

# Afrikaans Theatre: Reflections of Identity

Johan Coetser

## Introduction

Afrikaans drama and theatre have repeatedly been associated with major historical events in South Africa. Examples are the Great Trek (1838) and the South African War (1899-1902), the growth and decline of Afrikaner nationalism and the legitimisation of apartheid (1948), the democratic change of political power in 1994 and the reaction of Afrikaner<sup>1</sup> society to these changes. The analogy of theatre presenting a reflection of society's ills and greatnesses does indeed apply to Afrikaans theatre. Themes in plays, not necessarily part of the canon, bear testimony to this fact.

These reflections include refractions of identity. As such perceptions of identity link inexorably to the remembrance of past events and to expectations of what the future may hold. 'We are', stated Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (1998:i) in the introduction to their book *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, 'as yet unable to judge which memories and ways of remembering will come to dominate in South Africa in the future'. The uncertainty surrounding the question of remembering may therefore explain the proliferation of publications on this theme (Suleiman 1999:v). A recent example is the publication of a two-part history of Afrikaans literature, titled *Perspektief en Profiel/Perspective and Profile*, edited by H.P. van Coller (1998; 1999).

In this essay I shall focus on representations of identity in Afrikaans theatre. Key ideas relate to notions of *historical continuity* and *identity*, concentrating on *gender*, the ideology of *Afrikaner nationalism* and *ethnicity*. The essay will display a

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the main attribute of an Afrikaner is that the person speaks the language of Afrikaans. Depending on one's ideological frame of reference, the idea frequently includes allusions to ethnicity or race. Consequently many Afrikaans-speaking persons do not consider themselves Afrikaners. Which meaning is intended in this essay must be deduced from the context in which the word is used.

double focus. Initially the discussion aims at identifying dominant themes associated with identity formation in Afrikaans theatre. The following part traces the fashion in which the identified themes have informed Afrikaans plays written over the past three or four decades.

## Historical continuity and identity

Critics generally agree on the importance of themes associated with gender and ethnicity in Afrikaans theatre during the 1980s. H.J. Schutte (1994:41) points out the historical importance of these associations:

*In die Afrikaanse drama van die tagtigerjare is daar twee sake wat in die soeklig kom: die bevryding van die vrou en, binne die toenemende rassekonflik, die Swartmens se stryd om gelykwaardigheid in die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing. Hierdie tweeledige stryd wat in die jare tagtig kulmineer, is nie iets wat skielik gebeur het nie, want dit het 'n lang aanloop (e.a.).*

Afrikaans dramas written during the 1980s spotlight two features: the liberation of women and, against a backdrop of increasing racial conflict, black people's struggle for equality in South African society. Culminating in the 1980s, this dual struggle did not occur suddenly, *because it had a lengthy introduction*<sup>2</sup>.

Schutte (1994:53) adds that the most prominent feature of Afrikaans dramas written during the 1980s, was the deconstruction of the notion of *Afrikanerskap* (being an Afrikaner), especially the subversion of the traditional father-figure, or patriarch, in plays such as Pieter Fourie's *Ek, Anna van WykII*, *Anna van Wyk* (1986).

In the play *Senior*, the family patriarch, opposes his daughter-in-law, Anna, after it became obvious that she is an epileptic. He replaces her with a woman who could be the daughter-in-law he really wants. In the final scene Anna apparently murders him, but the Voice in the auditorium assures the audience that Senior had died earlier. Depicting Anna as Senior's victim and as a victim of the values embedded in the society he represents, raises the audience's sympathy for her and diminishes this patriarch's stature.

The need to subvert the role of the father in Afrikaans plays could be related to a major event in Afrikaner history, i.e. the South African War (1899-1902). This war was not simply a conflict between two Boer (Afrikaner) republics and the British

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are by the author of this essay, except if indicated differently.

Empire. In the end it escalated into a melting pot from which a transformed South African society emerged. Before the war agriculture dominated the Boer republics' economies; after the war South Africa experienced the advent of mining and capitalism, accompanied by gross urbanisation of its largely rural population<sup>3</sup>.

During the first half of the previous century Afrikaner ideologues such as Gustav Preller realised that urbanised poor-white Afrikaners were being integrated into a colourless poor-class and that they were losing their identity as Afrikaners. He and other Nationalists mobilised Afrikaners along the line of race, emphasising ethnic differences, their subjugation by British imperialism and the hardships wrought upon Boer women, children and the elderly in British concentration camps during the war. The plight of women, the young and the elderly—and their heroic behaviour under trying circumstances—would subsequently become dominant themes and identity markers in Afrikaans theatre<sup>4</sup>.

While in every day life the economic consequences of the South African War undermined the traditional role of the father as the breadwinner and head of his family, Afrikaans playwrights initially maintained his position in the family, even in the face of the hardship women and children had to endure<sup>5</sup>. However, from the 1950s onwards playwrights such as W.A. de Klerk, N.P. van Wyk Louw, Pieter

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. T.R.H. Davenport's *South Africa: A Modern History* (1989) for an overview of the period, especially Chapters 8 and 9. Chapter 8 covers 'The Breaking of Boer Independence, 1850-1902', and Chapter 9 'The Shaping of a White Domination'. Of importance during the pre-War years was the discovery of vast deposits of gold in the Transvaal Republic from 1870 onwards, and the participation of black troops on both sides of the conflict during the War. The discovery of gold and the consequences of war propelled both races towards the burgeoning metropolis of Johannesburg, often living as neighbours in the same suburbs.

<sup>4</sup> The point needs to be emphasized that this overview is greatly simplified. See, for instance, T. Dunbar Moodie's *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* (1980) or Dan O'Meara's *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital, and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1934-1948* (1983), among others, for a more nuanced overview of the formation of cultural markers during the period. Isabel Hofmeyr (1987) convincingly points to the role language and literature played in constructing Afrikaner identity.

<sup>5</sup> Exceptions are the texts written by members of the KWU or Klerewerkersunie, a union for workers in the clothing industry that came into existence during the late 1920s of the previous century. Members of the KWU wrote plays largely depicting family and working life from a female perspective (Coetser 1999b).

Fourie, Reza de Wet and André P. Brink in their texts increasingly redefined the role of the patriarch<sup>6</sup>.

An example of a play depicting heroic behaviour under trying circumstances, is Horatius's *Mag is reg/Power Justifies*. The characters are presented without nuance, and they are clearly mouthpieces for the playwright's ideology. In the play Sannie, Lenie and Hester—loved ones or wives of Boer fighters—are interned in a concentration camp. They suffer extreme hardships, such as humiliation by compatriots who have joined the ranks of the enemy and who were charged with their keep. Sannie's daughter, Ellatjie, dies of deprivation caused by hunger, cold and disease. However, when one of the joiners approaches Hester, she still sees fit to scold him for denouncing his identity as an Afrikaner:

*Van al die veragtelike dinge is dit die meest veragtelike ding; en van 'n boer konstawel met 'n kakiepakkie wil ik geen weldaad ontvang nie, al moet ik liever sterwe (Horatius 1917:49).*

Of all things despicable, this is the most detestable; from a Boer constable clad in a miserable khaki uniform I'd rather receive no favours. I would rather die.

When playwrights use characters to voice their own political and other ideologies in plays, and when ideologues such as Preller become involved in cultural production, it is obvious that culture is the result of a process involving socio-semiotic signs and codes, ultimately representing a secondary modelling system (Lotman & Uspensky 1978:212)<sup>7</sup> based on the ability of language in plays to create virtual social realities, i.e. possible worlds (Elam 1980:Chapter 4).

Following Yu. M. Lotman and B.A. Uspensky (1978:212) this has a number of consequences, of which the most important is that culture is a social phenomenon.

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<sup>6</sup> Plays by these dramatists will be examined further on in this essay.

<sup>7</sup> Preller's—and subsequent Afrikaner ideologues'—advances towards the formation of a particular brand of Afrikaner cultural *volks* identity (identity of the people)—corresponds with Joris Vlasselaers's (1993) description of identity formation in the Flemish community in Belgium. Gerrit Olivier (1992, especially Chapters 1 to 3) draws our attention to the influence of German philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century on the inception of Afrikaner nationalism. Olivier focusses his study on the literature, philosophy and politics contained in Afrikaans author N.P. van Wyk Louw's writings. Combining Vlasselaers's and Olivier's ideas seems to suggest that the specific process (cf. Lotman & Uspensky 1978) of Afrikaner identity formation is not uniquely characteristic of the cultural history of South Africa.

Structurally culture is part of a number of discourses associated with a particular cultural group. Through these dialogues culture renews itself, resulting in remembrance becoming part and parcel of it. In its turn memory broaches the question of longevity which, according to Lotman and Uspensky (1978:223), is '... evidently connected with the dynamism of the social life of human society'. Bearing on contemporary Afrikaner society and Afrikaans theatre, the question translates into concern about the viability of, or even concern about, the continued existence and growth of Afrikaans theatre.

Although quite a number of Afrikaans drama scripts, especially cabaret, were written and performed in recent years, very few were published (Louw 2000). Temple Hauptfleisch (1996:115) has, correctly, asserted how '[f]undamental to canonization and literary history' the publication of play texts is. The similarities between the current situation in Afrikaans theatre (following the democratisation of South African society in 1994) and the situation at the beginning of the previous century (after the conclusion of the South African War in 1902) are obvious. Similar to the situation at the beginning of the previous century Afrikaans theatre is increasingly being limited to events with a distinct Afrikaner ambience. Examples of events are arts festivals such as the KKNK (Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees/Little Karoo National Arts Festival) or the annual arts festival presented in Potchefstroom.

Although remembrances of the South African War informed many Afrikaans plays written decades after the event, few texts were written, performed or published in South Africa during the war (Coetser 1999a). Most theatrical activities then took place in Boer POW camps abroad and, following John L. Comaroff and Paul C. Stern (1995:5), displayed a constructionist view of Afrikaner identity, i.e. a '... collective consciousness ... as a response to (historically specific) practical circumstances on the part of a given population'.

In summary, roughly until 1920, Afrikaans dramatists, ranging from Harm Goot (Ou' Daniel/Old Daniel, 1906) to Melt Brink (Die verlore seun/The Prodigal Son, 1916), wrote plays similar to Horatius's *Mag is reg*. Almost all of these plays depict the evils and consequences of the South African War. Were it not for this war and the intervention of ideologues like Pretorius and of intellectuals such as Nico Diederichs and Geoff Cronjé (Olivier 1992:18 *et seq.*), Afrikaans theatre probably would not have taken the route it did. Themes originating from this period came to dominate the process of literary identity formation for the remainder of the century, at the same time testifying to a shifting cultural hierarchy within Afrikaner society (cf. Lotman & Uspensky 1978:215). These themes relate to gender, nationalism and ethnicity in Afrikaans plays.

## Gender

Themes associated with gender are prolific in Afrikaans theatre. Examples concern:

- the depiction of the notion of the *volksmoeder* (mother of the nation);
- the extension of that idea;
- and the representation of (other) gender issues relevant to contemporary Afrikaner society.

Shifts in cultural hierarchies involving the notion of the *volksmoeder* are evident when one compares texts written before 1920 and a recent play such as *Nag, Generaal/Good Night, General* (1991) by Reza de Wet.

#### (a) Depiction of the notion of the *volksmoeder*

In Horatius's play *Mag is reg* (1917), for example, Sannie, Lenie and Hester are modelled according to the ideal of the *volksmoeder*. This '... involved the emulation of characteristics such as a sense of religion, bravery, a love of freedom, the spirit of sacrifice, self-reliance, housewifeliness ... nurturance of talents, integrity and the setting of an example to others' (Brink 1990:280). Afrikaner women, '... had a purifying and ennobling influence on their menfolk; they would sacrifice much for their families and were loyal housewives and tender nurses, earnest in prayer, sage in advice, with a great love of freedom and steadfastly anti-British ...' (Brink 1990:281).

Magda, the main character in de Wet's *Nag, Generaal*, contrasts sharply with the female characters in *Mag is reg*. In *Nag, Generaal* the scene is set in a stable. Magda's husband, the Boer general mentioned in the title, is severely wounded. She is indifferent to her husband's suffering. Motivated by the fact that he forced their son into battle where he subsequently perished, she defies the *volksmoeder* stereotype. She is not a 'tender' nurse having 'a purifying and ennobling influence' on her husband (Brink 1990:281, quoted in the previous paragraph). Naas, a herbalist side character, and not she, takes care of the general's wounds.

#### (b) Extension of the notion of the *volksmoeder*

An extended interpretation of the notion of the *volksmoeder* may be found in another recent play, Deon Opperman's epic *Donkerland/Dark Land* (1996). The extension involves including persons of colour in the plot. *Donkerland* is a representation of Afrikaner history covering the period 1838 (when the Great Trek commenced) to 1996 (two years after the first democratic elections took place). In the part covering the South African War, the playwright confronts the audience with a reversal of stereotypical roles associated with the *volksmoeder* in plays such as Horatius's *Mag is reg*. One should bear in mind that Afrikaans playwrights initially avoided the

politicisation of the *volksmoeder* along racial lines, thus Opperman's treatment of this figure denotes a significant deviation from tradition.

In the play Anna remains loyal to Afrikaner sentiments regarding war. However, she falls in love with an enemy soldier, John Walsh. Exhibiting characteristics of a *volksmoeder*, she maintains:

*Jy't [John Walsh] jou mense en ek het myne. 'n Vrou kan nou wel nie 'n geweer dra nie, maar sy kan 'n wond verbind; 'n honger maag voed; 'n ontnugterde soldaat weer moed inpraai. Engeland se mans gaan teen die Afrikaner veg, maar die hele Afrikanervolk—man, vrou en kind—gaan teen die Engelse veg (Opperman 1996:58).*

You [John Walsh] have your people and I have mine. A woman may not carry a rifle, but she can care for the wounded; feed a hungry person; encourage a despondent soldier. England's men will be fighting against the Afrikaner, but all of the Afrikaner people—men, women and children—will be fighting against the English.

Following her father's example in retaining her cultural identity, she insists on speaking Afrikaans: '*In ons huis sal ons Afrikaans praat [as ons trou]*'/ 'In our house we shall speak Afrikaans [if we marry]' (Opperman 1996:55).

Anna's involvement with an enemy soldier reflects a similar plot in an earlier Afrikaans play, that is J.F.W. Grosskopf's *Oorlog is oorlog/War is War* (1927)<sup>8</sup>. The main difference between Grosskopf's and Opperman's plays is that *Donkerland* offers a more subversive interpretation of the *volksmoeder* idea. Opperman's further inversion includes the involvement of white male characters with black females, thereby introducing an ethnic or racial theme to the play which is absent in Grosskopf's *Oorlog is oorlog*. Ironically Meidjie, an Afrikaans word

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<sup>8</sup> In the play an English officer, Cuthbert, arrives on a farm accompanied by a prisoner of war, an Afrikaner by the name of Jan. Rachel was previously romantically involved with Cuthbert, but she now has a relationship with Jan. Grosskopf reduces Rachel's conflict to the question whether she would take a knife and cut Jan loose, enabling him to escape and kill Cuthbert. She pushes the knife within his reach and symbolically leaves the room. Her decision involved more than a choice between two enemies: she had to choose between her word of honour (not to release Jan) and loyalty towards her own people, and the enemy (represented by Cuthbert). As a *volksmoeder* she chooses loyalty towards her people, although she sacrificed her own happiness.

meaning *black servant*, in the beginning of the play becomes the biological mother of successive generations of the family De Witt (meaning *the whites*).

The play takes reversal to its logical conclusion in its closing, in which brother and sister Arnold and Mariaan part from the farm and each other. The farm, Donkerland (meaning Dark Land), would be returned to Meidjie's descendants. In the grim words of the narrator:

*Die wiele van Afrika draai stadig ... stadig, maar so seker soos die dood, en eendag ... ééndag sal daar net 'n verbrokkelde stapeltjie klippe oorbly, getuieis van 'n klein strepie mensdom, verlore in die gras van Donkerland* (Opperman 1996:157).

The wheels of Africa grind slowly ... slowly, and sure as death, and one day ... one day all that will remain, will be a small heap of broken rubble, testimony of an insignificant humanity, lost in the grass of Donkerland.

Apart from 'Donkerland' a number of Afrikaans plays, also written during the second half of the previous century, reflected events taking place in society. These plays demonstrated the extension of gender issues, such as the theme of the *volksmoeder*, by extending references to political practices and ethnic emotions. The construction of political and ethnic borders formed a cornerstone of Afrikaner nationalism and became the founding principle of the ideology of apartheid. It permeated all areas of society, touching on the most intimate relationships between persons. An example of this particular form of gender *cum* political extension may be found in *Die verminktes/The Maimed* (1960 and 1976, revised) by Bartho Smit.

*Die verminktes* is a play of love transgressing the ethnic boundaries constructed by Afrikaner society. Frans Harmse is the extramarital child of an Afrikaner Nationalist senator from a woman of mixed descent, who falls in love with his adopted white sister (Elize). In the end the father verbally castrates Frans, with the result that he regresses to a situation of subordination and marginalisation, which in the text is signalled by his use of a patois form of Afrikaans<sup>9</sup>.

The plot in André P. Brink's *Die jogger/The Jogger* (1997) mirrors Frans and Elize's relation in *Die verminktes*. In *Die jogger* Killian (whose name may be construed as *Kill Ian/Jan*), previously a colonel in the security police, is defied by his daughter Ilse and her husband Nico. They leave him isolated in a mental hospital where he is tormented by memories of past injustices perpetrated against her and 'the enemy', represented by Vusi's tongue which is kept in a bottle. In the play the tongue

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<sup>9</sup> This summary follows the 1970 version of the text.



becomes a stage metaphor representing the people of colour maligned and 'silenced' (eliminated) by Killian.

Ilse and Nico's departure may be interpreted as the final breaking from *patriarchal power* and *Afrikaner nationalism* in this text. Killian represents the Afrikaner, and Noni, the psychiatric nurse, the forgiving black female voice who reverses the *volksmoeder* stereotype in serving as a caring and forgiving mother of the future nation. This interpretation is suggested by her name which may be associated with the Afrikaans word 'nonnie', meaning *an unmarried girl, without children*. Regarded as an allegorical character, Noni fulfils a similar function as Meidjie in Opperman's *Donkerland*. She symbolically becomes a mother of a new nation in which the idea of a racially exclusive *volksidentiteit* (identity of the people) is refuted.

Should one, in summary, contrast plays such as *Mag is reg* (Horatius 1917) with *Die verminktes* (Smit 1960/1970), *Donkerland* (Opperman 1996) and *Die jogger* (Brink 1997), it becomes obvious that Afrikaans theatre has completed a cycle that initially involved a constructionist mechanism of identity formation. During the earliest phase (represented by *Mag is reg*) the deliberate involvement of ideologues gave Afrikaner identity, as has been indicated earlier in this essay, a constructed social bias involving gender<sup>10</sup>.

However, in *Die verminktes*, *Donkerland* and *Die jogger* constructionism has been extended to a social psychological study of identity, that is a sophisticated form of primordialism. This view, explain Comaroff and Stern (1995:5), 'presumes a prior cultural sensibility, a well of latent sentiments, a shared heritage; a primordial infrastructure, as it were, from which appropriate signs and symbols, political practices and ethnic emotions, may be extracted when the situation demands it'. In Horatius's time a primordial infrastructure existed but it did not have the same magnitude and content as the infrastructure from which Opperman, for example, drew his inspiration for *Donkerland*.

### (c) Other gender issues in contemporary society

Since the 1970s, as Pieter Conradie (1996:71-72) has argued, Afrikaans women writers have contributed to the redefining of identity. Relevant to this discussion is the importance he assigns to the role of 'the husband as the head of the family' (in the 1970s), a 'highly personalised' presentation of racial, gender or class conflict (in the 1980s), and 'opposition to patriarchal oppression' and 'postmodernist tendencies' breaking down 'barriers created by patriarchal sexual/ textual division' (in the

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<sup>10</sup> This view does not exclude other influences up till 1920, such as the consequences of the South African War on Afrikaner society.

1990s). Although Conradie's frame of reference is primarily works of prose, plays do fit in with this pattern. However, one should bear in mind that both male and female playwrights touch on gender issues in their dramatic presentations of both hetero- and homosexual relationships.

Although Afrikaans gay theatre is not a common phenomenon, suggestions of gayness to varying degrees may be found in plays by Hennie Aucamp, such as *Sjampanje vir ontbyt/Champagne for Breakfast* (1988) or *Punt in die wind* (1989). 'Punt in die wind' is an (untranslatable) Afrikaans expression, with a slightly mischievous sexual association.

Both plays display characteristics of Aucamp's cabarets, of which he himself has stated that the most obvious features are sentiment, eroticism and the use of satire (Aucamp 1977:2). Nevertheless, in both plays lightheartedness and humour mask a number of serious issues. These reflect homosexual life and identity but also address topical issues such as racism in gay communities. In *Sjampanje vir ontbyt*, which is about Daan and Terry's champagne breakfast for their gay friends on Christmas Day, Kas, for instance, declares: '*Ons wil graag met die Kaapse susters affilieer, maar nét op blanke grondslag*' ('We would like to affiliate with our sisters from the Cape, but only if they are white') (Aucamp 1988:30).

Louw Odendaal (1998:174) correctly asserts that *Sjampanje vir ontbyt* is characterised by:

... 'n ambivalente, tragikomiese stemming waarin die vermaaklike, maar ook die patetiese van hierdie karakters se lewens na vore kom. Hulle is gevat, maar daarin ook 'tewerig' en as sodanig uiters kwesbaar en uitgelewer aan gewetenlose uitbuiters.

... an ambivalent, tragicomic mood that emphasises the humorous but also the pathetic sides of these characters' lives. They are witty and at the same time 'bitchy', and therefore extremely vulnerable and exposed to merciless opportunists.

A number of Afrikaans plays, written mainly since the 1980s, address gender issues 'which [are] relative to the historical moment with its specific necessities'<sup>11</sup>. In this regard Cherryl Walker (1990:27) draws our attention to the importance of 'the domestic' as a site generating subordination, such as one may find in plays by Corlia

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<sup>11</sup> Ecker (1985:21) contrasts 'feminist' with 'feminine': 'The second [term] demands reflecting on the first. It takes the complications of subjectivity in account, and feminist investigations of aesthetic theory necessarily aim at a critique of traditional assumptions'.

Fourie (*Moeders en dogters/Mothers and Daughters*, 1985b; *En die son skyn in Suid-Afrika/And the Sun Shines in South Africa*, 1986; and *Leuens/Lies*, 1985a) or Reza de Wet.

In Reza de Wet's play *Mis* (1993a), for example, the mother, Miem, and her daughter Meisie make a living by selling manure<sup>12</sup>. Miem's husband, Gabriël, permanently stays in the loft, and everything he needs must be hoisted up to him. His excrement is lowered in a bucket. Seven years back he entered the loft and has since stayed there, because he could not come to grips with the consequences, financial and other, of the economic depression for himself and his family.

The similarity between his name and the name of the archangel is not coincidental. After seven years his wife and daughter still serve him as diligently as they probably would have served the archangel. Various stage props indicate his presence. The bucket used to remove his excrement stands under a table and his hat still hangs behind the door.

Miem and her daughter are practically prisoners of poverty and domesticity. Both of them, and a spinster visiting, would value (other) male company. The playwright manipulates their situation by introducing a blind constable to guard them against an unknown danger everyone associates with a visiting circus. In the end de Wet introduces elements of fantasy to the play: the constable miraculously turns out to be a magician, and he lures Meisie away with him. This is ironical because it was his duty to see to the safety of the women and to prevent young girls from disappearing, as had previously happened.

This play seems to suggest that the only way Meisie can escape from the bondage imposed by a situation of domesticity is by means of fantasy. Similar themes emerge from the remaining texts in the anthology of which *Mis* forms part, that is *Mirakel/Miracle* (de Wet 1993b) and *Drif/Causeway* (de Wet 1993c).

An interesting feature of Afrikaans theatre, as is the case in *Die jogger*, is that the patriarch is frequently portrayed as a military person, commonly a general, thereby emphasising the mythical power and influence of the father (cf. W.A. de Klerk's *Die jaar van die vuur-ox/The Year of the Coming of the Ox* published in 1952, N.P. van Wyk Louw's *Die pluimsaad waai ver/The Plume's Seed Blows Far* which premiered in 1966, or Reza de Wet's *Nag, Generaal*). *Nag, Generaal* and Charles Fourie's *Don Qxubane onder die Boere/Don Qxubane among the Afrikaners* (1994) take the process of demythologising the patriarch even further. In *Nag, Generaal* the wounded general, Magda's husband, is portrayed as a dribbling,

<sup>12</sup> 'Mis' is another Afrikaans title/ word that is difficult to translate into English. In Afrikaans the word refers, among others, to manure, even Gabriel's excreta, a religious mass or a misunderstanding. All these shades of meaning are present in the play.

powerless individual left to the mercy of his wife. In Charles Fourie's *Don Qxubane onner die Boere* the protagonist (Don Qxubane) should be played by an actor of colour. In his quest for his beloved Gracie, Don Qxubane reaches a country town in which rightist political sentiments reign supreme. The playwright presents the white, Afrikaans-speaking male characters as dumb nit-wits (cf. the side characters Otto and Worsie) or as less than brainless chickens (Andreas). Andreas endeavours to use Don Qxubane to further his own political ideas, but in the end Don Qxubane exposes him as the racist hit-and-run car driver who killed Gracie's mother in a car accident.

In all of these plays gender identity is treated as an ideological construction, or social myth, and a result of shifting historical continuances inherent to Afrikaner society. 'From the perspective of gender', stated Myra Jehlen (1990:265), 'identity is a role, character traits are not autonomous qualities but functions and ways of relating ... Connoting history and not nature, gender is *not* a category of human nature' (e.i.o.). Leading Afrikaans playwright Reza de Wet (1995:90) goes one step further:

I don't agree with categorising people. It falls into the patriarchal trap of needing to define and separate. If you accept divisions then you are accepting those structures. I believe to become psychically androgynous is the answer. And this categorising seems to work against it.

Ultimately plays such as *Donkerland*, *Die jogger* or *Don Qxubane onner die Boere* endeavoured to correct the perception that Afrikaner society would remain untouched by the flow of time<sup>13</sup>. They were, in fact, a testimony to the changing face of Afrikaner identity.

### Afrikaner nationalism and ethnicity

In an essay written mainly during the first half of the 1960s, Bartho Smit (1974:81) pointed out that many (cultural) critics until then accepted that reality is an objective, unalterable fact, and that plays should directly reflect the relation between theatre and reality. According to Smit (1974:96) the opposite actually applied. What they regarded as an unalterable fact, was really mankind's play with fellow humans, continuously changing attitudes and personas. Smit (1974:108-110) contends that theatre unveils this game in which confrontation and confusion act as two sides of the

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<sup>13</sup> For an overview of socio-political changes between 1956 and 1979, see Chapters 15 and 16 in Davenport's *South Africa: A Modern History* (1987). Significantly, Chapter 15 is titled 'Internal Combustion, 1956-64' and Chapter 16 is called 'Modification and Backfire, 1964-78'.

same coin simultaneously representing the formation of a new paradigm with its own set of identity markers.

Following up on Smit's argument it is possible to distinguish three phases of renewal in Afrikaans theatre since the 1960s:

- During the first phase (roughly until 1976) no major changes occurred. Compared to plays written and performed after 1976 Afrikaans theatre mirrored and mildly<sup>14</sup> challenged society.
- In the following phase (1976 onwards) theatre sought to unmask society and its individuals more deliberately.
- During the final phase (roughly 1990 onwards) theatre invoked a quest for an adequate thematic form involving a broader world view that tentatively moved away from its early limited focus on identity formation.

One should bear in mind that Smit's argument and my extension of the ideas contained in his essay (Smit 1974:81-120) follow a systems approach, implying that once a cycle of renewal has been completed, a new cycle may overlap with the previous phase to varying degrees.

#### (a) Phase 1 (roughly until 1976)

Being the first and therefore perhaps the most seminal play unveiling the playwright's 'game' with Afrikaner society, in this way contributing to the demise of apartheid, is N.P. van Wyk Louw's *Die pluimsaad waai ver* (published 1972; see Smit 1974:96)<sup>15</sup>. The importance of *Die pluimsaad waai ver* relates to its interrogation of perceptions of Afrikaner identity which, at the time of its first performance in 1966, were accepted without question. The plot plays against the backdrop of the South African War, portraying characters representing ideas which were prevalent at the time. Both grandfather Visser (representing internationalism) and Jan (representing the

<sup>14</sup> This was partly due to the system of censorship imposed by government. See my discussion of Smit's play *Putsonderwater/Well without water* (1962) further on.

<sup>15</sup> To this title one may, among others, add plays by Pieter Fourie, Deon Opperman (*Môre is 'n lang dag/Tomorrow is a Long Day*, 1986, and *Stille nag/Silent Night*, 1990), Pieter-Dirk Uys (a prolific satirist who debuted in 1979 with *Die Van Aardes van Grootoor/The Family Van Aarde from the Farm Grootoor*), Adam Small (*Kanna hy kô hystoel/Kanna's Homecoming*, 1965) and *Krismas van Map Jacobs/Map Jacobs's Christmas*, 1983), or Peter Snyder (*Political Joke*, 1983).

renegade) contest the idea of Afrikaner identity presenting itself as an undivided, monolithic unity in which all Afrikaners are loyal to *Afrikanerskap*.

*Afrikanerskap* finds its expression in the idea of a *volk* (or nation), and it is with this idea that the opening line links: 'Wat is 'n volk?/What is a *volk*?' The narrator, an old woman, immediately replies that a *volk* consists of persons of different persuasions, thereby implying that the concept accommodates internationalists (Visser), renegades (Jan), *bittereinders* or diehards (General de Wet) and true patriots (President Steyn).

The play also contests the idea that Boer soldiers, the Afrikaners, were invincible. In the public debate following the premiere of the play, Louw was severely scolded for his portrayal of Boers fleeing from the enemy<sup>16</sup>. This is the old woman's description of their flight:

*... ons het begin hardloop as die kakies net êrens gesien word,  
Ja, dis waar. Ons moet dit weet, ons moet dit weet:  
ons was bang, lafhartig, met elke smadelike woord wat ons taal besit.  
Generaal De Wet het tevergeefs met die sambok sy mense probeer  
terugslaan.  
As hy op een plek keer, dan vlug hulle op 'n ander.  
....  
Ons het gevlug en gevlug.  
Ons was bang.  
Ons was op ons velle versot (Louw 1972:46).*

*... we fled the moment we noticed the enemy.  
Yes, this is true. Let it be known, we must know it:  
we were afraid, cowards, every dishonourable word in our language.  
General de Wet tried to turn his fighters back with his sjambok, in vain.  
The moment he stopped them, they bolted from another position.*

*....  
We fled, and kept on fleeing.  
We were afraid.  
We were in love with our skins.*

Furthermore, the play expressed admiration for the courage displayed by the enemy in battle, specifically the Scotsmen Wauchope and Hannay. He aired his sentiments at a time when, according to critic Aart de Villiers (1973), few persons could accept

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<sup>16</sup> Although he veiled his words, this included a public reprimand from the then Prime Minister, Dr. H.F. Verwoerd (Pelzer 1966:673-674).

that a Boer could display a 'spot of blackness' and someone English 'a small splash of whiteness'. It is significant that de Villiers's words, written seventy years after the event, reflected the idea that Wauchope's and Hannay's descendants, the English-speaking part of the population, remained to some Afrikaners 'the enemy'. For Louw in *Die pluimsaad waai ver*, this slanted view of ethnicity was part of Afrikaner identity.

To Louw's implied criticism of Afrikaner identity in the 1960s one could add plays by the influential Afrikaans playwright, Bartho Smit (e.g. *Putsonderwater/Well without water*, 1962)<sup>17</sup>. Smit veiled his criticism in near-allegorical mode. This was necessary because South African literature at that time was reeling under a system of censorship that entertained no criticism against the social and cultural *status quo* imposed by the predominantly Afrikaans-speaking state. As a consequence performances of a number of his plays in South Africa were cancelled before opening night (for a short synopsis see Hosten & Visser 1999:578-580).

*Putsonderwater* plays in an imaginary desert hamlet with the same name. All the characters have allegorical names: Maria (Mary, the teenage protagonist), Seun (Son), Jan Alleman (Joe Everyman), Koster (Sexton), Sersant (Serjeant, representing the enforcement of law), Dokter (Doctor, representing medicine) and Dominee (Reverend, representing the church and faith). Maria is expecting a child (symbol of the future) but no one is prepared to accept the responsibility for fathering it.

Although Smit emphasises that *Putsonderwater* depicts Western man's (in the play represented by Maria<sup>18</sup>) religious crisis, it is also possible to interpret the characters as representations of Afrikaner social institutions. In this interpretation Smit implies that Afrikaner society is unwilling to accept responsibility for the future. Sersant, Dokter and Dominee would prefer a continuation of present life in *Putsonderwater*. Due to Maria's pregnancy and her increasing distrust in the promises made to her by the 'institutions' (represented by Sersant, Dokter and Dominee), this was no longer possible.

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<sup>17</sup> To Smit's name one may add the names of André P. Brink (e.g. *Die verhoor/The Trial*, 1970) or P.G. du Plessis (e.g. *Plaston: DNS-kind/Plaston: DNS Child*, 1971).

<sup>18</sup> Although it is possible to equate Maria to Mary, the mother of Jesus, this analogy will probably break down for a non-Christian audience or reader. Also compare the following didascaly at the beginning of the text: 'Hierdie stuk is 'n poging om die geloofskrisis van die Westerse mens uit te beeld. Wie daarin 'n aanval op die kerk of die Christendom sien, vertolk dit verkeerd'. (This play tries to depict Western man's religious crisis. Anyone inferring an attack in the text on Christianity, is missing the [this] point).

## (b) Phase 2 (1976 onwards)

During the second phase Pieter Fourie, among others, confronted Afrikaner society with his interpretation of identity formation in plays such as *Ek, Anna van Wyk* (1986) and *Die koggelaar/The teaser* (1988). Reza de Wet complemented him with *Diepe grond* (1986), *Drie susters twee/Three Sisters Two* (1996) and *Yelena* (premiered in 1998 at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival)<sup>19</sup>. Although not as ardent, Fourie's *Die koggelaar* enjoyed a reception that reminded one of the furore N.P. van Wyk Louw's *Die pluimsaad waai ver* caused. The play would have premiered in 1987 with the Performing Arts Council of the Orange Free State, but they postponed its first performance for two years following protest from members of the public and a parish of the Dutch Reformed Church in Bloemfontein. Obviously, as H.J. Vermeulen (1996a:58) points out, some Afrikaners were uncomfortable with their mirror image in the play.

At the time, South African society—and Afrikaner society in particular—was in disarray: 'The rending apart of Afrikaner politics and culture brought the Afrikaner's whole *Weltanschauung* in crisis. The socio-psychological effects of this crisis were *inter alia* disorientation, uncertainty, anxiety and fear of the future' (Vermeulen 1996a:57). Vermeulen examines the play from a Lacanian perspective<sup>20</sup> and concludes that '*Die koggelaar* reflects this [the Afrikaner's] predicament in the psyche of the protagonist Boet Cronje' (1996a:59). The plot concerns Boet Cronje, an Afrikaner farmer. He experiences a series of tribulations: drought, the death of his son (his successor) in an accident, and the realisation that a worker of mixed descent on the farm is his half-brother. He murders his family and shoots himself in an empty farm dam, justifying his behaviour by claiming that God had teased him.

Following Smit (1974:96), Fourie in this play *unmasks* a number of cultural (master) symbols associated with Afrikaner mythology, which are contracted in the persona of Boet Cronje. Some examples are the notions that whites are superior to

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps Ms. de Wet's most well-known play is *Diepe grond*. Both *Drie susters twee* and *Yelena* (unpublished) relate to plays by Chekov in such a way that one is tempted to derive similarities between their plots and the South African political situation (Coetser 1998). Ian Ferguson (1997:321), on the other hand, finds similarities between the Prozorovs and Jewish prisoners: 'Although the Prozorovs disappear down a derelict Russian garden, stripped of its birch trees, carrying bundles of clothing to travel (as Jewish prisoners would travel some twenty years after them) in cattle trucks towards an unknown hell, they do exhibit, even in their foolishness, a kind of courage. Perhaps that is all anyone can ask, or offer, in times of discontent'.

<sup>20</sup> Vermeulen (1996b, 1996c) follows a similar approach in his analyses of Fourie's *Ek, Anna van Wyk*. He aptly names the second article (1996c), 'The Lacanian Gaze, Pieter Fourie's *Ek Anna van Wyk* and the Afrikaner Psyche in Crisis'.



persons of colour, that South Africa belongs to whites, and that South Africa is an agricultural country and all Afrikaners are farmers at heart. (See also Coetser 1991:47.) A central symbol is the notion that Afrikaners enjoy a special relationship with their god/God, which explains the prominence the text accords to the Lacanian idea of the *father*.

In the play physical drought becomes a metonymic representation of psychic drought within the Afrikaner. Events that relate to this idea are the misuse of nature (over-grazing his land and over-using an animal, the stud ram Knaplat), disregard for the feelings of Anker (overt racism dehumanising his half-brother), rejection and humiliation of his wife (Anna) and, in the end, the annihilation of himself and his family.

Following Freud one may state that the physical drought initiates events that lead to the development of a fully-fledged psychosis in Boet (cf. Coetser 1991:45). Because of the interconnection of the *personal* and the *collective unconscious*, the physical drought becomes a dramatic metaphor for the figurative drought of the community Boet represents.

*Die koggelaar* consequently offers an alternate view of markers that are closely associated with Afrikaner mythology and identity. Fourie's Afrikaner is not steadfastly religious, a custodian of the land he inherited from his ancestors, a caring husband respecting women. His wife is not the traditional *volksmoeder*, and he is not a person who can persevere under all circumstances.

### (c) Phase 3 (roughly 1990 onwards)

According to Hauptfleisch (1997:12) theatre in South Africa—and he includes Afrikaans theatre—entered the age of post-colonialism after 1990. During this period the process of unmasking Afrikaner identity in plays continued, accompanied by even more dramatic changes in their social and political positioning. The changing post-colonial context demanded a re-examination of the content and presentation of Afrikaans theatre as a reflection of identity.

In this regard Breyten Breytenbach's play *Boklied: 'n Vermaaklikheid in drie bedrywel/Goat Song: An Entertainment in Three Scenes* (1998) seems to suggest a radical break from its predecessors:

*Dit dui 'n nuwe rigting aan: elitiesties, abstrak, intellektueel, maar ook robuust, anarchisties en surrealisties .... Dit versteur al die bekende bakens in die Suid-Afrikaanse teaterlandskap* (Van Vuuren 1998/1999:46).

It points to a new direction [in Afrikaans theatre]: elitist, abstract, intellectual, but also robust, anarchistic and surrealistic. It challenges all known beacons in South Africa's theatre landscape.

Most characteristics which Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins (1996) identify as characteristic of post-colonial dramas are present in *Boklied*. These include the reciting of classical texts, simultaneously involving canonical counter-discourse, the enactment of ritual and carnival, the representation and reinterpretation of post-colonial histories, the dramatic creation of a language of resistance, and the foregrounding of body politics.

In the play a few bygone actors gather in an enclosure. The enclosure may represent a jail, an institution for the mentally disadvantaged or even an unused theatre. The actors gather here regularly, away from 'normal', everyday life outside. It is suggested that the play takes place during a time of crisis or anxiety, perhaps during war, subdued insurrection or simply famine (cf. the 'Recommendations for Performance in No Man's Land' on pages 5 and 6 of the published text). The 'Recommendations' also indicate the presence of ritual, which, according to Gilbert and Tompkins is a strategy generally employed in post-colonial plays. Another is the re-enactment and embellishment of intertexts. Apart from a number of contemporary, mainly Afrikaans, references, Helize van Vuuren (1998/1999:44-52) points to the allusion to Aristophanes's *The Frogs* and *The Birds*, and to Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer/A Season in Hell*.

Some elements in the text directly relate to issues about Afrikaner identity. The list of *dramatis personae* invokes the question of ethnicity, for example, calling for parts to be played by persons of colour. Ritsos, a freedom fighter, ironically retorts:

*Dit is duidelik dat ek altyd van 'n minderwaardige ras was. Ek kon nie my opstandigheid begryp nie. My ras kom net in opstand om te plunder .... Die enigste slim ding om te doen, is om pad te gee uit hierdie kontinent waar malheid die miserabele mense as gyselaars aanhou* (Breytenbach 1998:47).

I have always been associated with an inferior race. I could not understand my own revolt. The only reason for my race's revolt is to plunder .... The only intelligent thing remaining, is to leave this continent, where insanity keeps miserable persons hostage.

The greatest significance of this complex text is the fact that it moves away from and reinterprets traditional cultural identity markers such as religion, language and social

customs, linking them to the personal of playwright and poet Breyten Breytenbach<sup>21</sup>. As such, it places Afrikaans theatre and Afrikaner identity against the backdrop of increasing globalization. Disregarding an organic approach defined by the interests of a group, the identity of the individual has become paramount.

## Conclusion

The first performances of Breytenbach's *Boklied* at the Little Karoo National Arts Festival (Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees or KKNK) caused a furore. To some members of the audience the performance was difficult to follow. They could not recognise the intertextual references to, among others, Aristophanes's or Rimbaud's writing. Another reason was that the text called for an actor to appear on stage with a naked behind and a feather between his buttocks. This offended part of the audience.

Both reasons serve as an indication of nonalignment by the audience with the performance and the ideas the text conveyed<sup>22</sup>.

Apart from the involvement of the audience, the association of sponsors with the KKNK should also be taken into account when considering the changing identity of Afrikaans theatre at the end of the previous century. The main sponsor of the event is Naspers, a conglomerate of major publication houses in South Africa. Naspers's involvement with the KKNK and similar ventures<sup>23</sup> make sound financial sense. The festivals offer publishers the opportunity to introduce and sell their publications.

However, as playwright Charles J. Fourie (2000) pointed out, not only financial benefit may be accrued from these festivals:

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Van Vuuren (1998/1999:50): 'Om by 'n enigsins koherente lesing van *Boklied* uit te kom, is dit belangrik om *Breytenbach se oeuvre en die outobiografiese gegewens van die digter* mee te lees' (To arrive at any understanding of *Boklied* whatsoever, it is imperative to read the play along with *Breytenbach's oeuvre and the autobiographical details of the poet*; e.i.o.).

<sup>22</sup> It must be noted, however, that, after the reaction of the first audiences, subsequent performances were immensely popular. The initial reception may, ironically, serve as an explanation for this turn in popularity.

<sup>23</sup> According to Jan-Jan Joubert (2000), writing for the Afrikaans Sunday newspaper *Rapport*, Naspers is the main sponsor of the Aardklop Festival (Potchefstroom), Rapport Festival (Windhoek, Namibia), Sarie Festival (White River) and the Gariep Festival (Kimberley). Spin-off festivals are the Kollig Festival (Durban) and Raisin Festival (Upington). Jacques Dommissie (2000), again writing for *Rapport*, even suggested the possibility of an arts festival to be held in London.

Arts festivals like the KKNK in Oudtshoorn ... offer some relief for independent theatre groups to stage their work, but with Standard Bank recently announcing their withdrawal as a sponsor [from the Standard Bank Arts Festival in Grahamstown] after 25 years, one fears the worst for the lifespan of these festivals. Perhaps they are too dependent on corporate sponsorship that mask hidden economic and political agendas.

The scenario invoked by Fourie reminds one of Isabel Hofmeyr's (1987) argument regarding the definitive role played by Afrikaner money power, the Afrikaner press and publication houses in shaping Afrikaner culture, literature and identity during the first half of the previous century. There are, however, a number of important differences between the context of the premier of *Boklied* (1998) and a play such as *Ou' Daniel* (1906). Most differences relate to the opposition of globalization (individualism) and the social engineering of Afrikaner (group) identity (Comaroff & Stern 1995). As indicated by Bartho Smit (1974) this mind shift started in the 1960s, and in Afrikaans theatre took the form of revising existing motifs that serve as indices of identity.

In conclusion, the most prominent motifs in Afrikaans theatre since 1960 relate to the depiction of persons of colour, gender and the deconstruction of social myths. These plays testify to the influence of social, political and historical processes that may be equated to reflections in a mirror. However, just as Plato's metaphoric polished copper mirror was unable to present a lifelike image of its society, Afrikaans plays could merely present a broken image of the processes involved in society and poorly reflected in the art of theatre.

Furthermore, Afrikaans playwrights added to the process by creating texts that questioned the power of the father and extended the notion of the *volksmoeder*. This process confirmed that the portrayals of *Afrikanerskap* and Afrikaner mythology in plays are social constructs and therefore subject to deconstruction and reconstruction.

Afrikaans Department  
University of South Africa

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