Crinkles in the Carnival: Ideology in South African Productions of *The Comedy of Errors* to 1985

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Open to a variety of interpretations on the stage, Shakespeare's plays may serve not only as cultural showpieces but also as public arenas for trying out current myths, ideologies, and systems of belief. The continued regularity of Shakespeare productions in South Africa attests not only to the unquestioned genius of the plays, but also to the high cultural prestige conferred on those producing them, itself a reflection of the tenacious, albeit diminishing, hegemony of English culture in South Africa. Even when intended only as a cultural showpiece, a Shakespeare production invariably reveals the ideological assumptions of its producers, whether purposeful or unconscious. Furthermore, the ideology of Shakespeare's plays in South Africa refers not only to their production, but extends also to their evaluation and preservation. Records of Township productions by black South Africans, for example, tend to be dependent on word-of-mouth and the fortunes of oral history, whereas productions by and largely for whites are often prevented from being overcome by history or forgetting, continuing as articulations of a white-constructed memory through their preservation in state archives and published memoirs.

From the first production of a Shakespeare play in South Africa in 1799 until the end of World War II, Shakespeare productions were largely the monopoly of English-speaking whites. While local amateur and professional companies gained strength and confidence during this long period, their productions were invariably based on theatrical styles in England. Performances were judged on how closely they managed to imitate what was being done on the stage of London. The highlight for local audiences was inevitably a tour of South Africa by some English company. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the first production of *The Comedy of Errors* in South Africa was performed by the touring Henry Herbert Company in 1913.

After World War II, other racial and language groups began to produce Shakespeare's plays, reflecting the widespread perception of Shakespeare as a litmus test of civilised culture. The first play performed by so-called "coloureds" was *The Tempest* in 1946; an Afrikaans *Hamlet* was staged in 1947. The first production using black actors took place in 1953, a production of *The Comedy of Errors*. Ian Bernhardt, long active in multiracial cultural activities, was approached by a friend who worked in the Welfare Department of PUTCO (the Public Utility Transport Corporation), eager to organise some instructional activities for the black workers. A number of workers requested a drama group, and thus the Bareti Players was formed — so called after the tribal eulogist who composes songs of praise to a chief. Colin Romoff was invited to direct *The Comedy of Errors*. The cast consisted largely of PUTCO office workers and clerks, but also included a few outsiders, mainly teachers. The play was performed at the University of the Witwatersrand Arts...
Festival and toured the black townships around Johannesburg in a bus provided by PUTCO, receiving an enthusiastic reception.

"It was a real eye-opener", said Mr Romoff at the time. "Modern audiences miss a lot of Shakespeare's wit, but the Natives laughed at things whose humour I'd never realised before". He noted that "with their natural exuberance... they probably have a lot more in common with the spirit of Elizabethan comedy than White South Africans". He was equally impressed with the cast. "It took them a little while to get the feel of the play and the convention in which it is written. After that they just bounded forward".2

According to Ian Bernhardt, they bounded forward rather further than Romoff's original conception. The comedy was played broadly, and this tendency increased as the run progressed, much to the delight of the audiences. The director, who attended about every third performance, was horrified at all the new "business" which crept in. He would have serious discussions with the cast, explaining that they must perform the play the way he had directed it and that they must not be diverted by the audience response. They would all agree, but somehow by the time he returned, the play would have evolved once more into a communal festival.3

The gales of laughter from the audiences in the township halls and the elaborate comic improvisations which the actors evolved as a result suggest that a spirit of Bakhtinian "Carnival" prevailed. What Colin Romoff, looking through the lens of 1950s liberalism, saw as "natural exuberance" might now construct itself as a communal refusal to be bound by the rigid strictures of theatrical norms developed by white culture, analogous to the role of popular culture in medieval times. Bakhtin writes:

A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture... They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extracensical and extrapitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom...4

The parallels between the two worlds of medieval official and popular culture and the two worlds of South African official white culture and popular black culture are easy enough to perceive. In each case the carnivalesque aspects of popular culture serve to subvert and interrogate official culture, keeping alive and legitimising an attitude of resistance on the part of the exploited classes.

A vital element of carnival, as Bakhtin notes, is the suspension of hierarchy:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions."5

This temporary liberation serves to subvert the dominant ideology which asserts all that is "stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political and moral values, norms and prohibitions".6

A clue to the mutually infectious rapport between actors and audience in this particular production might lie in the way in which The Comedy of Errors organises the audience's experience. Although the play initially threatens a tragic mode by presenting the draconian Ephesian law at work, it soon converts into comedy. As Ralph Berry argues, instead of succumbing to the potentially tragic forces of legalised oppression, the play,
defying the logic of "therefore by law", wills the marvellous, the death-suspended, the comic, and the audience assents to the logic. The "law" will yield to a yet stronger force.

Clearly the issue of mounting legal restrictions, the experience of arrest for being in the wrong place without authorisation, was an increasing reality for black South Africans in the early 1950s, and the audience responded to and evidently approved of the subversion of the law in the play.

In spite of the parallels with contemporary South Africa, however, the production made no attempt to localise the play, or to exploit the master-servant relationships between the Antipholuses and the Dromios in a South African context. The text, though attacked with great verve, was played straight, and the costumes suggested a conventional period setting. Nevertheless, representing the sometimes violent interactions between masters and servants on stage, contained within the framework of comedy, allowed an interrogation, albeit fantastic, of class relations in South African society. As Berry suggests, the comic force which overcomes the law in The Comedy of Errors manifests itself through fantasy. The Comedy of Errors is organized along two lines of psychic advance. One is that of erotic promise, unbelievable good fortune, discovered identity, the fulfilment of all one's desires. The other is that of loss, shattered identity, pain. The first line is stronger, and its triumph never really in doubt. The second is always present, often uppermost, at all times shadowing the experience of cast and audience. Threat and promise make up the fantasies of this play...

By inverting the customary South African order in which threat tends to overwhelm promise, the play allowed the audience to experience the promise of change, subverting the official myth of permanence.

The very fact that these Bareti Players were performing a Shakespeare play, of course, attests to the power of white cultural hegemony. Such a play falls under the rubric of official "high" culture, albeit one which incorporates elements of carnival. In most productions these elements are comfortably contained, forming part of an enjoyable evening for audiences who belong to the official culture. Yet the township audiences, clearly excluded from official culture, seized on the carnivalesque aspects of the play, and through their response, encouraged the cast to disregard the prescriptive norms of official theatrical style. "Carnival" thus operated on two levels in this production — first, the carnivalesque elements in the text resonated more powerfully in the ideological context of the townships than is usual in white theatres, and second, the presentation of Shakespeare as official culture was transformed by the cast and audience into a representation which subverted the theatrical norms of the dominant ideology.

In 1968, the Speech and Drama Department at the University College for Indians (now the University of Durban-Westville), presented the first "Indian" Shakespeare production in South Africa. David Homer, the head of the department, directed The Comedy of Errors in a commedia dell'arte style with all the characters wearing masks and commedia costumes, thereby invoking the traditional spirit of carnival. Homer thus began a tradition, which later University of Durban-Westville directors like Devi Bughwan and Robin Singh continued, of presenting unusual, experimental productions of Shakespeare. The ideological assumption underlying these Indian productions suggests that Shakespeare is perceived not as an awesome icon which must be mastered in order to prove one's level of educated sophistication, but rather as the great playwright of another culture, different
but not necessarily superior. This eclectic, experimental approach, by drawing attention to changing theatrical styles through history, might serve to remind the mainly Indian audiences of the ancient roots of their own culture, whose Golden Age of Sanskrit drama in the time of Kalidasa predates by more than a millennium Shakespeare and the Elizabethan theatre.

In 1970, the PACT (Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal) Youth Group produced *Kinkels innie Kabel*, an Afrikaans adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors* by André Brink. The title means literally, "twists in the cable", a proverbial saying equivalent to "a fly in the ointment". The play is written in the so-called Cape Coloured dialect of Afrikaans, set in a fishing village called, ironically, Witbaai, and takes place shortly before "Coon Carnival", the annual New Year procession through the streets of Cape Town (later restricted to a sports stadium and only allowed to take to the streets once more in 1988/89). Solinus, Duke of Ephesus, becomes the carnival leader, Sollie, while Egeon, merchant of Syracuse, is now a lollipop seller from Johannesburg called Aikona. The twins Antipholus become Apools-van-die-Kaap and Apools-van-die-Pérel, while the Dromios are Drommel-van-die-Kaap and Drommel-van-die-Pérel. Angelo, the goldsmith, becomes Magiel, a hippie.

The production opened in a carnivalesque explosion as the minstrel troupe in their bright satin finery entered with a burst of song from the back of the theatre, winding their way onto the stage which was adorned with fishing baskets, a jetty, and fishing boats. The music included traditional and original songs, and was performed by the cast playing banjo, guitars, and a mouth organ.

The production abounded with satirical references to South African society and topical events, expressed in the language of the street dialect, an integral element in the subversive nature of popular culture, providing "so many sparks of the carnival bonfire which renew the world". The most searing came from Drommel of Paarl, who talked of paying a ten rand find, "one-two, finish; kondem", and later of sitting in "tjoekie" (jail) and getting rice water and hard labour, a reference to the "non-white" experience of the South African justice and prison systems. Jokes were made about the Publications Control Board, the ban on "mixed sport", and even that most sacred of Afrikaner cows, the Day of the Covenant. Liberal causes were also treated irreverently: the Black Sash, Peter Hain (the anti-apartheid activist in England seen as responsible for South Africa's sporting isolation), and political protests at the English-speaking universities were all the targets of jokes. According to the director, Carel Trichardt, the biggest laugh generally greeted the Paarl Apools' suggestion to spy on the Capies from the inside, "Hertzog-style", referring to Cabinet Minister Albert Hertzog who broke away from the ruling National Party to form the extreme right-wing Herstigte Nasionale Party. Flower children, Christian Barnard's heart transplants at Groote Schuur hospital, and the Miss World competition, to which South Africa sent two contestants, a white Miss South Africa and a "non-white" Miss Africa South, were all satirised.

The satirical nature of *Kinkels innie Kabel* undoubtedly reflected, and perhaps gave an impetus to, the evolving maturity of Afrikaans theatre. Satirising even the "liberal" enemies of apartheid ideology allowed the production a certain license to take swipes at the dominant ideology itself. The problem of determining the political significance of this play is complicated, however, by the fact that the first production in 1970 took place at the height of theatre segregation in terms of both casts and audiences. As one critic pointed out:

The whole thing is given a final touch of South African absurdity by the fact that we have a stage full of White South Africans leaping around with
blacked-up faces and trying to swing like Capies (who wouldn’t be allowed into the theatre to see the performance anyway).10

It seems that what we have here is an attempt at a “controlled carnival”, one that would amuse without actually threatening the established order.

The reception from critics and audiences alike was enthusiastic. Having “whites” play “coloureds” in a play written by a white man would suggest problems of racial stereotyping, but theatre critics in 1970 found little fault on this score. They applauded the young cast for imitating “the peculiar intonation and rich draws of the Afrikaans of the coloured people and their clipped way of speaking English”,11 for getting “under the skin of the Cape folk”, for capturing “the quick fire repartee typical of the Cape Coloured”.13 Janice Honeyman was singled out for her portrayal of Adriana, “large and common”, with her front teeth missing, her “cumbersome movements and awkward stances”.14 The culture depicted was comfortably categorised as the Other. If any authentic “coloureds” were offended by the stereotypical portrayals, then some conservative Afrikaners were absolutely outraged at the whole production. “Stefan” of Pietersburg wrote to Die Transvaler, attacking the production for its vulgar, suggestive actions and gestures, and its shameless mockery of God’s Word. He accused PACT of being used by those moral underminers who wished to condition the Afrikaner to the norms of the permissive society. Evidently the carnivalesque elements in the production were threatening to some.

A year later, Robert Mohr directed Kinkels innie Kabel at the University of Cape Town’s Little Theatre. In this production the cast was made up largely of English-speaking whites with a sprinkling of Afrikaans and “coloured” students performing to racially integrated audiences. In a programme note, Robert Mohr wrote:

André Brink’s delicious improvisation . . . has an air of festivity and celebration about it that invites more improvisation from the cast and director. We have seized upon this aspect of the play with relish, and absolve Mr Brink from all blame for our more demented strokes!

As one would expect from Mohr, much of his inventiveness went into exploiting the anomalies in South African society, thus sharpening the socio-political satire. Instead of interpreting all the characters as stereotypical happy-go-lucky, vulgar, servant-class Cape Coloureds, the actors determined to which class they belonged, and modified their dialects accordingly. As a result, the master-servant relationship between the Apools and the Drommels was emphasised with the obvious reverberations for South African society. The servants would accuse each other of “acting like whites” when they behaved “above their station”. In addition, there was considerable interplay between the characters and the audience; in the true carnival spirit of suspending hierarchical privileges, the actors were instructed to address all the “whites” in the audience as if they were “coloured”, and vice-versa. Thus “coloured” patrons were respectfully called “sir” and “madam”, while whites were spoken to in the familiar tones of the street dialect. This treatment became a running joke which extended even to the ushers. “Coloured” people arriving at the theatre were politely shown to their specific seats, whereas whites were told to go and sit “over there”.15

Critics were warm in their approval. One stated, “There is no condescension in the play, incidentally, it is wholly affectionate in tone”.16 Another praised Robert Mohr for showing “just how valuable an outlet is theatre, to allow us to laugh at ourselves — a
luxury we don’t indulge in enough in this mad and sunny land”. An Afrikaans critic commended Mohr for his courage in using a largely English-speaking cast, but hoped to see the play done by experienced Cape Afrikaans actors, or better still, the Eoan Group.

Brink’s adaptation has been revived on several occasions, and during the 1970s was, in fact, produced by Eersterus, a “coloured” drama group in the Transvaal. In 1979, William Egan directed Kinkels inne Kabel for CAPAB (the Performing Arts Council of the Cape) at the Nico Malan Theatre. But as political realities changed, the concept of a state-sponsored controlled carnival lost its subversive novelty and seemed increasingly appropriated and contained by the dominant ideology. Although many of the topical allusions were updated (with references, for example, to Eschel Rhoodie and the Information scandal, which eventually forced the resignation of President B.J. Vorster), the play nevertheless seemed outdated. One critic complained of Magiel as a hippie, pointing out that the humour was now ten years too late. Another made a more serious charge. By 1979, the ban on theatre integration had been lifted, yet the entire CAPAB cast was white. The critic wondered “whether such a talented cast of white actors so clumsily taking off a set of essentially coloured characters were not really reinforcing stereotypes”. He pointed out that most of the cast “come across for what they are: white actors looking like white actors trying to play coloured people”. He asked:

Surely the formula for a completely successful performance . . . would be to use coloured performers? And here we come full circle again. Where are they? What are the problems? Are there any coloured drama students? And — would they want to play characters which white entertainers have turned into such cliches over the years?

PACOFS (the Performing Arts Council of the Orange Free State) produced Kinkels inne Kabel in 1977, and again in 1981 as part of the 20th anniversary Republic celebrations, directed by Sandra Kotzé. In this production, five black actors performed as part of the dance troupe, a surprising inclusion in the politically conservative Orange Free State. One critic felt that an English play, translated into Afrikaans, set in a “coloured” milieu, played by Afrikaans actors, with black performers as part of the troupe, was the best choice for the Republic celebration theme of unity and diversity. Her comment suggests the comfortable delusion of a ruling class which interprets its own small concessions as symptomatic of a whole new dispensation for the dispossessed masses, as if five black dancers were the equivalent of a fully integrated cast, as if integrated theatres meant an integrated society.

PACT also mounted the play in 1981 to open the new State Theatre in Pretoria, with Carel Trichardt again directing. Janice Honeyman was asked to repeat her role as Adriana, but she turned down the offer on the grounds that there were excellent coloured actresses to play the part. In a 1985 interview, she told me that what had been fine in 1970 was no longer acceptable in the changed political climate of the eighties. Not only should whites not be playing coloured people, but the very interpretation of coloureds in the play was dated. Honeyman said:

You can’t interpret coloured people now as those happy-go-lucky Coon Carnival characters because, in a funny way, it is a put down, a “shame, the simple-hearted, good-natured Klopse”, and it ignores the whole political side, a conscious side of the coloured person.

What was wonderful in 1970 was no longer so wonderful in the changed political situation
since the rise of Black Consciousness and the 1976 Soweto Uprising. Carel Trichardt, who directed the all white cast in 1981, agreed that in 1985, “You wouldn’t think of doing Kinkels inne Kabel with whites anymore”.23 The belief that the official culture could sponsor popular carnival was being steadily eroded.

In 1985, Janice Honeyman directed a modern dress production of The Comedy of Errors for PACT, set in contemporary Greece. In a programme note, she explained her choice of setting:

I have deliberately chosen a modern context because I believe that the Shakepearian comedies, in particular, gain from being given modern equivalents. The Comedy of Errors . . . touches on issues that are still prevalent today: summary justice (with echoes of a type of Group Areas Act), chauvinism, sex-role stereotyping, sexual repression/liberation, materialism, sectism, morality, violence, and so on. Yet it remains very much a comedy, and, like all Shakespeare’s romantic comedies, requires a romantic, exotic milieu.

To underscore the historical applicability of the play, the programme was peppered with quotations, including a report in a local newspaper at the time of the production about twin brothers in South Africa who had been separated at birth and were to meet for the first time in thirty-two years. Ironically, one was brought up speaking English and the other Afrikaans.

The set depicted the village square in front of the “Tiger Tavern” looking onto the jetty. The upper level of the tavern was connected by a walkway to the upper level of Antipholus’s house, providing multi-levelled acting areas. Alleys, arches, outside stairs, and television aerials lent an air of higgledy-piggledy authenticity. The costumes added to the atmosphere of colourful, bustling humanity. The square was inhabited by old ladies in black, drunken sailors, pimps and prostitutes. The Duke was resplendent in military uniform: white jacket liberally beribboned, black riding breeches and boots. The Antipholuses wore light blue suits and white panama hats; the Dromios were in yellow peasant smocks and straw hats. Dr Pinch appeared as a “John Lennon, guru, hippie-waistcoated, dagga-smoking, hare Krishna” conman.24

The cast was predominantly white. There were, however, two black actors as policemen, and Honeyman used them effectively to comment on the South African situation. In the opening scene, Egeon wandered into the square and was immediately accosted by the two black policemen who demanded to see his papers. No South African could fail to notice the inversion of the usual hierarchy in which white policemen demand to see a black person’s “pass”. Bedlam ensued as Egeon tried to escape, and white police reinforcements arrived. Suddenly the stage was filled with running policemen shouting into loudhailers with sirens screaming. All this was performed in a very broad Monty Python, idiot-goon, carnivalesque style. Egeon was then brought back by the black policemen who proceeded to hit him periodically with sjamboks during his interrogation. Even the hilarity of the “banana republic” atmosphere could not quite eradicate the twinge of discomfort felt by the largely white audience in Pretoria’s State Theatre; in fact, both the violence and the absurdity of the South African system were illuminated.

A further critique of South African society was made by a nameless worker, also played by a black actor, whose job was to paint an upturned boat while the chaos of the comedy revolved about him. One of the running jokes of the production was having each of the two Dromios periodically get his foot stuck in the worker’s paint bucket. Each time Dromio would clatter offstage with his foot in the bucket, only to reappear later with a
different coloured shoe and sock. Interesting from the point of view of social commentary was the way in which the painter himself, dressed in overalls like any black South African worker, was ignored by the other (white) characters. No-one ever apologised to him for interrupting his work, spoiling his paint, taking his bucket: his job was to get on with his job, and he did so in silent resignation. Though not in the text, this character certainly belongs in the context of the play's thematic exploration of master-servant relationships. The production did not shrink from depicting the Antipholuses's repeated physical assaults on the Dromios, though the violence was handled in a very stylised, acrobatic manner. As all four actors were white, an interrogation of South African master-servant relationships lurked in the shadows. The only other racial inclusion of note was one of the merchants metamorphosed into an Indian carpet seller, played rather stereotypically by a white actor. While adding exotic colour to the scene, the interpretation seemed out of place in an interrogation of racist ideology.

If the preceding discussion gives the impression that this was a heavily political production, let me hasten to add that any critique of South African society was smoothly integrated into the comic action. The production's emphasis was firmly on bawdy comedy, an essential element of carnival. Critics praised Honeyman for making Shakespeare palatable to modern audiences by recognising "the inherent bawdiness of the humour" and playing it "broadly in order that it can be immediately understood by unsophisticated minds". The programme quotations included a psychoanalytic theory of farce: "Farce enacts a primitive superego punishment for its characters' transgression in the form of a maniacal plot which both arranges libidinal gratification and punishes for it". Also quoted was a comment by a nineteenth century American theatregoer: "Shakespeare, Madam, is obscene, and, thank God, we are sufficiently advanced to have found it out".

Thus the audience saw the ladies of ill repute repeatedly dropping panties from their clothesline onto Emilia's head, watched Dromio-of-Syracuse buttoning up his trousers after having his way with his twin brother's wife, and even caught a glimpse of Antipholus' bare bottom — still risqué in puritan South Africa. Even gays were included in the bawdiness. Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse arrived with a boatload of tourists, including a stereotypically gay merchant who was quickly solicited by a very macho stud who lolled against the tavern wall suggestively caressing his silken running shorts. The merchant's speech excusing himself from Antipholus was given a certain urgency by his interest in the young man, with the final line, "My present business calls me from you now", delivered hastily as he raced off in pursuit! Antipholus-of-Syracuse's later comment, "Some offer me commodities to buy", was accompanied by a gesture towards the young stud who was making obscene movements of solicitation. The offensiveness of the stereotypical portrayal of the gay merchant was perhaps partially compensated for by having such a taboo subject integrated into the carnivalesque bawdiness of humanity. Within the confines of state-sponsored theatre, therefore, the production managed to utilise carnivalesque elements to interrogate and subvert the dominant ideology.

Researching these productions of The Comedy of Errors offered interesting insights into the mechanisms of evaluating and preserving theatrical productions in South Africa. The 1953 production, for example, is preserved as oral history and in an isolated newspaper report apparently chronicling the novelty of blacks performing Shakespeare's plays ("Shakespeare Comedy is played by Natives" reads the headline). By contrast, the Afrikaans adaptation, Kinkels inne Kabel, produced a flurry of articles, reviews, and interviews, all carefully preserved in various state archives around the country. Although lopsided, an examination of The Comedy of Errors in South Africa reveals, nevertheless, the adaptability of this play. South Africans have turned it into a spontaneous festival in
the township communities; they have presented an academic *commedia dell' arte* production; they have adapted it to a local setting to satirise the society; they have updated it to a modern Greek setting and still offered a critique of South African conditions. The play has been performed by "black", "coloured", "Indian", "white", and "mixed" casts, together offering a mosaic of insights into the workings of this peculiar society. While attesting to the continued privileging of Shakespeare as the pinnacle of high culture, these productions reveal the flexibility of the text, which, by incorporating subversive elements of carnival, allows itself to be used as an instrument for interrogating the dominant ideologies.

NOTES

1. Martin Orkin, in *Shakespeare Against Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1986), argues this point at length.
25. Editor’s Note — CAPAB’s 1989 revival of Brink’s *Kinkel innie Kabel* elicited the following comment by Temple Hauptfleisch:

... Marthinus Basson’s ... production has gone a stage further by ignoring (consciously and obviously) the racial element in his casting. It is not an unusual approach in itself, having been in operation for a number of years in virtually all companies, but what makes it a point of critical importance here, specifically at this time, is the implicit difference between a "coloured" actress satirising a shrew from the “community” and a bourgeois "white" actress doing it. It may appear a petty point, representative of the over-sensitiveness we have all come to display about such things . . . , yet there was a feeling of awkward patronisation about the entire performance, which made this critic at least, doubt the real suitability of the choice of play.

(*Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 3, 1989, p.90)