

Close Encounters: Staging *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* in contemporary South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Is there room, as Natasha Distiller asked in 2012, for a “close encounter” with Shakespeare in post-apartheid South Africa? This question has become increasingly pertinent. Following the Fallist movements which were ignited at universities across the country in 2015, calls for the decolonisation of curricula and cultural institutions have been coupled with growing resistance against pervading socio-economic inequalities. Amongst other things, the student protests represented a rejection of “old ways of reading” characterised in both ideological and material terms by exclusion, lack of access and disempowerment. This article suggests that Distiller’s question may be engaged with reference to stage adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays in educational and/or academic settings which took place before, during and after the student movements of 2015–16. These are two productions by the National Children’s Theatre aimed at secondary school students – *Coriolanus* (2016) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (2018) – and two university productions: *The Julius Caesar Project* (2013) at the University of the Witwatersrand, and *DCoriolanus* (2017) at the University of Pretoria. Through close consideration of the strategies and decisions employed in staging these productions, the paper argues that the medium of theatre, and the ways in which it has been used by South African performers and theatre-makers, is key to understanding how both subversive and productive “close encounters” with Shakespeare might be enacted.

In her 2012 book, *Shakespeare and the Coconuts*, Natasha Distiller poses a question: whether “there [is] room for a close encounter with Shakespeare in post-apartheid South Africa”, despite the ways in which “old ways of reading” are perpetuated in schools and in the public arena.¹ Shakespeare is too often still enmeshed in structural oppositions established by colonial histories. Such oppositions express themselves in a specific positioning of the text and its readers: the text is held at an elevated distance, assigned a right and proper place with a fixed meaning and value. The reader (onlooker, student) approaching the text is required to submit to its authority – or to the authority of privileged figures acting as translators and intermediaries. At best, the text acts as a hollow signifier: mostly irrelevant, but with some display value. At worst, it becomes a blunt instrument used to reinforce pre-existing hierarchies. Distiller’s question implies that we need new ways of reading Shakespeare which do not lapse into such patterns: for Shakespeare to be meaningful in South Africa, we need a different kind of encounter between readers and text.

This has become an even more pertinent concern than when Distiller’s book was published. In 2015 and 2016, students across the country rallied behind the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall

1 Natasha Distiller, *Shakespeare and the Coconuts: On post-apartheid South African culture* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012), p.101 and p.165.

movements to call for free access to tertiary education and the decolonisation of curricula and cultural institutions. The protests proclaimed a deeply felt contradictory (and causal) relationship between colonial epistemologies and infrastructure on the one hand, and the embattled reality of students' lived experiences on the other. The Fallist movements were thus, among other things, a vehement rejection of old ways of reading *and* the ways of being associated with them: ways characterised in both ideological and material terms by exclusion, lack of access and disempowerment.

The protests have left South Africa with a complex legacy. At the time of writing, the government is dealing with the issue of free tertiary funding through a three-year plan (initiated in 2018) for subsidised higher education for students from poor and working class families.² Yet the call for decolonisation cannot, by its nature, be answered by short-term solutions, financial or otherwise. On an ideological level, it has had, and continues to have, a profound effect on academic discourse across disciplines. As the editors of a special volume of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* dedicated to the theme of "Decolonising Shakespeare" noted in 2017, it is clear that "the imperatives of this moment [in South African history] have put education, theatre-making and scholarship under intense scrutiny", and Shakespeare is a prominent nexus at which these three areas of scrutiny intersect.³ Within the history of protest movements in South Africa in the last decade, Fallism represents an important form of resistance specific to educational institutions. It is the result, in many ways, of an encounter between the dissatisfied and disadvantaged public and the limitations and inequalities in the knowledge systems (including Shakespeare) on which society and culture are built. The imperatives of the moment, as well as Distiller's question, can be engaged by investigating how Shakespeare was interpreted by certain productions staged before, during and after the student protests of 2015–16. These productions were staged either by students at tertiary institutions or for students at secondary schools, and each specifically responded to the need for new ways of reading.

In 2013, *The Julius Caesar Project (JCP)* was staged by a group of student actors at the University of the Witwatersrand. While preceding the Fallist movements, it was a distinct formal experiment, undertaken with the goal of interrogating the place of canonical, Western texts on a postcolonial stage. The project's interventions in theatre practice set it apart from previous productions with similar thematic concerns. As Colette Gordon has noted, *JCP* presented an iteration of "open", actor-driven Shakespeare in a South African theatre scene which favours director-driven Shakespeare.⁴ Moreover, the actors were students working within an educational institution, engaging the existing dialectic of protest and inequality which pervaded the national consciousness. The production recalled powerful images of unrest and violence, for example the Marikana massacre and a farm workers' strike in the Western Cape, both of which had occurred within the previous year.⁵ In this case, resistance against power structures, situated within the larger political landscape, was reflected and reflected upon in the university microcosm. A few years later, the universities themselves became the centre of conflict. Asserting the continuity of asymmetrical power structures across institutions and generations, students became protesters. The student movements that resulted from this directly influenced both *Coriolanus* (2016), staged for Grade 12 learners at secondary schools by the National Children's Theatre (NCT), and *DCoriolanus* (2017), produced at the University of Pretoria. In 2018, *Antony and Cleopatra* –

2 See Tebogo Tshwane, "Finally: how government plans to fund free education", *Mail & Guardian*, 21 February 2018. Online: <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-02-21-finally-how-government-plans-to-fund-free-education>

3 Lliane Loots, Sandra Young and Miranda Young-Jahangeer, "Editorial: 'Decolonising Shakespeare?' Contestations and Re-imaginings for a Post-liberation South Africa", *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 30 (2017): iv.

4 See Colette Gordon, "Open and Closed: Workshopping Shakespeare in South Africa" in J.C. Bulman (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

5 On 16 August 2012, 34 striking mine workers were shot dead by the South African Police Service at Marikana. From August to November 2012, farm workers in the Western Cape (winelands) protested against poor working conditions and the low minimum wage.

another NCT production – reflected a post-Fallist moment in which the call for decolonisation resonated on conceptual and practical levels.⁶

It is noteworthy that these productions represent a selection of the Roman plays. When considered together, certain trends in performance and interpretation do become apparent. In a series of cultural moments defined by public revolt against institutional power, the tension between citizenry and leadership (especially prominent in *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*) resonated. At the same time, the Roman play categorisation is neither neat nor sufficient as an organising principle. The selection of these texts does not clearly signify relevance or artistic choice. The NCT productions of *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* directly correlate to the curriculum set by the Independent Examinations Board (IEB). *Coriolanus* is a comparatively new arrival to classrooms, chosen by the IEB in 2016 as a Grade 12 set work, followed in 2018 by *Antony and Cleopatra*. The reasons for and effects of the IEB's selection of set works are potentially interesting in their own right, but fall beyond the scope of this article. It could be added, though, that part of the novelty of choosing these plays as set works lies in the fact that they are not *Julius Caesar*, which represents something of the status quo in English curricula. The familiarity of *Julius Caesar* provided *The Julius Caesar Project* with the double benefit of recognisable source material which could be disrupted and reinvented to great effect. *JCP* also avoided playing to John Kani's comment that *Julius Caesar* is "Shakespeare's African play"; at the time, this assertion found purchase not in (South) Africa, but in Britain, being co-opted by director Gregory Doran in his 'African' *Julius Caesar*, which played to the audiences of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2012. There is export value in essentialising claims about what kind of play works in what kind of setting, particularly for interpretive, director-driven productions selling an African concept. Instead of connecting the productions according to theories of the 'appropriateness' of *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus* or *Antony and Cleopatra* to a perceived national (or continental) reality, it is more helpful to consider the productions' shared commitment to interrogating formal assumptions in staging and reading these texts.

The focus in my analysis is therefore on what productions chose to do with texts at a particular time, not why those texts were chosen in the first place, or how their purported essential characteristics speak to a cultural milieu. This follows Chris Thurman's suggestion for a conceptual shift away from Shakespeare's singularity – and the often-proclaimed universality of the works – towards the singular character of each interpretation of a Shakespeare text:

[P]erformances, adaptations, interpretations, translations and pedagogical readings of Shakespeare are always the opposite of universal: they are singular. That is, in each instance, each instantiation – they are produced by individuals (and sometimes collectives) shaped by always different, always unique histories; and they are consumed by individuals (and sometimes collectives) shaped by other, always different, always unique histories.⁷

Such a reading places the source of meaning-making not in "understanding the creation of Shakespeare's dramatic works" (that is, in understanding the mind behind their composition), but rather in considering their reception and recreation by individuals or collectives at a given moment. The strategies, decisions and experiences of theatre-makers and actors, as well as theatre itself as a medium of reception and re-creation, are therefore central to the consideration of what close encounters with Shakespeare might look like, and how they might be enacted.

Considering typical approaches taken to staging Western texts in South Africa, Greg Homann outlines three categories: pasteurised productions (which "look and feel like approximations of their Broadway or West End equivalents"), productions which recontextualise the original text, and

6 My analysis of these productions is based on a combination of sources: I had the opportunity to watch *DCoriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* live, and had access to video recordings of both *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* made available by the National Children's Theatre. I have also relied on reviews, academic articles, production photos, and private interviews with *DCoriolanus* director Myer Taub, *Coriolanus* co-director Nicola Pilkington and actor Yamikani Mahaka-Phiri.

7 Chris Thurman, "From Shakespearean Singularity to Singular Shakespeares: Finding new names for Will-in-the-world", *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 30 (2017): 6–7.

productions which rework the original text.⁸ The latter two categories provide a useful framework for organising the present discussion. Recontextualised productions respond to the necessity for relevance and accessibility through visual and accenting strategies designed to situate the play within a local environment. While the text itself remains generally unaltered, recontextualised productions are often also concerned with socio-political parallels between the text and local events and frames of reference. Reworkings differ from recontextualisations in that they *do* alter the original text, using it as a “point of departure”, going on to “create an entirely new play but that is, in varying degrees, a reinvention of the original into a South African context”.

The Julius Caesar Project (2013) and *DCoriolanus* (2017) fall into the category of reworkings. Sarah Roberts, under whose guidance *The Julius Caesar Project* was devised, describes the production as a “reconfiguration”, explaining that this term implies a “restructuring [of the] spatio-temporal and material constituents of a dramatic narrative”.⁹ *DCoriolanus* was, according to director Myer Taub, a site-specific interrogation which was meant to “dismantle” a traditional proscenium theatre, accompanied with the “mechanic of absolutely breaking” the text.¹⁰ Neither production followed the traditional imperative to preserve the original form and structure of the text in performance, and both thus undermined the positioning of text as authority. *The Julius Caesar Project* reorganised scenes from *Julius Caesar* into a three-part structure, with each part dedicated, in turn, to the citizens, Caesar and Brutus. For *DCoriolanus*, Taub selected fragments from Shakespeare’s play representing parts of Coriolanus’s life, which groups of actors then performed simultaneously in performance areas scattered across a repurposed theatre space.

These approaches to the Shakespearean text were preceded by a deeper concern with dynamics and structures within theatrical practice itself. Both *The Julius Caesar Project* and *DCoriolanus* questioned the position and function of Shakespeare’s texts in South African theatre by investigating the mode of interpretation applied to those texts. Roberts articulates this in her discussion of *JCP*, stating that if “the core of the theatrical encounter may be defined as the presence of actors and an audience in space and time, then any ... interrogation of a classic must intervene primarily at the level of this set of relations”.¹¹ *The Julius Caesar Project* thus positioned the actors, working in ensemble, as the primary agents of interpretation. Yamikani Mahaka-Phiri, one of the ten student actors who participated in the production, describes the play as an exercise in actor agency, with a main objective being to “create a performance ‘owned’ by the performers, as an ensemble or collective, rather than the director”.¹² Roberts explains that the production dispensed with the role of the director in order to counter the tendency of directorial figures to function as stand-ins for the “much disputed absent author”.¹³ *JCP* thus aligned with a form of “free” Shakespeare, which has roots in John Russell Brown’s critique of interpretive (typically director-centric) Shakespeare in Britain.¹⁴ The flexibility, economy and subversive character of a freer “small theatre” can be found in South Africa’s history of township theatre. However, township theatre pieces and the formal innovation they represent have become relegated to history, along with the political system of apartheid that their protest focussed on. At the same time, the hierarchies of theatre-making remain entrenched in South African Shakespeare productions. As Gordon observes, even when productions undertake a workshopped approach, the process is in danger of turning in upon itself: the director might nominally be replaced by ‘the text’, but maintain authority as a qualified reader of that text. On the other hand, if the text is identified as the source of authority that needs to be undermined,

8 Greg Homann, “Claiming Western Texts for Contemporary South African Theatre: Issues of Relevance and the Dead-end Pursuit of National Identity” in Greg Homann and Marc Maufort (eds.), *Theatre, Drama, and Performance in Post-apartheid South Africa* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2015), p.108.

9 Sarah Roberts, “*Caesar* Reconfigured: An ensemble presentation of improvised permutations”, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 26 (2014): 29.

10 Myer Taub, interview with the author at the University of the Witwatersrand, 22 March 2019.

11 Sarah Roberts, “*Julius Caesar* – Seminar and Paper” (unpublished essay, 2013), p.2.

12 Yamikani Mahaka-Phiri, “Towards developing ensemble training performance skills in a South African context” (unpublished essay, 2013), p.2.

13 Roberts, “*Julius Caesar* – Seminar and Paper”, p.2.

14 See John Russell Brown, *Free Shakespeare* (London: Heinemann, 1974).

then a focus on performance may still be co-opted by a directorial figure slipping into the space left by the text in absentia. Finally, even if the directorial figure remains squarely in the background, he or she may still exercise defining authority in terms of casting, risking, for instance, dependence on overdetermined racial identities in interpretation or perpetuating existing, unequal dynamics between (typically white, male) directors and diverse groups of actors.¹⁵

Nevertheless, against the broader context of director-centred Shakespeare in South Africa, *The Julius Caesar Project* distinguished itself as a comparatively free, actor-centred ensemble production. Countering a model in which one individual reading is privileged over another, the project was a result, according to Mahaka-Phiri, of merging the actors' multiple perspectives into a "collective subjectivity".¹⁶ This shift in focus was expressed in several ways. In addition to the decentring of the directorial figure, the focus on the collective and the mechanisms of theatre-making challenged Western conventions of "the self-indulgence of the actor and the neglect of medium in favour of content".¹⁷ The democratisation of the production was therefore not only achieved through a change in actor-director dynamics; it also resisted the authority that might have been exercised by content at the expense of form, or by an individual actor in a main role at the expense of his or her fellow performers. Importantly, the continuous reconfiguration of performances also circumvented the problem of casting to some extent: actors changed role allocations with every performance. The collaborative mode established between the actors also deliberately included the audience. In addition to opening the developing work to the observation and input of graduate students, two open rehearsals were presented on the Wits campus, and audience responses inflected the further development of the production.¹⁸

The intervention on the level of actor-actor and actor-audience relations finally determined the production's treatment of the play text. According to Roberts, the decision to split the play into sections centred on the citizens, Brutus and Caesar was partly guided by the fact that the roles of the citizens offered "points of affinity and identification for the actors".¹⁹ The focus on the citizens as a point of entry coincides with the collective subjectivity which the actors worked towards. The intensely collaborative nature of the project was thus expressed in part as a synergy between the citizenry in the play, the citizens of South(ern) Africa who represented them, and the audience-citizens to whom they were being presented. The form of the production seems to have yielded, both for audiences and for actors, an exceptional permeability between text and context. The production offered neither escapism nor the comfort of predictable and superficial allegorical gestures towards South African politics. Reviewer Megan Godsell noted the immediacy of the production at a moment in time. This was apparent in the images it evoked – among them the Marikana massacre of 2012 – as well as in the interactions between performers:

Everyone is engaged. Everyone is listening. Everyone is drawn in totally to each moment of the story. This means that not only is the production free from actors monologuing *at* the audience in a void ... but it also means that Cassius, Caesar, Brutus are always seen in context, surrounded by ardent followers and angry mobs.²⁰

Mahaka-Phiri confirms that the images the actors worked towards in scenes were linked with contemporary protests and uprisings. He also notes that a key part of working in ensemble was to acknowledge the different realities of a multiracial, multilingual and multinational cast. This was coupled with the group's constant reflection on the permutations of the play in performance. For example, the group had a distinct awareness of shifting character dynamics according to racial representation. During one performance, Mahaka-Phiri remembers, "Cinna [played by a white actor] was killed by four girls, four black girls";

15 See Gordon, "Open and Closed".

16 Mahaka-Phiri, "Towards developing ensemble training", p.2.

17 *Ibid.*, p.12.

18 Roberts, "*Julius Caesar* – Seminar and Paper", p.18.

19 Roberts, "*Caesar* Reconfigured": 30.

20 Megan Godsell, "The Julius Caesar Project", *Fifty Five Thumbs*, 16 May 2013. Online: <https://fiftyfivethumbss.wordpress.com/2013/05/16/the-julius-caesar-project/>

to the group, it “didn’t look right, and we couldn’t ignore that”.²¹ This incident points to the multiple potential tensions that this mode of performance spontaneously generates. The ensemble cast must choose which of these tensions to explore, and which to avoid. The actors were thus continuously confronted by choices rooted in a complex shared experience. At the same time, every performance offered an opportunity to create a different experience, and to make different choices.

The variability within performance, as well as the variety of constituent parts from which to build that performance, was also demonstrated through translation. The actors translated the Shakespeare text at various points into isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, Setswana, chiShona, Ndaus and Afrikaans. Mahaka-Phiri notes that translation into multiple languages contains a paradox, in that it both highlights difference and encourages unification: it “segregates”, while “at the same time it also integrates”.²² Individual performers are given the opportunity to take pride in their own language, and other actors, as listeners, need to try to interpret and engage with that language. At the same time, those same individuals are likely (unless they speak all seven translated languages fluently) to become more attentive listeners in turn. In this process, the coherence of each performance was maintained because of each actor’s memorisation of the entire ‘original’ text, as well as their cooperation in forming a collective interpretation of it. That is, even if Brutus did not speak isiXhosa, he would understand a Xhosa-speaking Caesar’s speech because both actors had learned that speech in a different, shared language and agreed on an interpretation of it during rehearsal.

The actors thus participated in a fluid, consistently challenging process of expressing different dynamics and reference points in different languages within the shared boundaries of the production as a whole. The production’s interrogation of fixity and power relations in theatrical practice therefore enabled a radical and unusual reflection of many voices, experiences and images.

The Julius Caesar Project was built on the multiple subjectivities of its performers in ensemble, and this led to an organic reflection of civil unrest in its historical moment. In contrast, *DCoriolanus*, staged in March 2017, immediately and conspicuously resonated (in its title, a play on the word “decolonise”, as well as in its content) with the student protests of 2015 and 2016. The #FeesMustFall protests of the previous year had led to the cancellation of lectures at the University of Pretoria for the last months of the second semester. The resumption of classes, of business as usual, still seemed tenuous early into the new year. I was working as an assistant lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Pretoria at the time that *DCoriolanus* was staged, and was invited to take part in a panel discussion after a performance on 29 March.

In and of itself, the event I attended provided an unexpected example of a singular Shakespeare performance shaped directly by outward forces. *DCoriolanus* was specifically supposed to be staged in the Masker Theatre on campus. However, in this instance, it had to be moved to an off-campus venue. This was due to exceptionally strict security measures regulating entry to the campus, which in turn led to the refusal of access to a fellow panellist: Naledi Chirwa, a FeesMustFall activist and leader. To accommodate Ms Chirwa on the day of the panel discussion, a last-minute decision was made to move the production to the hall of the Dutch Reformed Church across the road from the university. This led to a moment of unconventional audience participation: we were guided off campus by student actors who led a chant: “Caius, Martius, Coriolanus”. This worked on two levels. Firstly, the audience was encouraged to participate in the collective voice of the citizenry, juxtaposed with the individual figure of Coriolanus. Secondly, the exodus from campus became a protest in reverse. A chanting crowd in and around campus had become a familiar sight – the goal was to show resistance by occupying campus spaces. In this case, however, resistance meant moving off campus.

This performance thus became an unexpected expression of the work’s concern with student protests and the resulting institutional tensions. In a parallel to *The Julius Caesar Project*, Taub indicates that “the first appropriation of [*DCoriolanus*] was the word ‘citizens’”, combined with “the call to arms [and] the call to protest”, and that “ideas around access, the shutting of access, protest, and citizenship ... informed how to make the work”.²³ In the performances on campus, these ideas were expressed in

21 Yamikani Mahaka-Phiri, Skype interview with the author, 7 May 2019.

22 *Ibid.*

23 Taub, interview with the author.

response to the Masker: a large, traditional proscenium theatre located on the University of Pretoria's main campus. Taub interpreted this space as a manifestation of hierarchies and structures in theatre practice and scene-making. (The discussion that follows relies on a review by Professor Molly Brown, who attended a performance in the Masker Theatre – for which it was intended – and an interview I conducted with Taub.)

To initiate a dismantling of the Masker Theatre space through performance, Taub and his students established a narrative point of departure: the theatre is locked, the director is absent, and the assistant director (a role played by a student actor) has to take over. The performance therefore started with the anxious assistant director arriving to welcome audience members standing outside the theatre, thanking them for coming to audition. The audience was then guided into the theatrical space, which was split into several different performance areas in the wings, balcony, foyer and one of the aisles. Designating all these areas to performance undermined the traditional spatial positioning of actors and audience, as well as challenging the dominance of the stage as the typical site for performing and containing meaning.

After entering the theatre, audience members were divided into groups according to a numbered system, and each group moved between performance areas according to a unique sequence. Each one of the performance areas was a dedicated space in which actors were “caught in a loop ... of performing ... fragments from *Coriolanus*”.²⁴ In terms of the production process, Taub had selected fragments of the text to give to actors to investigate in whatever mode they thought appropriate, whether through “[rhythm], repetition, patterning, logic ... recreation, response, [or] parody”. This process took place after the students, in negotiation with Taub, selected a performance area for the text which they felt was suited to it. In their final form, the actors' investigations were varied in content and presentation, and characterised by fragmentation and a proliferation of voices. For example, character roles were not assigned to single actors: in one instance, a group of eleven actors (male and female) played Volumnia, while ten played *Coriolanus*.²⁵ In this way, similarly to *The Julius Caesar Project* (albeit to a lesser extent), the student actors had a large measure of interpretive agency in responding to the play text.

However, whereas *The Julius Caesar Project* seemed to be concerned with actor-audience communication in a comparatively gentle loop of input and output, *DCoriolanus* pointedly disturbed and unsettled its audience. Beyond placing audience members in the role of auditioners and requiring movement between different performance areas, the interaction between actors and audience was unpredictable. In one performance area in the foyer, an “initially comforting” atmosphere was achieved – the “director from the opening scenes sat in a full-length robe applying makeup in a well-lit alcove” – but was soon interrupted by “anachronistic asides, videos about Shakespeare on Robben Island and a demand that [one of the audience members] should read a speech from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*”.²⁶ The student protests were characterised by resistance and imperatives for change, while being immersed in disruption, uncertainty and a multiplicity of conflicting discourses. This was reflected in the dynamics of *DCoriolanus*, in which audiences became participants in an unavoidable process, while simultaneously experiencing alienation through bombardment by multiple, fragmentary messages delivered in various spaces and startlingly different modes. In this, *DCoriolanus* exemplified the comparative instability of theatre as a medium which renders it a “more immediate barometer of the contemporary moment”.²⁷

As in *The Julius Caesar Project*, isiZulu and a range of other South African languages were woven into *DCoriolanus* by student actors. Differences in the performance and effects of the translations, however, capture key differences between the productions. In *The Julius Caesar Project*, translation was a process of performing difference without displacing coherence. The actors had a shared point of narrative and linguistic reference in the adapted English text, and in their shared interpretation of it. The nature of the production meant that it was always shifting, transforming, “reconfiguring”, but also always unified in its presentation and constituent parts. In *DCoriolanus*, translation and Shakespearean verse were commingled in an overwhelming combination of “screams and murmurings, repetitive

24 *Ibid.*

25 See Molly Brown, “Review: *Coriolanus/Post-Coriolanus/Counter-Coriolanus/DCoriolanus?*”, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 30 (2017): 120.

26 *Ibid.*: 120.

27 Homann, “Claiming Western Texts”, p.109.

cries and restless susurrations of discontent”.²⁸ The fact that sounds bled between performance areas contributed to the sense that the production was built on a proliferation of dissenting voices. The overall effect was destabilising: the primacy of the original play text in English was emphatically undermined, the coherence of the dramatic experience was fragmented, and the process of linguistic interpretation undercut.

The Julius Caesar Project and *DCoriolanus*, within a higher education context, engaged with issues surrounding staging Shakespeare in postcolonial South Africa, with *The Julius Caesar Project* being an early interrogation of what would become an even more prominent and urgent concern at the time of staging *DCoriolanus*. Both productions worked toward embodying close encounters, intervening in the hierarchies of theatre-making in order to reject and undo the distances imposed by history, familiarity and cultural institutions – and insisting on the power of immediacy in performance. The NCT productions of *Coriolanus* in 2016 and *Antony and Cleopatra* in 2018 share significant similarities with *The Julius Caesar Project* and *DCoriolanus* in that they, too, consciously responded to issues surrounding the place of Shakespeare in local cultural production within a particularly charged time in South African history. Nevertheless, there are significant differences between the educational paradigms of secondary schools and tertiary institutions. *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* were produced specifically for school learners following the English Home Language syllabus set by the Independent Examinations Board. *The Julius Caesar Project* and *DCoriolanus* were produced by the drama departments of their specific institutions, starred student actors and were performed for audiences generally consisting of university students and staff. In terms of an educational paradigm, they were concerned with training their actors. At the same time, at the intersection of education and politics, the formal interventions of both productions invested unusual power in student actors, who then embodied protest from within and outside of their own institutional contexts. In contrast, the mandate of *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* was to educate their audiences. The students were readers of literary texts for English as a subject, not actors training in dramatic arts. Certain levels of student agency in the university productions were enabled by the containment and specific contexts of individual departments, whereas the NCT productions needed to align with educational parameters applied to hundreds of schools across the country.

These factors determined features of the university productions and the NCT productions that may be understood in terms of Homann’s broader categories. Whereas *The Julius Caesar Project* and *DCoriolanus* could be understood as reworkings, *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* fit more comfortably into the category of recontextualisations. It would have been difficult to follow an alternative route: the original text in Early Modern English is taught in schools and is neither modernised nor translated for curriculum purposes. To align what is performed with what is being taught, for-schools productions cannot change the dialogue or sequencing of the text beyond cutting in terms of length. Nevertheless, part of their educational role is also to make the text as it is as accessible to student audiences as possible. This is done through directorial strategies, design and visual representation. In an interview with Shakespeare ZA, director Néka da Costa explains her directorial approach to *Antony and Cleopatra*:

[I]t has mostly been guided by image theatre ... The number one thing is that we ensure it is visually strong so that the language becomes accessible ... it’s about being able to use your imagination, and about turning the stage into anything that it needs to be with a very minimal set, as well as minimalistic props and costumes.²⁹

Antony and Cleopatra made use of tableaux to communicate character relationships, manifest the different environments of Egypt and Rome, and emphasise events in context. Both NCT productions were highly visually engaging in aid of their audiences, without indulging in or depending on artifice.

28 Brown, “Review”: 120.

29 In Kirsten Dey, “The Interview Series #7 (Part 1): Néka Da Costa on directing the National Children’s Theatre’s production of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*”, *Shakespeare ZA*, 25 February 2018. Online: <http://shakespeare.org.za/blog/2018/2/25/the-interview-series-7-part-1-nka-da-costa-on-directing-the-national-childrens-theatres-production-of-shakespeares-antony-and-cleopatra>

Tanya van der Walt, reviewing *Coriolanus*, describes it as “pared-down and portable”.³⁰ The costumes were simple, in toned-down shades of khaki, black and grey. Against this palette, white and red scarves and draping were used to signal characters’ affiliation with the Romans or the Volscians. This is one example of an overall design element which, in Van der Walt’s words, “functioned as a complex system of signs which helped the learner audience to navigate shifts in locale and character”.³¹ Further, the design set this *Coriolanus* in a broadly contemporary context, with certain South African sociocultural and political references specific to the time in which it was staged. However, the design choices were made to open the play to various possible readings, as opposed to locking it down into a context that was constrictingly specific. *Antony and Cleopatra* was somewhat more particular in its setting, using Egypt as a metonymical site for a depiction of Africa that carefully avoided cliché and resisted the conceptual limitations of a popular stock of visual signifiers. Da Costa explains that neither she nor the production designer wanted “Cleopatra to be full of gold necklaces, with a snake around her neck”, nor did they want “Rome to be looked at as only ... metal and armour”.³² Building on a similar range of colours to those used for *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra* presented Egypt as more “textured and patterned” in shades of blue and gold, whereas Rome was dressed in austere and lavish “beiges and greys”.

In a parallel to both *The Julius Caesar Project* and *DCoriolanus*, *Coriolanus* used the citizens as a point of entry into the play. According to co-director Nicola Pilkington, the creative team interpreted the play as being “about the citizens, and the students being citizens ... about the vote ... about political responsibility”.³³ The production established an immediate point of identification in the first scene of the play, opening with a chant from disgruntled citizens that “Martius Must Fall!”, echoing the refrain of “Fees Must Fall”. According to Pilkington, this chanting was particularly powerful when on the schools tour: actors engaged student audiences, drawing them into identification with the citizenry by moving among them. At times, the students added their voices to those of the actors in chanting their refrains. Variations of this punctuated the rest of the events of the play. When Caius Martius became Coriolanus after his victory against the Volscians, the chant matched his full title: “Caius, Martius, Coriolanus!” Once he fell out of favour with the citizens once more, the chant reverted to “Martius Must Fall”. At the end of the play, after Coriolanus was killed, his murderers chanted “Traitor, Traitor”.

The focus on citizenship also stretched into the question and answer sessions after every performance. Students were asked, for example, to think about whether Volumnia or Coriolanus was the most powerful character. Their answers were taken as votes, indicated by either standing up or sitting down. The voting would lead to more discussion and opened the floor for questions directed at the actors. Interestingly, the parallel between student reception of the production and the democratic process was not only an engagement with the political context of 2015. It also seems to have responded to a felt need for greater equality in accessing, or *reading*, the Shakespeare text. According to Pilkington: “[P]erforming Shakespeare is how you’re supposed to study it, how you’re supposed to receive it, and ... words on a page, particularly those words, can feel very disconnected.”³⁴ An equalising process in this respect consisted, firstly, of presenting the text to students through performance, in a way which could be understood and responded to. Secondly, students could then engage with the same performers they had been watching, most of whom were young and relatively close to the students’ own age. In terms of the performers, Pilkington indicates that casting black actors to play Coriolanus (Thapelo Sebogodi) and Volumnia (Sanelisiwe Yekani) was intentional, an attempt to “make a comment about who Shakespeare is for, [and] who does Shakespeare”.³⁵

Casting was also a central concern with the NCT *Antony and Cleopatra*. In an interview with Shakespeare ZA, director Néka da Costa states that she wanted “a cast who could bring an African spirit to the production, and a local energy”, and who represented African characters to South African

30 Tanya van der Walt, “Making Shakespeare Useful: A pared-down, portable *Coriolanus*”, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 28 (2016): 99.

31 *Ibid.*: 100.

32 In Dey, “The Interview Series #7 (Part 1)”.

33 Nicola Pilkington, Skype interview with the author, 8 May 2019.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

audiences: “[T]he students themselves need to see actors who look like them – in *Africa*.”³⁶ This sentiment is echoed by Ben Kgosimore (Antony) in another interview with Shakespeare ZA:

In terms of accessibility, in South Africa, in 2018, we are performing a Shakespeare text where we have a black Antony, a black Cleopatra, and a predominantly black cast ... I just think that it shows the kids that we are going to perform to that there are multiple ways you can look at the play, and at Shakespeare, and that you can also put yourself in the shoes of this particular character.³⁷

In the NCT *Coriolanus*, the student audience was identified with the citizenry, and encouraged to engage with the play both by lending their voices to the citizen performers and by being asked to make judgments about characters after the performance. Unlike in *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, the citizenry do not play a prominent role in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Nevertheless, the production still focused on reflecting a context with which student audiences could identify and engage. Da Costa indicates that, using the setting and characters of the play text in addition to making conscious decisions in casting and design, *Antony and Cleopatra* was envisaged as a production which could open conversations about race, Africa, Shakespeare and decolonisation.³⁸ As with *The Julius Caesar Project* and *DCoriolanus*, the situatedness of *Antony and Cleopatra* was also powerfully reflected in language. In a production of an English text for school students studying that text as part of their English syllabus, *Antony and Cleopatra* opened with a funereal lament in isiZulu (following the death of Fulvia), sung in chorus by the cast. As protest-like chants permeated *Coriolanus*, songs in isiZulu were constantly sung throughout the action of *Antony and Cleopatra*, often accompanied by drums. The play also ends with one of these songs: another lament, this time for Cleopatra. In this way, *Antony and Cleopatra* possessed a polyphonic quality that similarly characterised the other productions, making the voice of the collective – whether in one or many languages – an inextricable part of their renderings of the play texts.

As with *The Julius Caesar Project* and *DCoriolanus*, *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* demonstrate the singularity of performances of Shakespeare. While the NCT productions did not share the same radically reconfiguring mechanics of the university productions, they did have to be exceptionally adaptable for the purposes of their schools tours. *Coriolanus*, for example, had sixty-three performances at more than fifty different schools from all nine provinces. According to Pilkington, the cast and crew often had only half an hour to familiarise themselves with a performance space, whether that space was a small classroom, a courtyard, a theatre in the round, or a traditional school hall.³⁹ Touring school productions such as *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* thus have to respond to and find a place in differing practical circumstances for each performance, a variety of geographical locations, and in front of audiences from a wide range of backgrounds. Thurman notes that this is “singularity writ large”.⁴⁰ This, in addition to decisions regarding direction, design, casting and textual interpretation, produced firmly localised versions of Shakespeare that shifted and morphed according to many different performance spaces. The potential impact of the encounters offered by *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* should not be underestimated, specifically for school audiences for whom Shakespeare might still, according to Distiller, too often represent “old ways of reading”.

The complexities and levels of engagement represented by the productions I have discussed responded to difficult questions surrounding the kind of material we read and how we read it in a postcolonial South African context. It is perhaps useful to return to the original question – whether “there [is] room for a close encounter with Shakespeare in post-apartheid South Africa”. I have focused here on the idea of close encounters with Shakespeare: what new ways of reading might entail in the

36 In Dey, “The Interview Series #7 (Part 1)”.

37 In Kirsten Dey, “The Interview Series #7 (Part 2): Shakespeare ZA meets with the cast and director of the National Children’s Theatre’s production of Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra”, *Shakespeare ZA*, 4 April 2018. Online: <http://shakespeare.org.za/blog/2018/4/4/the-interview-series-7-part-2-shakespeare-za-meets-with-the-cast-and-director-of-the-national-childrens-theatres-production-of-shakespeares-antony-and-cleopatra?rq=Antony>

38 In Dey, “The Interview Series #7 (Part 1)”.

39 Pilkington, Skype interview.

40 Thurman, “From Shakespearean Singularity to Singular Shakespeares”: 8.

realm of theatrical performance. The other part of the question – whether there is “room” for these encounters – seems on the one hand to be answered simply by the fact that the productions discussed in this paper existed. There *is* room for these productions, because room was made, and used.

However, it must be noted that the reasons that spaces for Shakespeare exist are not straightforward. *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* were staged because school students study them, and students study them because they have been prescribed as set works as part of a larger tradition of English literature being incorporated into the curriculum. *The Julius Caesar Project* and *DCoriolanus* adapted Shakespeare texts because Shakespeare is part of the South African cultural vocabulary, and he is part of our vocabulary because of our complex shared history. This tells us about what *is* and *has been*, but in the discourses about Shakespeare in South Africa, another question exists: whether there *should* be room for encounters (close or not) with Shakespeare at all. This is especially the case in educational contexts: with *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* the language of the original texts presented a barrier to engagement. In the absence of modernisation, this is a barrier to close encounters with the text that needs to be continuously worked around by teachers and performers alike.

The analysis of productions in this article is not intended to provide clear-cut solutions to such complex issues. My hope is, rather, to provide an opportunity to recognise and reflect on the acts of questioning, revision and transformation undertaken by the artists involved. In their specificity, *The Julius Caesar Project*, *DCoriolanus*, and the NCT productions of *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* presented powerful and significant embodiments of varied encounters between the literary text (carrying the burden of history) and the countervailing force of the actors and artists of the present. Wamuwi Mbao describes the essential struggle of the #FeesMustFall movement as being “about dislodging the fixity of top-down meaning.”⁴¹ Both directly and indirectly engaging in this struggle, these productions demonstrated close encounters with Shakespeare through diverse interventions in theatrical practice. These encounters with the text were varied in process, tone and effect, but all placed a radical emphasis on the generative capacities and agency of performers and audiences. In these configurations, the ceaselessly-giving breadth often assigned to Shakespeare became dependent not on an isolated, historically-sealed quality of the text, but on the immediacy and vitality of the readings, actions and creative powers of the present.

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41 Wamuwi Mbao, “Dry like steel: A wrecking ball of a book—Wamuwi Mbao reviews Adam Habib’s *Rebels and Rage: Reflecting on #FeesMustFall*”, *Johannesburg Review of Books*, 6 May 2019. Online: <https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2019/05/06/dry-like-steel-a-wrecking-ball-of-a-book-from-the-hashtag-seasons-wamuwi-mbao-reviews-adam-habibs-rebels-and-rage-reflecting-on-feesmustfall/>

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