

Shakespeare Schools Festivals – Malawi IV and South Africa X

Friday, 13th March, 2020

The Fugard Theatre, Cape Town

The following is a brief report (for the benefit of Kamuzu Academy, SSF MW & SA and other ‘friends and sponsors’) of the successful attempt to bring the two Shakespeare Schools Festivals together (for the first time) in Cape Town.

Background

Over the past three years (2017 – 2019) Kamuzu Academy [KA] has hosted a Malawi Shakespeare Schools Festival [SSF MW]. This is a ‘daughter’ Festival of the South African Festival [SSF SA]. In November 2019 some four hundred pupils and teachers were involved, representing twelve schools from all three regions of Malawi. They included two deaf schools. All together some twelve thirty-minute adaptations of Shakespeare plays and as many sonnets were performed over two days.

There is a video record of the occasion that might be accessed from:

<http://shakespeare.fritillary.org>

SSF SA has a website at:

<https://www.ssfsa.co.za>

SSF MW IV & SSF SA X

It has been our special wish over the years to find a way to bring the South African Festival to Malawi and / or the Malawi Festival to South Africa. Accordingly, we were delighted to receive an invitation from Ms. Kseniya Filinova-Bruton (founding director) to bring a Malawi play to perform as part of the tenth anniversary celebrations of the South African Festival in 2020.

This had been countenanced in April 2014 when RH first met the South African director in Cape Town. Six years later (and four years after the Malawi Festival was established) it was to be fulfilled.

The South African Festival exceeded in length and ambition even what RH had witnessed in Cape Town in May 2019. Together with KA, thirty-four schools (from Western Cape alone) would perform thirty-six productions of fourteen different plays over twelve days (Tuesday, 3rd – Saturday, 14th March). They would include three special needs schools, including for the deaf and the blind, and many more from the locations. The programme is alongside.

The Fugard Theatre had made available its handsome space (it is a converted church) to the South African Festival on favourable terms. A special feature of the Festival is that participants are able to perform on a professional stage. This is very different from what is possible in Malawi, where available space is KA’s auditorium.

Kamuzu Academy Drama Club & Cape Town 2020

The school most ready and able to accept this invitation was KA, whose Drama Club (under the direction of Mr. Lloyd William Parker, himself a South African and graduate of the University of KwaZulu-Natal) had performed *The Comedy of Errors* in November 2019 – to considerable acclaim.

LWP has contributed his own report as director of the KA Drama Club. However, it falls to RH as director of the Malawi Festival to confirm that KA could not have represented Malawi better. Both performance and deportment were wholly admirable.

Eleven pupils and three teachers of KA participated. (Their names are appended.) The party left Malawi on Wednesday, 11th March and returned on Tuesday, 17th. It included two Government scholars – Memory Munthali (Likoma District) and Emmanuel Sogolera (Mulanje District) – who were able to join us thanks to the generosity of donors in South Africa and the United Kingdom.

It should be noted that not one of the pupils had seen a professional theatre before rehearsal on the morning of Friday, 13th let alone acted in one. (Even the journey into Cape Town – along roads and among buildings unknown in Malawi – was revelatory to some.) In the event, the performance of the KA Drama Club that evening was greeted with a standing ovation. This was a remarkable achievement and put flight to any notion (reflected in a rather ill judged report in the *Cape Times*) that KA is somehow a ‘bush school’. KA participated (as an equal) alongside the three Wynberg schools – as per the programme.

Theodore Mitole (especially) caught the attention of the South African director. It may be that considerable opportunity will result from this.

There is a photographic record of the occasion that might be accessed from:

<http://shakespeare.fritillary.org>

Pupils returned to the Fugard Theatre on the evening of Saturday, 14th to attend the final day of the Festival. The highlight was the play that concluded proceedings: *The Taming of the Shrew* by De la Bat School for the Deaf. (This was filmed for the benefit and inspiration of deaf schools in Malawi.) Memory Munthali and Emmanuel Sogolera spoke on behalf of Malawi at a short ceremony of thanksgiving that was convened by the South African director.

Our final visit to the Fugard Theatre took place on Sunday, 15th. This was to watch the matinée performance of Athol Fugard’s *Master Harold’... and the Boys* – appropriate not least because the KA Drama Club had performed *The Island* in March 2019. Once again, it was extraordinary to watch the reaction of pupils when confronted with professional drama for the first time in their lives. It was clearly a very moving experience for them and it was satisfying to note the generosity of the principal actors in finding time to welcome their Malawi guests personally.

The Fugard Theatre was closed – *sine die* – by Presidential decree (as were all theatres in South Africa) on account of the coronavirus epidemic that evening.

Aliter

RH must admit that he had looked forward with a certain ambivalence to the prospect of the company of adolescents over seven days.

He is humbled to report that other aspects of our visit were also wholly enjoyable. Cultural excursions were made to the University of Cape Town, the Rhodes Memorial, Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, the Waterfront Theatre School, the V & A Waterfront itself and Zeitz MOCAA, Simonstown (for the Boulders Beach Penguin Colony and the historical centre) and various churches that reflected the denominations of the party. All of these were successful.

However, special mention should be made of the welcome extended by the Lighthouse Farm Backpackers Lodge in the Oude Molen Eco-Village, Pinelands, which provides simple, peaceful and comfortable accommodation in a happily idealistic, alternative and inclusive community. This was transformative for our party, which demonstrated over only seven days the positive effect of living and working together at close quarters.

Funding & Support

It is RH's pleasure and duty to acknowledge the generous support of the following:

- a) Ms. Kseniya Filinova-Bruton (EduCape Ltd. and SSF SA) kindly extended a welcome to SSF MW to join SSF SA in Cape Town and undertook every effort to facilitate the exchange. It should be emphasized that participation in SSF SA is usually at cost, which she generously waives for SSF MW. Her encouragement and support to our Malawi Festival have been unfailing over many years. Thanks also to Mr. Blythe Linger, who is assistant director to the South African Festival.
- b) The hospitality of both the Fugard Theatre and the Lighthouse Farm Backpackers Lodge was integral to the success of our visit.
- c) Mr. Andrew Wild (Headmaster, KA) agreed to the use (without charge) of KA's transport in Malawi, financial support for transport and food in South Africa and a contribution toward the cost of airfare for accompanying teachers. He considers SSF MW to be an important part of KA's cultural programme and 'outreach' to Malawi and the world, which are aims we are happy to endorse. The contribution of Mr. Fyson Kanjira (Bursar) and Messrs. Hawkins Gondwe and Andrew Hubbard (Dep. Headmasters) is also acknowledged with gratitude.
- d) Mr. Jeffrey Hewitt (UK) made a generous contribution toward our visit, which (at least) met the costs of Memory Munthali (Government scholar), paid for the work of the professional photographer at the Festival, and allowed the KA Drama Club to watch *'Master Harold'... and the Boys*. Mr. Barry Brindley (UK) kindly arranged for the Zikomo Trust to forward this donation and to add 'Gift Aid'.

- e) Parents and Guardians of pupils generously paid for airfare and accommodation, extended words of encouragement and gratitude, and overcame their anxiety in the face of foreign travel in the time of the coronavirus.
- f) Without the hard work, advice and collaboration of RH's colleagues, Mr. Lloyd William Parker and Ms. Dionne Wright, the Malawi Festival could not have been represented in South Africa. LWP also kindly sponsored Emmanuel Sogolera (Government scholar).
- g) Last but not least... Pupils involved in the KA Drama Club could not have proved more talented, gracious and committed thespians, on the one hand, nor better ambassadors for Malawi, on the other.

Many thanks and Zikomo kwambili to the above and to everyone else who contributed in any other way!

Obiter Dicta

It would be conventional to conclude by commenting on the benefit of our visit to participants in particular and to Malawi and / or Kamuzu Academy in general. It is hoped that this will be self-evident to all people of good will.

Another time would also invite consideration of the future of the Malawi Festival and its relationship with the South African Festival. It is hoped that this time will come to pass.

However, on the evening of the day on which South Africa closes its borders and its communities for at least the next three weeks, and when the fates of Malawi and the United Kingdom are also far from certain, it seems more appropriate to offer the words of C. S. Lewis that Presbyterians in our party heard quoted from the pulpit of the Good Hope Presbyterian Church, Cape Town, during Sunday devotions:

It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.

This is the first point to be made, and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things – praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts – not huddling together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies but they need not dominate our minds.

The sentiment seems transferable to the present age and we would like to think that our participation in the South African Festival was in this spirit.

R. L. Hewitt

25th March 2020

**Kamuzu Academy Drama Club
Cape Town 2020**

Zimatha CHILIMA
Mzati DZOOLE
Ndemiji KACHALE
Gomezgani KAYIRA
Daniel MATAYA
Theodore MITOLE
Watipa MKANDAWIRE
Memory MUNTHALI
Temwa MUNTHALI
Hannock NYIMBIRI
Emmanuel SOGOLERA

Mr. Lloyd William Parker
Ms. Dionne Wright

Mr. Richard L. Hewitt

LWP writes...

This farcical comedy sees two sets of twins caught up in a series of mistaken identities that lead them into hilarious trouble. The play evolves with Antipholus of Ephesus being barred from his own house while Antipholus of Syracuse unwillingly dines inside with his wife. More conflict develops when a chain commissioned by Antipholus of Syracuse is delivered to the other Antipholus. The merchants chase down the twins while it all comes to a head as the twins are revealed to each other. The errors of the play are untangled as they work out what has happened for a final resolution and reunion.

The choices for costume and design were made to assist the audience in untangling the confusion of characters. The Antipholuses and Dromios were matched in *chitenje* accents on their costumes. This made it easy to see when an Antipholus was speaking to the wrong Dromio. The same was done with the two sisters, Adriana and Luciana, by linking their wrap skirts with the appropriate twin. The merchants were kept simple in *chitenje* waistcoats while the additional characters were explored with more unique features to allow them to command more space within the play.

To travel to Cape Town and the Fugard Theatre with this play was a truly incredible experience. I could not have asked for a better group of young thespians to work with and they represented the Academy and Malawi proudly. We all hope that this was the first of many such opportunities.
