DURBAN DIALOGUES DISSECTED

An Analysis of Ashwin Singh's Plays

Edited by Felicity Hand

List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout the text for quotations from Ashwin Singh's plays.

H	<i>To House</i>
SS	<i>Spice 'n' Stuff</i>
Sh	<i>Shooting</i>
RL	<i>Reoca Light</i>
D	<i>Duped</i>
BBB	<i>Beyond the Big Bangs</i>
Sw	<i>Swing</i>
IG	<i>Into the Grey</i>

Note on Terminology

We have chosen not to unify the authors' use of the term *black* so readers are encouraged to think beyond straightforward definitions. Each author uses the term in his or her own way and spells it with either a capital B or a small letter b. Likewise, authors have opted for capital or lower case letters for other ethnicities, such as white or coloured, in accordance with their specific purpose.

Introduction

Ashwin Singh's Drama: Reconstructing South Africanness

Felicity Hand

I first made Ashwin Singh's acquaintance via email over three years ago in 2017 and since then we have met on two occasions in Durban and have kept up a regular email correspondence together with Skype conversations. Ashwin contacted me as he had heard about a forthcoming publication I had co-edited with Esther Pujolràs-Noguer which contained a chapter on his play *To House* written by Coplen Rose, who has also contributed to this volume. To my shame, I was not very familiar with South African drama at all as I had tended to specialize in novels and short stories with some occasional poetry. However, over the last three years I have realized how much I had been missing and I have since incorporated several South African plays, including of course Ashwin's, into my syllabus. A highlight of one of my trips to Durban was watching a brilliant performance of Ashwin's 2017 play *Into the Grey*, in which he acted. I was deeply honoured to be invited to edit this volume of essays on Ashwin Singh's work and it is no exaggeration to say that the experience of working with Ashwin himself and the interaction with the authors in this volume has enriched me enormously.

In 1980s South Africa collective community theatre was identified with the soul of resistance to the oppressive apartheid state. Theatre traditions in the country were centred around the Struggle as the Black Consciousness Movement had inspired much political theatre from the 1970s onwards. Art clearly has a crucial role to play in disseminating political ideas, especially in dictatorial regimes, and to mention just one well known example, Maishe Maponya's *The Hungry Earth* (1979) called for resistance to the repressive apartheid state (Gilbert, 2007). The individual protester was obliged to find his or her niche within this community and by not conforming to the collective voice, he or she would have run the risk of being, at best, misunderstood and, at worst, categorized as indifferent or even hostile to the Struggle (Nuttall & Michael, 2000: 10-11). By the 1990s, when the demise of apartheid was becoming a reality, more strident individual voices were beginning to be heard. Director Mark Fleishman notes how new identities were gradually being forged, which would slowly dismantle rigid categories implemented by apartheid philosophy (Nuttall & Michael, 2000: 209). Despite the move towards an inclusive nation-building project, old racial fixations and stereotypes die hard. The first two decades of a democratic South Africa may

have rendered protest theatre somewhat obsolete but a firm belief in a creolized community, where the sharing of a common space leads to an intermingling of cultures, languages and customs without any hierarchical ranking, still seems to be in the making (Nuttall & Michael, 2000: 6-7). As regards specific Indian South African theatre, according to Neilish Bose (2009: 366), the Struggle did not enter into local drama until the 1960s when issues of discrimination and unfair apartheid laws began to feature in plays. Thomas Blom Hansen (2000: 256) notes that Durban Indians began to foment their own tradition of drama, satirical plays and outright political commentary from this time but even today they are still enmeshed in a crisis of representation, which manifests itself in the wider South African arena.

The plays of Ronnie Govender, who “inaugurated the genre of Indian South African theatre” (Rastogi, 2008: 222), focussed exclusively on the Indian South African community, which, being mainly quite conservative in outlook, shied away from excessive radicalism in its attempt to obtain middle-class respectability, making it, in the words of the playwright, “its own worst enemy” (ibid:232). These early Indian South African plays, including those by Kessie Govender, Kriben Pillay as well as Ronnie Govender’s own work, sought to delve into the complexity of the Indian community, so often reduced to what Hansen describes as the “older ‘coolie’ stereotypes [with their] funny accents, superstition, snobbery and patriarchal control of women” (Hansen, 2000: 267-268). These plays, with their “internalist character [of] self-mockery of vices and accents” (ibid: 258) highlight the internal racism and classism of the community while also attempting to celebrate the “new interracial solidarities and levels of understanding between non-whites” (ibid). In this respect Kessie Govender’s *Working Class Hero* needs to be singled out for its brave denunciation of Indian racism towards Black Africans.¹ Following on from Nuttall & Michael’s claim that twenty-first century South Africanness should be conceived in terms of a creolized identity, I claim that the plays of Ashwin Singh celebrate this creolization as his characters strive to come to terms with the post-apartheid situation which acknowledges – or should acknowledge – the contribution of cultures from the other ethnic groups in the “new” South Africa. In fact, Ronnie Govender laments what he calls the lost possibility of a common South African identity, free from apartheid categories (Rastogi, 2008: 223), which is a theme that resurfaces in post-apartheid drama, including Ashwin Singh’s work.

This volume aims to insert Ashwin Singh’s oeuvre into the postcolonial canon of drama but before I proceed to justify this well-deserved position, I wish to make a few comments on the absence of drama in far too much postcolonial criticism

1 In this respect Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed’s somewhat controversial 2016 publication suggests that Gandhi showed little sympathy towards the Africans. They argue that he collaborated to their subjugation and perpetuated racist stereotypes about black people by insisting on the Aryan connection between Indians and Europeans.

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and – I lament to add – in far too many university postcolonial syllabi. In *Post-Colonial Drama*, Gilbert and Tompkins note that “most post-colonial criticism overlooks drama, perhaps because of its apparently impure form: playscripts are only a part of a theatre experience, and performance is therefore difficult to document” (1996: 8). This is undoubtedly true as many of the plays of the Black Consciousness Movement underwent various rewritings during performances before the final print publication (Gilbert, 2007: 13). However, dramatic and performance theories “have much to offer post-colonial debates about language, interpellation, subject-formation, representation, and forms of resistance” (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996: 9). The difficulty, if not impossibility, of national audiences, let alone foreign drama enthusiasts, of actually viewing a live performance of contemporary drama, need not, and should not, prevent the study and criticism of this highly immediate and provocative genre. Postcolonial theatre critics tend to focus on what Femi Euba argues is an excessive interest in oppression and resistance, which “has tended to obfuscate other developments of political theatre in Africa” (Euba, 2002: 671). This is, of course, a valid argument as theatre, in our case South African, tends to be neglected in most postcolonial criticism as Gilbert and Tompkins point out. The question is whether we should be analyzing South African literature – and more specifically, Indian South African theatre – under the umbrella term of postcolonial writing. Loren Kruger claims that “the term ‘postcolonial’ and the sovereign state it presumably denotes has yet to gain the currency in South Africa that it enjoys in metropolitan academic circles” (1995: 61). Certainly, persisting class and ethnic inequalities suggest the truth of this statement but if we define the postcolonial moment as the demise of discriminatory racial laws and the achievement of universal franchise then post 1994 South Africa has indeed entered the postcolonial stage. So, why has South African postcolonial drama not received that much critical attention? To my mind, the problem resides not only in the discrepancies between the published text and the performance but in more far-reaching issues. While students around the world study Shakespeare’s plays without ever having seen a live performance of the Bard’s works, few university or secondary school teachers would include a contemporary play in their syllabi without the possibility of their students being able to see the acted performance of the drama in question. Obviously, factors surrounding the canon enter into this dilemma but we need to see performance as a tool of resistance to the inequalities of the status quo. Drama is an immediate and critical social self-introspection, and performance functions as a tool of resistance, but sadly economic questions of viability and the need for what actor and director Peter Hayes calls “a commercial edge” enter into the choice (Nuttall & Michael, 2000: 210). He argues that contemporary playwrights have to compete with sports events and more popular understandings of culture when it comes to corporate sponsors. This suggests that thought-provoking plays are – like literary novels – no longer on the popular agenda but our aim as critics is to vindicate the importance of serious drama – if by “serious” we mean plays that question our prejudices,

our comfortable middle-class positions, and our stereotypical visions of the Other. Our duty as university lecturers is to promote this kind of drama, regardless of whether our students can attend a performance of the play, as drama is, and will always be, a reflection of our reality.

In this volume, we celebrate the work of Indian South African playwright Ashwin Singh, which, through its diversity of characters from all ethnic backgrounds, goes beyond the former resistance plays and forges a more inclusive South African identity. This does not mean to say that his plays cover up the race and class inequalities that still plague the nation. On the contrary, Singh's work is an attempt to bring these blatant prejudices and social ills to the forefront as only by confronting unpleasant realities can any far-reaching changes ever take place. Singh admirably fills in what Gilbert and Tompkins have called "the gap in post-colonial studies" (1996: 9) as his plays provide a sweeping overview of the trials and tribulations of the newly inaugurated post-apartheid, therefore postcolonial, state. The contrast between the climate of optimistic political protest and the complacency and disillusion of the new democratic era serves to reassess the actions of the past in the light of the present outcomes. *Into the Grey* (2017), Singh's most recently published play, spans over almost thirty years and, while not being totally pessimistic, does engage the audience to reflect on the actions of the heroes of the Struggle in the light of their current dubious choices. One of the many projects of postcoloniality is to review and rewrite past histories in order to present alternative viewpoints but also to reject any sense of the marginalized or colonized as having an inherent purity as opposed to the innate villainy of the colonizing white minority. Non-binary thinking is essential in any postcolonial reassessment of the past and Singh's plays avoid falling into this trap. His works encompass a myriad of current situations and social issues and he is careful to measure out dramatic moments with snatches of humour so the audience (or reader) can fully empathise with the characters.

In true theatrical fashion this volume is organized into three acts. Following this introduction, we provide a brief biography of the playwright and a list of his works. Act 1 concludes with an interview with Ashwin Singh which highlights his concerns with the future of contemporary South African theatre, which is witnessing rapidly diminishing theatre audiences. Despite competition from television, Netflix and the like, Singh claims that, like other well-known foreign playwrights who use humour in their work, "comedy with substance can be effectively used to heal some of the country's unfinished business" so he still believes in the role of theatre as a vehicle for social change.

Act 2 contains six essays by leading academics and cultural practitioners. Betty Govinden inscribes Singh's oeuvre within the traditions of South African literature and drama in her chapter "'The Cartography of Struggle' in South African Theatre, with Particular Reference to *Reoca Light* by Ashwin Singh". She emphasizes how South African plays – and Ashwin Singh's are no exception – are

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“impelled by a robust political will to overcome apartheid, and strong impulses to focus on the goals of common citizenship”. Govinden centres the main body of her article on Singh’s one-man play *Reoca Light*, which, she claims, illustrates the survival tactics of the indentured labourers and their descendants. Her detailed discussion of the play focuses on the numerous themes that *Reoca Light* brings to the fore, including home, identity, diaspora and of course spatial politics.

Deborah Lutge, in her chapter “Ashwin Singh: Egg or Chicken: A Writer/Director’s Recipe in Interviews and Analysis”, seeks to unravel what she calls the chicken and egg syndrome, by comparing opinions of various leading South African playwrights including Ashwin Singh himself. She claims that the work of the director is as far-reaching as the playwright’s - hence her title - and which together forge an alliance that aims to uncover a past which can explain the meaning of our present existence. She argues that “the relationship between writer and director is a mutually influential one, and it is the critical detachment that is the key to a solid working relationship”. Her chapter emphasizes how Singh’s work is paramount in “globally connecting contexts, by inviting and encompassing multi-layered perspectives, acknowledging the shift away from tunnel world-views grown in isolation”.

Coplen Rose’s chapter “From Rockets to Robots: The Function of Science Fiction Icons in Ashwin Singh’s *Duped*” examines this 2011 play as a clever mixture of satire and Science Fiction deployed by the playwright in order to explore apartheid’s traumatic legacy. The chapter acknowledges the playwright’s refusal to think in binary terms as “Singh’s foray into the SF genre avoids creating a simple binary between explorer and the people under assessment by identifying both parties as members of the same nation”. Rose concludes by stating that, in true Singh fashion, the play’s message is a warning call that mutual distrust and self-interest among South Africans could be used to install sinister methods of control.

Shantal Singh provides a psychological perspective to Ashwin Singh’s plays in her chapter “Exploring Trauma in Post-Apartheid South Africa as Experienced by Lead Characters in Ashwin Singh’s Plays *Shooting*, *Beyond the Big Bangs* and *Into the Grey*”. She examines the playwright’s ability to “balance the emotion of trauma [in post-apartheid South Africa] while entertaining the audience”. Shantal Singh argues that while other South African playwrights have tackled this highly sensitive area, Ashwin Singh is able to go one step further by delving into the “complexities and contradictions” of his characters, victims and perpetrators. In her chapter, which focusses on three of Singh’s plays, she highlights the difficulty of achieving an equilibrium and portraying three-dimensional characters when themes of trauma are foregrounded.

Pranav Joshipura’s chapter “Racial Conflict Presented Through the Plays of Indian South African Playwright Ashwin Singh” explores the background to Indian South African theatre. This timely contextualization of the role of Indian South

African playwrights in recent history paves the way for his analysis of Singh's work. Joshipura points out that Singh's plays "not only present problems the nation faces at micro level of their multiracial existence but also pose questions to the government regarding their intention of governing the nation" thus signalling the political role of the playwright and his interpellation of his audiences in this task. Joshipura concludes that "Ashwin Singh's plays enable readers and theatregoers to explore racial and class divisions in South Africa as well as providing solutions to end them".

The final chapter of Act 2 is dedicated to Singh's latest performed play *Into the Grey* (2017). Felicity Hand argues that this play has to be read as a call for resilience as a way for more positive, adaptable solutions to contemporary inequalities, which can serve as antidotes for more positive thinking and a clear determination to abandon, what Singh calls the "grey".

Act 3 begins with Ralph Lawson's views on the role of the director. In his chapter "A Director's Cut. Staging the Play", Lawson, who has collaborated with Ashwin Singh in numerous productions, reveals the dilemmas and quandaries of a theatre director. Focussing on three of Singh's plays, Lawson succeeds in enlightening audiences and readers on the crucial decisions that a theatre director must take as regards characters' psychology and motivations, without losing sight of what he calls the playwright's "pivotal idea". Lawson makes it clear what Deborah Lutge suggests in her chapter that playwright and director form a symbiosis that turns the theatrical event into a multifaceted experience.

The final scene in Act 3 of this volume is Pallavi Rastogi's "Afterword. How to Swing the Game of Life in South Africa", which sums up many of the issues dealt with in the preceding chapters but with a special focus on the play *Swing*. Rastogi highlights Singh's essential Durban identity, which is apparent in most of his plays as well as his constant experimentation with new forms and new approaches within the genre of drama. She centres her main argument on the play *Swing* (2015), which has not been discussed in detail by any of the preceding authors. *Swing*, Rastogi argues, exemplifies "the conflict between the coloured and the Indian communities who are unable to transcend their differences". The play switches back and forth from the apartheid days to the present through the narratives of the two characters, Samantha and her father. Without a clear-cut resolution, the play leaves the viewer/ reader wondering what the outcome will be - who will win the tennis match, Samantha, the coloured-Indian or Lerato Sibisi, the umZulu - but this is precisely the point, South Africa will be whatever the people make it.

This volume aims to celebrate the work of Ashwin Singh, a "brave new voice" as Pallavi Rastogi calls him, and to encourage readers, theatre-lovers, postcolonial specialists and other interested scholars around the world to discover his amazing gift and enjoy learning about the reality/ realities - Singh would be the first to

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acknowledge this plurality - of post-apartheid South Africa from his entertaining and thought-provoking plays.

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Ashwin Singh's Biography

Ashwin Singh is an attorney, academic, playwright, director, actor and filmmaker. His plays have received national and international exposure, having travelled throughout South Africa as well as to India and London. *To House; Spice 'n Stuff; Shooting; Beyond the Big Bangs; Reoca Light* and *Into the Grey* are widely regarded as his seminal works. His first anthology of plays, *Durban Dialogues, Indian Voice. Five South African Plays* was published in 2013 by London-based Aurora Metro Books. His second anthology, *Durban Dialogues, Then and Now* was published by Aurora Metro Books in 2017. These books are being studied and/or referenced at a variety of universities in South Africa, Mauritius, India, Canada and Europe. Singh has also been published as a playwright in the collective anthologies, *New South African Plays* (Aurora Metro Books, 2006) and *The Catalina Collection* (Catalina UnLtd, 2013). There have been several presentations on his oeuvre at seminars and conferences in South Africa, India and Europe. Singh is also a published poet and academic author. His debut novel, *Shooting*, based on the play of the same title was published by MicroMega Publications in 2020.

Singh is a three-time national award winner via the PANSA Playreading Festival (the country's foremost playwriting contest) with his plays *To House* (2003); *Duped* (2005; earlier version); and *Reoca Light* (2012). He is also a respected stage and radio actor, having performed in a number of dramatic and comic productions. The stage productions include *Spice 'n Stuff*, *Marital Blitz*, *PopCom*, *Culture Clash*, *To House* and *Into the Grey*. The radio productions include *Psycho Art*, *Switch Hitch* and *GrandAsia Lodge*. His plays *Spice 'n Stuff* and *To House* have been adapted for radio on Lotus FM and SA FM respectively. Singh also played a lead role in award winning UK director James Brown's short film about child abuse, *One Wedding and A Funeral* and has just written and directed his debut documentary feature film about Indian identity entitled *The Cane Cutters' Transcendence*.

Singh is a former board member of the Catalina UnLtd Theatre Company and has been a script writing and business mentor for the Playhouse Company's development programmes over the past decade. The Singh Siblings (Pty) Ltd and the Playhouse Company have been the most prominent producers of Singh's works.

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Ashwin Singh's Plays and Other Theatre Works

The Plays

To House (2003)

Spice 'N Stuff (2006)

Shooting (2009)

Reoca Light (2010)

Duped (2011)

Marital Blitz (2011) [Co-Written With Kajal Maharaj And Nesan Pather]

Culture Clash (2012) [Co-Written With Edmund Mhlongo]

Beyond the Big Bangs (2013)

Swing (2015)

Into the Grey (2017)

The Sketch Comedy Shows

The Rainbow Indignation (2001) [Co-Written With Joe Carroll And Ivan Boniaszczuk]

The Looney Lahnee Show (2009) [Co-Written With Dhaveshan Govender]

Popcom (2012) [Co-Written With Kajal Maharaj And Nesan Pather]

Popcom 2 (2020)

To House; *Spice 'n Stuff*; *Reoca Light*; *Duped* and *Beyond the Big Bangs* were published in the individual anthology Singh, A. *Durban Dialogues, Indian Voice. Five South African Plays*. 2013. London: Aurora Metro Books.

Shooting; *Swing* and *Into the Grey* were published in the individual anthology Singh, A. 2017. *Durban Dialogues, Then and Now*. London: Aurora Metro Books.

To House was also published in the collective anthology Fourie, C.J. (ed). 2006. *New South African Plays* London: Aurora Metro Books.

Spice 'n Stuff was also published in the collective anthology Catalina UnLtd. 2013. *The Catalina Collection*. Durban: Catalina UnLtd.

Shooting was adapted into a novel and published by MicroMega Publications in 2020.