



PROJECT MUSE®

The Tempest (review)

Virginia Mason Vaughan

Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 27, Number 3, Fall 2009, pp. 468-471 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.0.0092>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/316787>

hyphy” is often called “getting stupid” or “going dumb.” As the students bounced and vibrated with the dance of their hyphy machine, I became convinced that “going dumb” never looked so smart. On that day, when the *Macbeth Project*’s hyphenations met Crockett’s “hyphy nation,” it became clear to me that what is more important than adjusting the habits of (re-habilitating) youth is the project of reincarnating our national arts pedagogy. The AASC places reincarnation before rehabilitation, illustrating that what needed to “come alive” was an ensemble capable of illustrating to hip-hop youth how their affective habits already have a home within larger political and aesthetic machines. With the help of the AASC’s project, Crockett’s hyphy performance has already begun to colorfully exceed and reconstitute the contours of our classic, national Shakespearean machine.



The Tempest

Presented by the **Baxter Theatre Centre** and the **Royal Shakespeare Company** at the **Richmond Theatre**, Surrey, UK. March 19–28, 2009. Directed by Janice Honeyman. Set designed by Illka Louw. Lighting design by Manie Manim. Music direction, composition and sound design by Neo Muyanga. Puppetry by Janni Younge. Choreography by Christopher Kindo. With Antony Sher (Prospero), John Kani (Caliban), Atandwa Kani (Ariel), Tinarié Van Wyk Loots (Miranda), Jeremy Crutchley (Alonso), Nicholas Pauling (Sebastian), Lionel Newton (Antonio), Charlie Keegan (Ferdinand), Ivan Abrahams (Gonzalo), Wayne Van Rooyen (Trinculo), Elton Landrew (Stephano), Royston Stoffels (Adrian), and others.

VIRGINIA MASON VAUGHAN, *Clark University*

The Richmond Theatre is a typical late-Victorian playhouse, its proscenium arch decorated with ornate friezes and little cupids. Built in 1899 at the height of the British Empire, this old-fashioned space nicely framed Janice Honeyman’s South African *Tempest*, which was set in the same period. In contrast to many *Tempest* productions of recent years that have paid lip service to the colonial theme in the treatment of their Calibans, only to ignore it for the remainder of the production, this *Tempest* consistently evoked the pain suffered by colonizer and colonized alike. Antony Sher’s Prospero, disheveled and bearded, wore the stained linen suit of a nineteenth-century European who had spent too much time in the jungle, while his daughter Miranda, played by the lanky and ebullient

Tinarie Van Wyk Loots, was reminiscent of Tarzan's Jane, a leather-clad, tree-climbing beauty. Living in the wild, simulated in Illka Louw's set by a giant tree whose convoluted foliage provided three levels of playing space, this gritty colonial pair were surviving life in the bush, not enjoying an island paradise.

Honeyman's animistic African ethos was apparent from the play's opening moments, when spirits, dressed in variegated body suits made of straw and accompanied by music and drums, waved a translucent serpentine puppet high in the air. As the program notes explained, in Zulu mythology serpents exhibited supernatural properties and their movements were thought to create turbulent weather. The waving serpent was, in effect, the storm created by Prospero, who stood aside watching. Throughout the production African drums and music were interspersed with the dialogue, and the audience watched the African spirits take part in the action, listen to what was said, and respond verbally in a variety of languages, including Bantu, Zulu, and Afrikaans. Sycorax was represented by means of African puppetry, the parts of her body held aloft as individual puppets—most notably the supersized hands that enclosed Ariel while Prospero recalled the spirit's confinement in a pine tree. Ariel later appeared as an Africanized harpy, a witchdoctor with wings, standing aloft on stilts with animal hooves at the base; his threatening words were accompanied by drums and cymbals, and he made the Neapolitans roll on the floor in agony. The play's puppetry, music, costumes, and set design incorporated a range of African motifs—not simply those of South Africa—and together they evoked a consistent non-European wild, a fascinating and colorful world where nature seemed alive.

Of course *The Tempest's* colonial resonances arise not simply from the ambiance of a non-European island, but from the characters' power relations, which were also forcefully rendered. Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio were costumed in English naval officers' uniforms, presumably serving as instruments of Victoria's British Empire, and they, in turn, were served by Ivan Abrahams' Gonzalo, who appeared as a South Asian Sikh, complete with turban and pantaloons. As the court party wandered around Prospero's jungle, the officers' trim hats and jackets disappeared and their white slacks became increasingly torn and soiled, until complete disorientation put them at Prospero's mercy.

With Prospero, too, the colonial project was stripped of illusions. In his interactions with Ariel and Caliban, Sher's Prospero was fueled by anger, his actions unusually brutal. In 1.2 he held his magic staff at Ariel's neck as if to choke him; then, when John Kani's Caliban protested, Sher

pulled out his sjambok—a South African whip made of rhinoceros hide. Prospero frequently brandished this whip, and his cruelty was particularly palpable when he knocked out the sticks the aged Kani used to support himself, making Caliban fall over. His rage crescendoed at the beginning of act five, when he grabbed a rifle and threatened to shoot his European enemies, reluctantly relenting after Ariel's call for forgiveness. In the Epilogue, Sher's Prospero still seemed unreconciled to his loss of control. Only in the final lines, which he addressed to Kani's Caliban instead of the audience, did he willingly relinquish power.

Opposite Sher's wrathful Prospero was John Kani's dignified Caliban. He was given no animal features or monstrous deformity. Instead, Kani appeared as a grey-haired and bearded, somewhat overweight gentleman, hunched over the sticks he needed to support his aging legs. Worn from age and unrelenting toil, this Caliban drew the audience's sympathy, and his claim that "This island's mine" rang true. After Prospero addressed the Epilogue's final lines to Caliban—"As you from crimes would pardoned be / Let your indulgence set me free"—and left the stage, Kani turned to the audience, slowly raised himself and stood straight for the first time. Proud and strong, he dropped his walking sticks and raised his arm in a gesture of liberation. In a post-play discussion, Kani reminded the audience that Shakespeare's works were smuggled into South Africa's prison on Robben Island where they were avidly studied by Nelson Mandela during his captivity. The actor explained that when apartheid ended, South Africans did not at first want to forgive those who had oppressed them, but Mandela and Bishop Tutu stressed *The Tempest's* lesson, that "the rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance." Unlike many recent productions, Honeyman's *Tempest* was rooted in the actors' lived experience, which made the colonial paradigm compellingly real, not simply window-dressing.

Despite its roots in South Africa's recent history, the Baxter/RSC *Tempest* never neglected its obligation to entertain. Little suggestions of jungle life—Miranda's frequent scratching, her pauses to extract nits from her scalp, or the strange noises made by spirits/musicians—created a fantasy world that was more enchanting than threatening. Tinarie Van Wyk Loots's Miranda, more mature and assertive than usual, was so fascinated by Charlie Keegan's Ferdinand that she could hardly keep her hands off his well-toned torso. Wayne Van Rooyen's Trinculo and Elton Landrew's Stephano enjoyed their clowning, which was interspersed with the spirits' songs and dances performed under Ariel's oversight. Moments of tenderness abounded as well, such as Prospero's frequent embraces of

Miranda or—after many futile attempts to touch Ariel—Sher's washing the body paint off Atandwa Kani's body to signify the spirit's release from bondage. Shining against the backdrop of the magician's anger, these loving touches were intensely poignant.

Acting alongside his more experienced father, Atandwa Kani rendered a charming and expressive Ariel. Dreadlocked and naked from the waist up except for the white designs painted on his body, Kani moved lithely up and down tree branches like a spirit indeed. His facial expressions were attuned to the moment, whether he was angry at his enslavement or amused by Ferdinand's protestations of undying love or Stephano and Trinculo's antics. In contrast to many post-colonial Ariels, Kani was never sullen. Once he was assured of his freedom, he did what the text calls for—he did his spriting gently, but also with humor and even enthusiasm. His enjoyment and his fellow spirits' delight in these white folks' escapades were contagious, becoming the audience's enjoyment and delight too. No wonder that they, and I, were disappointed that the play was over when Sher's Prospero appeared to deliver the Epilogue, suitcase in hand. Our revels were ended, but in contrast to many performances of *The Tempest* I have recently experienced, this one delighted and hurt not.



Othello

Presented by **Theatre for a New Audience** at **The Duke on 42d Street**, New York, New York. February 22–March 7, and April 12–24, 2009. Directed by Arin Arbus. Set by Peter Ksander. Costumes by Miranda Hoffman. Lighting by Marcus Doshi. Sound by Matt O'Hare. Music by Sarah Pickett. With Denis Butkus (Roderigo), Ned Eisenberg (Iago), Kate Forbes (Emilia), Lucas Hall (Cassio), Robert Langdon Lloyd (Duke of Venice), Elizabeth Meadows Rouse (Bianca), Christian Rummel (Montano), Juliet Rylance (Desdemona), Alexander Sovronsky (Senator, Soldier, Musician), John Douglas Thompson (Othello), Graham Winton (Brabantio, Lodovico).

KATHARINE GOODLAND, *College of Staten Island, New York*

The intimate Duke theatre is an ideal venue for Shakespeare's most intimate tragedy, which begins in the murky streets of Venice and ends on the thwarted nuptial sheets of the doomed couple. The audience wraps around three of the four sides of the square thrust stage, an arrangement that enhanced the grandeur of John Douglas Thompson's Homeric Othello while abetting the off-hand coziness of Ned Eisenberg's Iago,