violated, disempowered, imprisoned and viewed with disgust, the prisoners are the embodiment of injustice and systemic violence. The physicalised representations (as per the stage directions) of their daily routines become constitutive acts

2 See for example Simon O’Sullivan, *On the Production of Subjectivity: Five Diagrams of the Finite-Infinite Relation* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.130–131.

3 Hahn, *The Robben Island Shakespeare*, p.3.

that entrench the limits of their subject positions and highlight the violence inflicted on their personhood. Interspersing dialogue, monologues and sequences of action using heightened physicality and role-swapping draws attention to the fabrication of social and racial constructs.

The arrival of the young prisoners in 1976 (amongst others Stringi Moodley and Saths Cooper) exposes the older prisoners to alternative discourses on the struggle for liberation, compelling them to acknowledge how their subject positions became entrenched. They are compelled to reconsider the ways in which they engage with power, as well as their ways of thinking about liberatory practices. The play offers some information on the fate of some of the political prisoners such as Moodley and Mobbs Guirana (both died) – with an implied critique of selective remembrance.

The tension between past ideals and contemporary betrayals of these ideals is presented as a reflection at the end of the play in a tone of resentment and cynicism. The play's critique of anti-apartheid activists, who embrace an economic dispensation that was a keystone of the oppressive order they fought against, seems to be the focus of this reflection. It is further reinforced by the choice of character names (Capitalist 1 and 2). I would have liked to see this part of the play more developed and the critique on the present more nuanced.

Whilst there is a clear attempt at foregrounding multiple narratives (and underplaying the enduring presence of Mandela in popular narratives about the Struggle and Robben Island), the end of the play uses Mandela's choice of text. This so strongly conjures up the Mandela figure in my mind that the poignant narratives in the play are almost overshadowed.

Far from being a documentary account without critical intervention, the play encourages renewed understandings of the entanglement of histories and contexts, introducing an alternative voice to public debates that necessitates a profound recognition of possibilities for change.

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