H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Graver, ed. *Drama for a New South Africa.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. 228 pp. $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21326-6; $16.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33570-8.

Reviewed by Simon Lewis (Department of English, College of Charleston)
Published on H-AfrLitCine (May, 2000)

South African Drama after *Albert!*

In *Drama for a New South Africa* David Graver has assembled for an international readership the first collection of South African plays devoted to post-apartheid drama. This is a spectacular selection of seven plays covering issues of social, racial, and gender equality, the effects of Islam in South Africa's Indian community, the claims of ecological conservationists in the context of rural poverty, and the new application of old beliefs in the context of disintegrated communities. According to Graver these plays exhibit "three important concerns of post-apartheid theatre: the recovery of the past, abiding social injustices, and hybrid theatrical forms" (7). For those outside South Africa who might have been wondering what has been happening in South African drama since the resistance theatre of *Woza, Albert!* or Fugard's angst-ridden *"Master Harold" . . . and the boys*, this collection will be both illuminating and definitive.

Among the anthology's many notable features, the first thing to commend is its range. The plays themselves were first produced between 1986 and 1998, three before 1990, two between 1990 and 1993, and two after 1993. Graver's opting for this span wisely avoids demarcating the "end of apartheid" at a particular date (whether of Mandela's release, or the first ANC election victory) and indeed allows the plays to represent a still-anticipatory work-in-progress that has been underway for some time now. The earliest of the seven plays, Junction Avenue Theatre Company's *Sophiatown* (1986) furthermore looks backward to the snuffing out of the defiantly hybrid, criminal-romantic, multicultural, polyglot *Drum* era, while Reza de Wet's ghostly offering, *The Crossing* (1994) subverts the stolid national-familial Afrikaans drama of the 1930s. In both cases, though more explicitly in the former, the plays actively participate in forming the drama *for* a new South Africa (not "from" or "of") by reclaiming and popularizing hidden histories, driven by the contention that "we need an informed and articulate new generation, steeped in the past and carefully theorizing about the future" (25), and that "one of the most effective ways to communicate ideas, information, and feelings is through the living theatrical encounter" (25).

Given this social, not to say sociological, commitment, it is not surprising that three of the plays should have as their starting-point specific new stories or factual details (here again the collection's range shows, as each play approaches its subject-matter in a radically different style). *Sophiatown* takes a more or less documentary approach, setting the destruction of that vibrant, mixed Johannesburg suburb against the experiment of *Drum* writers Nat Nakasa and Lewis Nkosi to advertise for a Jewish girl to come and live with them; *Purdah* (1993) by Ismail Mahomed is an extended dramatic monologue in which eighteen-year-old Ayesha explains her motivation for killing her abusive, polygamous husband; Brett Bailey's evocation of a 1995 witch-hunt in which several women were blamed and killed for the death of twelve boys in a minivan accident stunningly combines Xhosa and Christian ritual with the campily weird figure of Intombi Nyama (Black Girl), "a special guest star from the Johannesburg metropolis–a gaudy, endearing black transvestite" (202). Bailey's dazzlingly experimental play takes all sorts of risks, and with its frenzied drumming and the emphasis on witchcraft has even been accused of racism, but Graver cites Zakes Mda as calling the play "a work of genius that maps out a path to a new South African theatre that is highly innovative in its use of indigenous performance forms" (201).

Indeed, it seems to me that in *Ipi Zombi* a white South African comes closer to the metaphysical concerns of a play like *Death and the King's Horseman* in which Soyinka's fascination with transition claims a specifically Yoruba origin, unlike the familiar notion of postcolonial hybridity which tends to have a Western stamp. Graver's excellent introduction identifies the various roots of South African theatre and demonstrates how "develop-

ments in twentieth-century European drama . . . have brought it closer to African performance forms, but before this century, the two were far apart, offering fundamentally distinct approaches to theatre" (3). Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema's *Woza, Albert!*, for instance, owes as much to the theories of Brecht, Grotowski and Peter Brook as it does to traditional African forms, looking at the effect of apartheid on urban black South Africans. In fact, nearly all of South African resistance literature was resolutely modern in its opposition to apartheid, that acme of the modern European taxonomic mania. In a post-apartheid world the modernist certainties have been dissolving, allowing Bailey to go back (not unproblematically) to rural African traditions.[1]

Contrasting the unsettling nature of *Ipi Zombi* with the "comfortable gestures of moral superiority such as one finds in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*", Graver concludes that while Bailey "does not take seriously the charges of witchcraft, . . . he does take seriously the belief in magic and spiritual possession that lie behind such charges" (201). Although written in a much more realistic vein, Paul Slabolepszy's *Mooi Street Moves* catches some of the postmodern chaos of contemporary urban South Africa by tracing the fortunes of Henry Stone, a white country bumpkin "out of his depth in Jozi [Johannesburg] and flat-broke" (201). As the streetwise Stix explains to the befuddled Henry, "Soweto has come to town. Things are different, jong" (121). Despite a slightly melodramatic ending in which Stix is stabbed to death with a sharpened bicycle-spoke as a result of Henry's verbal abuse of the local ganglord,

Mooi Street Moves tellingly dramatizes the fate of a lower middle-class white male "adrift in a rapidly changing, unfamiliar world" and dependent on the "good graces of an urban Black, whose group is now a dominant political force" (114). Although Slabolepszy is British/Polish by birth, both his work and that of Afrikaans dramatist Reza de Wet are concerned with a critical reexamination of Afrikaner myth and mentality. While Henry's pairing with Stix anticipates the encounter between the epileptic Lambertus Benade and the streetsmart Sonnyboy from Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* [2], de Wet's *The Crossing*–an incestuous, confined parody of '30s Afrikaans drama aimed at forging a national identity–like *Triomf* suggests that lower-class Afrikaners were pretty much conned by the National Party's myth-making. De Wet's vulnerable women characters, therefore, "Rather than draw[ing] strength from the past, . . . are haunted by unquiet ghosts" (166).

Such deconstruction of Afrikaner nationalist mythology might be seen as a case of special pleading, but the language issues raised by the characters Sonnyboy in van Niekerk's novel and by Stix in *Mooi Street Moves* are of enormous significance in South African literature and culture which since the formal end of apartheid has become richly hybridized. Scholars of Afrikaans have been stressing the creole nature of that language – its Asian and indigenous African origins, its alliance with Islam, the fact that the first Afrikaans text was written in Arabic script, and so on – while scholars of indigenous languages haave been stressing the familial continuum of Zulu and Xhosa as Nguni lanaguages. Given the complexity of language politics over the last century and a half in particular, and the administrative nightmare of having eleven official languages, the development of a South African literature that breaches linguistic "purity" and language divisions is crucial to the development of a national consciousness that is neither ethnically or racially dominated by the ideological assumptions of any one of South Africa's languages, from Afrikaans to Zulu.

The tsotsitaal [street-language] of *Sophiatown* enacts this abandonment of sub-nationalist allegiance, echoing one of the play's main themes that ethnic divisions are culturally constructed. Through the character of Ruth Golden the characters can answer the question "What is a Jewish?"[sic] by saying that it is neither a religion, a nationality, nor a language. Jakes, the play's *Drum* journalist, sees the indeterminacy as a *blessing* of "perfect confusion," and declares that "Softown is a brand new generation" (56). That claim and Fahfee's confident "We are going to make a new South Africa" point to one of the play's most radical historiographical moves – to present places like Sophiatown as the "beginnings of a non-racialist urban culture that had been interrupted by apartheid and would be continued now [in 1986]" (24). Like Dan O'Meara the Junction Avenue Theatre Company demystifies the apartheid era as forty "lost years" while the true "difficulties and promises of a democratic South Africa" have to be dusted off and grappled with anew.[3]

Zakes Mda's *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* (1988), makes a similarly radical move, but geographically rather than historiographically. Anticipating the end of apartheid from his base in Lesotho, Mda produces a two-hander reminiscent of Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*, a sort of local variant of *Waiting for Godot* with the material circumstances of the characters duly contextualized. In Mda's case the Woman and the Lady (a maid and a prostitute, respectively) are vainly waiting in line for days on end for the doling out of food-aid rice. As

in Sembene Ousmane's *The Money-Order*, however, the ludicrous bureaucracy denies the poor their rightful allocation while wealthy businessmen drive off with truckloads for sale at a profit. What Mda does here is to widen the late '80s model of anti-apartheid theatre from the national level to the regional. The domestic worker, criticizing the anti-political attitudes of her fellow-waiter, declares, "One day it's going to dawn on you, and on the rest of all the others who think like you, that this struggle is not just South African. It is Southern African" (106). She goes on to make challenging statements about the nature of freedom, especially about the challenge of freeing oneself from patriarchal nationalisms that glorify male warrior ancestors "as if the past will take care of the future without any effort from the present" (107).

The length of this review reflects my great enthusiasm for Graver's book, both for the individual plays gathered in its pages and for Graver's astute editing. In addition to the clear, concise, wide-ranging introduction, each play is prefaced by an equally clear, and concise headnote giving valuable biographical, performance and general background; Graver copes judiciously with the difficulties for non-South African readers of cultural references and the use of South African languages other than English, by adding occasional footnotes and in-text translations as well as an informative glossary which frequently explains the cultural significance of words and phrases, not just their literal meanings. Although the book is obviously of most interest to African and South African literary/cultural scholars, Graver's tailoring of his introductions to the series emphasis (Drama and Performance Studies) makes it accessible to all drama theorists, particularly those interested in community and development drama.

In his introduction Graver makes reference to the worldwide distribution of *Woza, Albert!* via a BBC film. It would be wonderful to see similar treatment of any one (or sampling of more than one) of these plays. Until then, Graver has done non-South African readers a great service by providing the textual evidence of these playwright's efforts both to produce the drama *for* a new South Africa, and to record the drama *of* the new South Africa.

Notes

[1]. When an earlier version of the play was performed in the Cape Town black township of Nyanga, its witchcraft elements prompted the urban black audience to laughter.

[2]. Marlene van Niekerk's novel *Triomf* came out in Afrikaans in 1994 and was released in a translation by Leon de Kock in the United States in 1999.

[3]. Dan O'Meara's *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party 1948-1994* was published by Ohio University Press in 1996.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Simon Lewis. Review of Graver, David, ed., *Drama for a New South Africa.* H-AfrLitCine, H-Net Reviews. May, 2000.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4088

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.