

Subversion versus Inversion: The Loss of the Carnivalesque in Janet Suzman's *The Free State*

Lida Krüger, Hein Viljoen & Marita Wenzel

Summary

According to Gilbert and Thompkins (1996: 5), postcolonial drama is aimed at dismantling the hierarchies and determinants that create binary oppositions in postcolonial contexts and – according to Young (2001: 4) – also actively transforming the present “out of the clutches of the past”. This dismantling can, however, only occur when the inevitable ambivalence of postcolonial binaries are taken into account (Gilbert & Thompkins 1996: 6). In her text *The Free State* (2000a), Janet Suzman attempts to appropriate Chekhov’s dismantling of power structures in *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) within the South African context. However, although *The Free State* is written against the former apartheid regime, it fails to dismantle the hierarchies within its context because it negates the vital carnivalesque subversion of Chekhov’s text. Instead of subverting the hierarchies in her context, Suzman merely inverts them. In this article, the concept of the carnival as developed by Mikhail Bakhtin is used to investigate the significance of Suzman’s deviation in the treatment of the hierarchies within the South African context.

Opsomming

Volgens Gilbert en Thompkins (1996: 5) het postkoloniale drama ten doel om die hiërargieë en beslissende faktore wat binêre teenstellings in postkoloniale kontekste veroorsaak, te ontbind, en Young (2001: 4) voer aan dat dit die hede aktief transformeer [“uit die kloue van die verlede”]. Hierdie ontbinding kan egter slegs plaasvind wanneer die onvermydelike ambivalensie van die binêre teenstellings binne postkoloniale kontekste in ag geneem word (Gilbert & Thompkins 1996: 6). Janet Suzman poog met haar teks *The Free State* (2000a) om Chekhov se ontbinding van magstrukture in *The Cherry Orchard* (vertaal as *Die kersieboord*, oorspronklik in Russies gepubliseer in 1904) vir die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks toe te eien. Alhoewel *The Free State* teen die hegemonie van die voormalige apartheidsbestel geskryf is, slaag dit egter nie daarin om hiërargieë te ontbind nie aangesien dit 'n integrale aspek van Chekhov se teks negeer, naamlik die karnavaleske ondermyning van daardie hiërargieë. In plaas daarvan om die hiërargieë in haar konteks te ontbind deur dit te ondermyn, keer Suzman dit bloot om. In hierdie artikel word die konsep van die karnaval soos ontwikkel deur Mikhail Bakhtin gebruik om die implikasie van hierdie afwyking in Suzman se teks binne die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks te ondersoek.

1 Introduction

Janet Suzman's drama *The Free State* (2000a)¹ is an appropriation of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (which he wrote in 1904)² and is situated within the South African context. This type of response to, or rewriting of, canonised texts is often found in postcolonial literature, usually in the form of canonical counter-discourse, which entails the rewriting of a so-called classic narrative (such as Derek Walcott's *Pantomime* (2001), a response to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (2001)) with the aim of dismantling the colonial discourses, power structures and social hierarchies within the text (Gilbert & Thompkins 1996: 2). In this way, the assumed imperial hierarchy in such texts is challenged. However, Suzman does not aim to dismantle Chekhov's text, but to transpose it to a context familiar to her, based on certain similarities between the two contexts. Both texts are set in the midst of social change: in 1904, Chekhov's Russia was still coming to terms with the abolition of serfdom (in 1861) and still anticipating great social and political changes (Zakharova 2006: 593). In South Africa, the year 1994 marked the end of apartheid. This corresponding end of an official, institutionalised oppression thus forms one of the similarities between the contexts on which Suzman bases her text.

There is, however, an important aspect in which Suzman's text differs from Chekhov's. In this article it is argued that if Bakhtin's notion of *carnival* were applicable to Chekhov's text, which involves the subversion of the contemporary hierarchical structures, then the carnivalesque would be absent from Suzman's text. Chekhov not only inverts but also subverts the hierarchy of serfdom by indicting the former masters' conduct as well as the servants' aspirations to rise to the social status of their masters, in a manner reminiscent of Bakhtin's conception of the carnival. Suzman only indicts the nostalgic behaviour of the previously advantaged characters in her play, and strongly sympathises with the politically correct views held by most of the characters. Where Chekhov subverts – and thus dismantles and undermines – the hierarchy of serfdom, Suzman merely inverts the hierarchy of

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1. Although the full title of the play is *The Free State: A South African Response to Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard"*, the title, *The Free State*, without its subtitle, is used throughout this article.
 2. Suzman used a literal translation of *The Cherry Orchard* by Tania Alexander in her adaptation. However, no such translation could be found in print and a version of the play by Pam Gems (1996) from the literal translation by Tania Alexander was used. English translations by Laurence Senelick (2006), Tania Alexander (1996), Elsaveta Fen (1954) and Julius West (1916), as well as an Afrikaans translation by Karel Schoeman (1975), were also consulted.

apartheid, and therefore only rearranges the subjects of this structure in her context, without indicting it per se.

2 Subversion versus Inversion

2.1 Chekhov and *The Cherry Orchard*

In Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, a noblewoman (Lyubov Ranyevskaya) and her brother (Leonid Gayev) struggle to come to terms with the fact that their way of life is no longer sustainable. When the play opens, the siblings are already in the process of losing their estate as a result of their profligate lifestyle. Due to the abolition of serfdom, the Gayev family has to compete economically with the lower classes, but their poor financial management and ineptitude at farming have caused the bankruptcy of their estate. Their peasant-born businessman friend, Lopakhin, offers to help the family retain their land by devising a plan which entails cutting down their beloved cherry orchard to make room for a more economical, more sensible housing development. The family rejects the plan, as they cannot bear to see their orchard cut down, and they lose their estate, which Lopakhin then buys at an auction. Although the estate belonged to Lyubov, she had not lived on it for years. She left after her husband's death from alcohol abuse and her infant son's drowning, leaving her adopted daughter Varya in charge of the housekeeping and staff. The play thus opens with Lyubov returning to the home of her childhood and youth after an absence of five years. Apart from the reunion of the family, the play shows the complicated relationship between the family and their servants. The reader/audience thus also meets Dunyasha (the housemaid), Yepichodov (the estate clerk) and Yasha (the young footman).

Like Chekhov's other plays, the play is not plot-based but character-based. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov shows the reader or audience an array of characters that are representative of a number of social positions. Styan (1971: 241-243) divides the characters into categories of birth and class, economic considerations, age and sex. Chekhov uses these contrasting stances towards social change to create tensions within the play. These tensions include the social opposition between the spiritual and intellectual friend of the family, Trofimov, and the hard-working materialist Lopakhin. These two characters argue throughout the play because Lopakhin cannot understand Trofimov's philosophical views on life and his frugal and seemingly idle lifestyle, while Trofimov regards Lopakhin as an insensitive materialist. When Lopakhin offers Trofimov money at the end of the play, Trofimov turns it down, saying, "I'm free of all that ... all the things you crave ... have no power over me. I walk past you, I do without you. Can't you understand? Humanity is on the move towards a higher truth ..."

(Chekhov 1996: 71). Lopakhin replies that when he is working, he gets the feeling that he knows why he exists. These two characters thus part in an amicable way, realising that they will never agree on issues of work, money and humankind.

Lopakhin's attitude towards money is also contrasted with Lyubov's spendthrift attitude, while her irresponsible attitude towards love is also contrasted with Trofimov's. When Trofimov criticises Lyubov for going back to a man who has been unfaithful to her and has stolen from her, Lyubov calls Trofimov a prig, suggesting that it is unnatural for him not to have a mistress at his age. This cast of characters also identifies social hierarchies according to Styan's description. According to these hierarchies, Gayev ranks higher than Trofimov regarding class, while (as a radical student) Trofimov outranks Gayev intellectually. The different characters also have different speech registers, which correspond to these respective categories and sometimes clash with other characters' ways of expression. Yepichodov, for example, speaks in an inappropriately formal register in an attempt to emulate the higher class he aspires to, and in the third act he challenges Varya's authority over him. As their argument becomes more heated, Varya becomes more emotional – to the point where she threatens Yepichodov with a stick – and yet Yepichodov persists speaking in his inappropriate register. Their speech registers clash in an ironic manner when the adopted daughter of gentry threatens the uneducated clerk with physical violence and he replies, "I must ask you to express yourself with more delicacy" (Chekhov 1996: 64). In this way, Chekhov's characterisation becomes a polyphonic and textured canvas on which to explore his plot of the loss of an orchard and the traumatic passing of an unjustifiable way of life.³

Yet it is important to keep in mind that Chekhov does not promote any of these binary oppositions of work versus idleness or materiality versus spirituality, but undermines them. Whenever Chekhov's characters take themselves or their situation too seriously, he undermines them by having the other characters ignore them or letting them literally fall down. For example, when Lyubov offends Trofimov by saying that it is unnatural not to have a mistress, he storms out, declaring that "[i]t's over between" (Chekhov 1996: 60) him and Lyubov – only to then fall down the stairs, to the amusement of Varya and Anya.⁴

However, due to the themes of loss and trauma, Chekhov's work has in the past been labelled as depressing; it has been associated with covert

3. For a detailed discussion of Chekhov's textured characterisation, see Styan (1971).

4. For a detailed discussion of Chekhov's undermining of binaries, see Senelick (2006) and Styan (1971).

sympathy for the former gentry and promoting their plight throughout his play. Chekhov rejected the notion that his plays are depressing:

You say that you have wept over my plays. Yes, and not you alone. But I did not write them for that; it is Alexeyev [Stanislavski, the director] who has made such cry-babies of my characters. I wanted something else. I wanted to tell people honestly: "Look at yourselves. See how badly you live and how tiresome you are!" The main thing is that people should understand this. When they do, they will surely create a new and better life for themselves. I will not see it, but I know it will be entirely different, not like what we have now. And so long as it does not exist, I will continue to tell people: "See how badly you live, and how tiresome you are!" Is that what makes them weep?

(Chekhov quoted in Valency 1966: 298-299)

Chekhov thus sees the circumstances of his characters as uplifting rather than tragic, irrespective of their social position. Gottlieb observes:

It is almost impossible to detect Chekhov's dislike of a character in his plays – except, perhaps, of Ivanov, Natasha in *Three Sisters* and Yasha in *The Cherry Orchard*. With most of his characters, their three-dimensionality results in a "realistic" perspective, with decent and weak aspects to each character, and no sense of the "black and white" which informed the stereotypic characters and plots of many of the contemporary popular comedies.

(Gottlieb 2000: 230)

Thus, Chekhov uses comedy and humour to indict the lifestyles of all his characters. Gayev's decadent and indulgent lifestyle is, for example, indicted by his ridiculous speechifying which none of the characters take seriously. At the end of Act One, Gayev tells them: "You know, you're talking to a man of the eighties – oh, I've had to suffer for my convictions ... the peasants don't love me for nothing You've got to know your peasant ... know how to ..." (Chekhov 1996: 34) – whereupon Anya and Varya interrupt him and ask him to stop. Yet, the peasants' ambitions are also undermined, as the unlucky Yepichodov's clumsiness and inappropriate register ridicule him. For all their clowning and binary attitudes, Chekhov thus still succeeded in creating realistic, nuanced characters, rather than stereotypes.⁵

Although the word "comedy" is notoriously difficult to define, Stott (2005: 2) defines it as both a tonal and a structural quality that should be distinguished from "humour", which he defines as a specific tone operating

5. Although Chekhov is often grouped with Ibsen as a naturalist, States (1985: 82) proposes that Chekhov actually "disguised" elements of self-parody and even surrealism within naturalism.

free from generic restraints. Weitz (2009: 9) agrees that although humour is closely associated with comedy, it is not the essence of it. Weitz (2009: 9) defines comedy as a “spirited escape from the harsher realities of corporeal existence” which “recalls the sense of play with which we humans sidestep the serious implications of life on earth”. Furthermore, Stott (2005: 2) defines a few persistent comic themes which can constitute this “escape” Weitz describes. These themes include the “world-turned-upside-down” (or the inversion of “master” and “slave”), foolishness, intellectual myopia and the rigid insistence of an inflexible system. Colebrook (2004: 137) says that humour often results from an incongruity in the concept of the self. In other words, the humour that supplements comedy often arises when a character deviates in some way from his or her personality or context.

Pitcher (1985: 91, 92) suggests that Chekhov’s humour is often rooted in the incongruous or the subversive, and traces these comic roots back to his short stories of the 1880s. According to Pitcher (1985: 91), the humour in Chekhov’s short story “From the Diary of a Violent-tempered Man” is based on the fact that “the hero is not quick-tempered at all, although he would like to be”. This incongruence between the character’s mask and face (or the way he or she would like to be perceived and the way in which they are really perceived) causes humour, as is also the case with Yepichodov, Yasha and Dunyasha in *The Cherry Orchard*. Pitcher (1985: 92) describes Chekhov’s comedy of subversion as comedy that “exposes and holds up to ridicule the whole authoritarian, hierarchical arrangement of society” and discusses short stories such as “Mayonnaise” and “The Professional Pianist” in which characters conform to their designated roles in the hierarchy. In these stories, “rank-consciousness inevitably breeds arrogance toward those below and servility towards those above in the social hierarchy” (p. 92). Despite the fact that Chekhov exposes this hierarchical system, his characters do not dissent from it, and “if anyone *is* moved to protest, the attempt is likely to end in bathos” (p. 92). In *The Cherry Orchard*, we see this in Yepichodov’s resistance to Varya’s authority which is undermined by his stilted speech.

This tension between mask and face results in a carnivalesque situation where the servants’ attempt to overthrow the master-servant hierarchy fails, thus ridiculing both their own and their masters’ aspirations.

2.2 Suzman’s *The Free State*

In contrast to Chekhov who never indulges his characters’ acts of dissent, Suzman has a very specific political agenda with her play and therefore diminishes much of the comedy in Chekhov’s text, indicting the aspirations of the proletariat.

In her transposition of the play, Suzman preserves the structure of Chekhov’s text meticulously. Therefore the plot of *The Free State* is, in

essence, the same as that of *The Cherry Orchard*. Keuris (2007: 2) points out that the full title of the play – *The Free State: A South African Response to Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard"* – evokes, as a response text, a dialogue between Chekhov's text and context and the postcolonial context from which Suzman writes. Suzman does not respond to Chekhov's text only, but also to the system of apartheid. In her version of the play, the setting is changed from early-twentieth-century Russia to the South Africa of 1994. The white siblings Lulu Rademeyer and Leo Guyver lose their farm in the Free State province, as they are not prepared to cut down their cherry orchard and lease out the land. A black businessman and friend of the family, Leko Lebaka, then buys the land on auction – after failed attempts to persuade the family to divide their land into plots to be rented out. Lulu and Leo can no longer enjoy the benefits of apartheid and, like Lyubov and Gayev in *The Cherry Orchard*, they have to compete for employment and business opportunities on the same footing as those whom the erstwhile government regarded as inferior.

Suzman wrote *The Free State* at a time when she was, in her own words, engrossed by “the idea of transposing a couple of classics ... to a more local scenario” (Suzman quoted in Walder 1999: 255). In an article in the *New Statesman*, Suzman (2000c: 41) explains that in the days of apartheid, she and Barney Simon were always looking for plays that “might be useful as a medium for expressing the status quo” and found the similarities between Chekhov's Russia and contemporary South Africa obvious enough for a transposition. Suzman and Simon “both thought even then that redirecting the political arguments in the play in the light of a dreamed new order in South Africa would be a fascinating exercise” (van der Spoel 1997: 35). Suzman's rewriting thus does not aim to subvert or decentralise the canonised text, but rather to appropriate it in a new post-apartheid context. Therefore, as she writes against the apartheid regime, her text is post-colonial. However, since she does not subvert or decentralise the hierarchy as in Chekhov's text, but rather transposes it, her text is not counter-discursive – although it is intertextual.

Suzman's transposition of these hierarchies differs considerably from Chekhov's original text, as she retains instances of comedy where she ridicules the outdated behaviour of conservative characters such as Gayev and Pishchik who are transposed into white racists, but she does not transpose the foolish pretentiousness of Chekhov's servant characters. Gayev's speech to Varya and Anya about how the peasants respect him is transposed as a speech by Leo in which he tells Maria and Anna that “you have to know how to deal with your Affs” (Chekhov 2000: 26), while the transposed Yepichodov and Dunyasha are much more popular with the other characters than their Russian counterparts.

Thus, in accordance with the play's setting in South Africa in 1994, Suzman's text is much more politically inclined – and politically correct –

than Chekhov's source text. In her introduction to the play, Suzman (2000b: xxii, xxiii) states that although Chekhov's text need not necessarily be seen through the prism of politics, she based her adaptation on such an interpretation because it was justified by the overall emphasis on politics in contemporary South Africa. Although she acknowledges some of the inefficiencies of the new democracy, her play is aimed at celebrating the advent of democracy and is meant to be "both a query and a hope" (Suzman 2000b: xxi). However, these queries are overshadowed by her optimism as she intends her transposition "to celebrate the year 1994 when South Africa held its first democratic elections and optimism rode high". Despite the fact that she calls her text a query it does not question or investigate her characters' reaction to the end of apartheid.

2.3 Postcolonialism and the Carnivalesque

Gilbert and Thompkins (1996: 16) emphasise the importance of ambivalence and open-endedness in postcolonial counter-discourse when they stress that the rewriting of classics in postcolonial theatre should aim for a more polyphonic text rather than a mere substitution of the canonical text with its oppositional reworking. They argue that for epistemological change to happen, dissent must be accompanied by difference, and that is why Bakhtin's notion of the carnival is remarkably applicable to the postcolonial. For them, the heterogeneity of carnival results in "a subversion that undermines virtually all categories of social privilege and thus prevents their unproblematic reassemblage" (Gilbert & Thompkins 1996: 84). This carnivalesque subversion is relevant to postcolonial transformation, since "the power of the postcolonial translation of modernity⁶ rests in the *performative, deformative* structure that does not simply revalue the contents of acultural tradition or transpose values 'cross-culturally'" (Bhabha 1994: 241). In other words, it is not enough to merely reverse a binary, or to privilege "what was once denigrated" as this "does not free us from epistemological underpinnings" (Cooper 2007: 734). For a hierarchy to be dismantled, it should be subverted and not only inverted. In agreement with Bhabha, Barnard (2004: 283, 284) sees the carnivalesque in postcolonial contexts as quintessentially ambivalent and criticises the application of the term to anything vaguely transgressive or rowdy – since it entails not only transgressiveness and rowdiness but also inherent ambivalence.

According to Gilbert and Thompkins (1996: 84), this postcolonial view of carnival differs somewhat from some more conservative views on carnival "as a licensed inversion" and, indeed, Bakhtin's own writings on carnival insist as much. Bakhtin's concept of carnival is derived from his idea that

6. Bhabha (1994: 240) sees modernity as the Western ethics of self-construction, or the perpetual (re)construction of the self or subject.

language is dialogic: it is not a code which can be decoded, but an interactive and incomplete creative process which cannot be separated from discourse (Davis & Finke 1989: 593). Contrary to the communication model of Jakobson, Bakhtin's communication model locates the meaning of an utterance within the process of interaction between two interlocutors, and not within the message sent (Todorov 1984: 55-56).

The interactive nature of language furthermore implies that discourse is multi-voiced, or heteroglossic: even within an apparently unitary self there are contending languages. In other words, language is always aimed at someone, even if that someone were a person's own inner addressee (Dentith 1995: 91). It is this dialogue between contending voices which Bakhtin recognises in the popular festivities of ancient Rome, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Castle (2008: 196; our italics) defines the carnivalesque as "a mode of subversive representation *based* on the [temporary] inversion of hierarchies", and Dentith (1995: 65) explains it as the "discrowning", parody and overturning of social hierarchies in terms of the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism. Bakhtin (1973: 88) emphasises that carnival itself is "not a literary phenomenon" but "a syncretic pageant form of a ritual nature" and describes the carnival atmosphere of folk festivities of the Renaissance and Middle Ages as an atmosphere in which "civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals such as the tribute rendered to the victors at tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights, or the initiation of a knight" (Bakhtin 1984: 5). The carnivalesque festivities of the Renaissance and Middle Ages thus contested social hierarchies by mimicking, and mocking, the elite members of those hierarchies. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin describes the suspension of hierarchies in carnival as follows:

The laws, prohibitions and restrictions which determine the system and order of normal, i.e. non-carnival, life are for the period of carnival suspended; above all, the hierarchical system and all the connected forms of fear, awe, piety, etiquette, etc. are suspended, i.e. everything that is determined by social-hierarchical inequality among people, or any other form of inequality, including age.

(Bakhtin 1973: 101)

Bakhtin (1973: 139) also explains that carnival relativises "everything that was externally stable and already formed", through which ideas can break "out of their self-enclosed hierarchical nests".

Nevertheless, this subversion is necessarily ambivalent because carnival does not ridicule only the elite. Bakhtin (1984: 13) states that "not only schoolmen and minor clerics but hierarchs and learned theologians indulged in gay recreation as relaxation from pious seriousness". Carnival creates a

free space in which the status quo can be *temporarily* overturned. Yet at the same time it is aimed at simultaneously *reinforcing* the status quo (Dentith 1995: 75, 76; our italics) because in carnival not only one aspect of society but “the entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity” (Bakhtin 1984: 11). Carnavalesque laughter is carefree and triumphant and at the same time mocking and deriding (Bakhtin 1984: 11, 12). With its ambivalence, carnival can thus do more than merely *invert* binaries, it also reinforces them, indicting the idea of binaries per se.

The carnivalesque is furthermore distinguished by cycles of degradation and renewal (Dentith 1995: 67). Bakhtin (1984: 10) describes carnival as “the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalised and complete”. He distinguishes the “grotesque body” which appears unfinished, “marked by the evidence of its material origin and destiny”, from the “classical body” of classical art which is “achieved and completed” (Dentith 1995: 67). Carnival thus enacts the temporary inversion of hierarchies as an ambivalent and ongoing process that cannot be completed. Through this suspension of binaries, by simultaneously confirming and indicting a hierarchy, the hierarchy is dismantled and not only overturned.

We can thus conclude that the carnivalesque has three main characteristics: (1) the temporary inversion of hierarchies, (2) an ambivalent depiction of this inversion, and (3) emphasis on degradation and renewal as opposed to the ideal and complete. While the characters in both *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Free State* react to the social change in their contexts by anticipating some form of inversion of the hierarchies of the previous order, Suzman’s text lacks the ambivalence of Chekhov’s text. Although Chekhov portrays the social change in his context as part of a cycle of degradation and renewal, Suzman sees the social change in the context of her play as definitive and permanent, which of course reduces the ambivalence of her text. One could substantiate this claim with various examples and excerpts from the two texts which, for example, illustrate the relationship between Dunyasha/Dikeledi and Lopakhin/Leko, Anya/Anna and Yasha/Nyatso. For the sake of brevity, however, only one of Chekhov’s most comical characters, the young melancholic clerk Yepichodov, will be compared with Suzman’s transposition of him.

3 The Pretentious Yepichodov versus the Sincere Khokolo

In *The Cherry Orchard*, the estate clerk Yepichodov’s behaviour exemplifies a recurring theme and source of humour in Chekhov’s work: the tension between a character’s true nature and the image he or she is trying to portray (Lindheim 1985: 56). Yepichodov’s noble aspirations are especially

evident in Act Two when he tries to impress the housemaid Dunyasha by attempting to appear poetic and well read. The scene opens with Dunyasha, Charlotta (the governess), Yepichodov and Yasha (the footman who has just returned from Paris with Lyubov) sitting in an open field before the other characters arrive. Yepichodov is singing and strumming his guitar, referring to it as a mandolin, while the object of his affection (Dunyasha) refuses to indulge in his projection of himself as a melancholic suitor and points out that he is playing a guitar and not a mandolin. Yepichodov nevertheless persists in his attempt to appear like a melancholic suitor and as he continues with his song, Yasha shatters the atmosphere by joining him in song and Charlotta rubs salt into his wounds by complaining about their singing. Yasha then impresses Dunyasha with stories about France while Yepichodov tries to regain her attention by musing on the meaning of life in an attempt to sound intellectual:

DUNYASHA: [To YASHA.] You've been abroad, you're lucky.
 YASHA: [Yawns, lights a cigar.] I am, who's arguing?
 YEPICHODOV: Absolutely. I mean to say ... abroad everything's been sorted out long ago.
 YASHA: Yes, take my word for it.
 YEPICHODOV: I'm a mature person. I read ... I've read any number of books. Remarkable books. But there's no guidance. Nothing to tell you. Should one? I mean ... live? Or shoot oneself. So to speak. I carry it with me all the time. Just in case. [He produces his revolver.]

(Chekhov 1996: 38)

Charlotta, not fooled by Yepichodov's musings, plainly tells him that he is neither clever nor romantically desirable. Yet Yepichodov persists in musing in an inappropriate register about his unlucky clumsiness. When no one responds, Yepichodov makes one last attempt to sound well read and intellectual by asking if either Yasha or Dunyasha has read *The History of Civilisation* by the English historian Buckle. This reference is, however, lost on his audience. As a final insult, Dunyasha ignores his request to speak with her in private by sending him to fetch her cape. Yepichodov exits, strumming his guitar.

Yepichodov's portrayal of a romantic martyr clearly fails as it remains mimicry and does not convince any of the other characters: they refuse to indulge his pretensions, consciously disrupt his attempts to appear sophisticated and ignore him. They even fail to respond to his dramatic gesture of producing a revolver. Evidently, none of the characters take Yepichodov seriously as an intellectual. Yepichodov illustrates Bhabha's (1994: 126) contention that "the desire to emerge as 'authentic' through mimicry ... is the final irony of partial representation". Thus, Yepichodov's attempts to be

perceived as intellectual and sophisticated are subverted by the transparency of his imitative behaviour as it only creates comedy through irony.

Yepichodov not only exposes his own foolishness by his attempt at intellectual conversation, but his mimicry also indicts the radical student and intellectual Trofimov. Certain parallels between Trofimov and Yepichodov suggest that Yepichodov's musings parody Trofimov's speechifying which follows later in this act, as Barrault (quoted by Senelick 2006: 974) also notes. These parallels include Trofimov's fall down the stairs after his argument with Lyubov in Act Three, which emulates Yepichodov's perpetual clumsiness; Yepichodov's courting of Dunyasha, which corresponds to Trofimov's courting of Anya; their respective musings on the meaning of life, and especially their use of imagery when they speak. When describing Lopakhin, Trofimov says: "And just as the predatory beast that devours everything in its path is a necessary part of the metabolism of nature, so you too have your place and function" (Chekhov 1996: 45), while Yepichodov insists on referring to his ordinary guitar as a mandolin: "To a man who is mad with love it is a mandolin" (Chekhov 1996: 37). Yet, while Yepichodov's lack of discretion in his speech and reading material as well as his clumsiness reduces him to a clownish figure, Trofimov – by contrast – is more respectable and is taken seriously by most of the other characters (like Lyubov and Anya).

The scene between Yasha, Dunyasha and Yepichodov then conforms to Dentith's (1995: 65) interpretation of Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque because it subverts the social hierarchy between Trofimov (the "intellectual") and Yepichodov (the estate clerk, or "clown"). Yepichodov imitates Trofimov in order to raise his own social status, but in the process he unknowingly indicts Trofimov's intellectualism as pretentious. However, as is evident from the other characters' reactions to Yepichodov, this subversion is ambivalent (in the carnivalesque spirit) because it exposes his own aspirations as mimicry. If the status quo were (in this case) Trofimov's presumed intellectual superiority to Yepichodov, this scene simultaneously reinforced it by exposing Yepichodov's aspirations as mimicry, creating a free space in which it could be overturned to also indict Trofimov as pretentious. By not simply inverting the binary opposition between Trofimov and Yepichodov, and thereby merely privileging what was previously denigrated, Chekhov subverts both ends of the hierarchy.

In Suzman's transposition of the above-mentioned scene, the clumsy and unlucky trainee manager of the estate, Khokoloho, vies for the housemaid Dikeledi's heart with the same ardour as Yepichodov but without his stilted speech. While all the characters on stage are annoyed with Yepichodov's song in *The Cherry Orchard*, Karlotta joins Khokoloho in song in *The Free State*. After singing an old Afrikaans love song jokingly, Dikeledi and Nyatso enter on returning from their swim.

Khokoloho's appropriate speech register makes him less ridiculous, but his unfortunate clumsiness is still emphasised. He muses on his bad luck, but less melodramatically than Yepichodov. Yepichodov's reference to the historian Buckle is transposed in *The Free State* as a reference to the Bible when Khokoloho asks Karlotta if she has read the entire Bible. According to Suzman (2000b: xxxv), she wanted to allude to the missionary schooling Khokoloho must have had with his reference to the Bible as well as his spiritual inclination. Meanwhile, Dikeledi begs Nyatso to tell her more stories about Paris:

- KELE: ... More stories, Nyatso, go on, more, more. I wish I could go overseas too, lucky you.
- NYATSO: Yeah, well, you guys live in the dark ages.
- KHOKO: So. But they have had time to work things out over there. Africa takes her own time.
- NYATSO: Don't I know it. I choose to speak only English now – the world language. French when I'm in France, of course, but English here and everywhere.
- KARLOTTA: Get him!
- KHOKO: So. Well, I speak maybe four languages. I can read [*KELE hoots.*] ... I can! Standard Three was enough to teach me to ...
- KELE: It is not, Khokoloho, our schooling was kak.
- KHOKO: ... but no books can tell me what I *really* want to know; like, do I go on like I am now, or must I go somewhere far, far away and find another life? So, I just play my tunes and I sing my songs.

(Suzman 2000a: 29, 30)

Khokoloho doubts that the answers to his questions can be found in books and wonders about the impact that the end of apartheid will have on his life, since he considers starting a new life in a new place. Democracy has arrived and yet his life continues as it has been under apartheid. He cannot find an answer to these questions, and will thus continue to play his guitar and sing his songs. In contrast with Charlotta, Karlotta sympathises with Khokoloho and openly expresses her resentment about Nyatso's arrogance. When Dikeledi sends Khokoloho to fetch her sweater in response to his request to speak to her alone, he recognises this as another stroke of bad luck and exits, admitting defeat by singing mournfully.

Although the extract closely resembles its corresponding scene in *The Cherry Orchard* structurally, it also deviates from it in certain respects. Suzman adds details to the text that are specific to the postcolonial South African context: Khokoloho's doubts about the effect the social change will have on his life are very relevant to the South African context where the advent of democracy did not necessarily mean the end of poverty.

Khokoloho's language shows an Afrikaans influence as he was most likely educated in Afrikaans. He also appropriates well-known Afrikaans folk songs for his own purposes: he teases Karlotta about her loneliness by singing "*My Sarie Marais*" and tries to chase Nyatso away from Dikeledi with "*Vat jou goed en trek, Ferreira*". While Khokoloho might willingly appropriate these songs to deride or mock the Afrikaner (his former oppressor), this appropriation neither subverts nor dismantles the apartheid hierarchy since it only ridicules the former oppressor and not the oppressed – which brings us to Suzman's next deviation.

Suzman's transposition of this scene lacks the carnivalesque elements of Chekhov's text. As mentioned, Khokoloho's way of speaking is not stilted, which makes him less ridiculous than Yepichodov. Whereas Yepichodov describes the cockroach that landed in his *kvass* as "an object of remarkable repulsiveness" (Chekhov 1996: 38), Khokoloho asks, "[W]hy does a gogga always fly in for a swim" (Suzman 2000a: 29) whenever he drinks a beer. Also in his actions, Khokoloho is less melodramatic than Yepichodov – he does not make any suicide threats or produce a revolver. Instead, he almost accidentally sits on Karlotta's gun, causing pandemonium. Khokoloho's question if Karlotta has read the whole Bible also differs significantly from Yepichodov's reference to Henry Buckle's *The History of Civilisation* as it shows naivety rather than pretension.

While Yepichodov desires to "emerge as 'authentic' through mimicry" (Bhabha 1994: 126), Khokoloho willingly mimics the Afrikaner through his songs. This scene thus lacks the tension between mask and face in Khokoloho's character that we find in Yepichodov's character. It functions neither as a carnivalisation of Khokoloho's ambition nor as a parody of the philosophies of Pitso Thekiso (the transposed Trofimov).

4 Conclusion

Suzman's transposition differs significantly from its source text despite her meticulous preservation of Chekhov's plot and speech patterns. The most significant difference between the two texts is the respective authors' use of comedy and humour. While Chekhov uses comedy of subversion to create a carnivalesque ambivalence in order to dismantle the hierarchies within his context, Suzman adopts a less ambiguous approach. She specifically intends her play to celebrate South Africa's first democratic elections and their immediate aftermath and therefore fashions the comedy in Chekhov's text to that prerogative.

Therefore Suzman's transposition of Chekhov's Yepichodov as Khokoloho is much less carnivalised than his Russian counterpart. The reader/audience can sympathise more easily with Khokoloho's questions and uncertainties than with Yepichodov's philosophical musings because

Khokoloho's behaviour is much less ridiculous. The other characters react amiably towards Khokoloho, while Yepichodov is treated coldly.

Although Khokoloho might mimic and ridicule the white characters in the play by singing traditional Afrikaans folk songs, his own aspirations to rise in the social hierarchy are never indicted – unlike Chekhov's Yepichodov whose subversion of the hierarchies between serfdom and nobility also ridicules a superficial inversion of this hierarchy. Suzman thus negates this subversion of Chekhov's.

While Chekhov's text entails a carnivalesque dismantling of its hierarchies, Suzman's text entails only a superficial inversion of these hierarchies. We can thus conclude that the carnivalesque is an essential subversive characteristic of Chekhov's style that indicates the ambivalent character of change. Suzman's failure to transpose and incorporate the subversive elements results in a diminished text.

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Lida Krüger
University of South Africa
krugeja@unisa.ac.za

Hein Viljoen
North-West University
Hein.Viljoen@nwu.ac.za

Marita Wenzel
North-West University
marita.wenzel@nwu.ac.za