

Blackface on the South African Stage: Early English South African Theatre (19th and 20th Century)

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Abstract

In most contemporary studies in which the practice of blackface is discussed, it is seen as a controversial and racist practice. While many studies are available globally on different aspects of this practice (e.g., origin and history, the broad spectrum of media where it is used, different permutations and developments of this practice in various countries, etc.), one finds only a few studies focused on the use and practice of blackface in South African theatre studies. This is surprising when one considers the major role played by race in the general history of South Africa, as well as more specifically within the history of South African theatre. The focus in this article is on the practice and occurrence of blackface on the South African English stage from a historical theatre viewpoint as framed within a postcolonial perspective of this topic. Although one can assert that the practice of blackface was probably simply taken from the origin of this practice in the United States and mainly introduced to South Africa via travelling minstrel troupes from America and travelling theatre companies from the United Kingdom, it is important to see how this practice was received in colonial South Africa. The discussion will first address the use of this practice within early English theatre in South Africa as influenced by the blackface minstrelsy travelling troupes of the 19th century (1830s to 1870s), while the second part of the article will focus on the use of blackface by white actors on the South African stage to portray black characters in the early 20th century (1910 to 1930s).

Opsomming

Meeste kontemporêre studies wat die voorkoms en gebruik van *blackface* bespreek, beklemtoon die kontroversiële en rassistiese aard van hierdie praktyk. Terwyl daar heelwat studies globaal beskikbaar is wat op verskillende aspekte

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van hierdie praktyk fokus (byvoorbeeld sy oorsprong en geskiedenis, die wye spektrum van media waarin dit voorkom, bepaalde permutasies en ontwikkelinge daarvan in verskillende lande, ens), vind mens net enkele studies wat verwys na die voorkoms en gebruik van *blackface* in Suid-Afrikaanse teaterstudies. Dit is verrassend wanneer mens die groot rol wat ras speel in die algemene geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika, sowel as spesifiek binne die geskiedenis van Suid-Afrikaanse teater in gedagte hou. Die fokus in hierdie artikel is op die praktyk en voorkoms van *blackface* binne die vroeë jare van Engelse teater in Suid-Afrika vanuit 'n teater historiese perspektief soos geplaas binne 'n postkoloniale raamwerk. Alhoewel mens kan stel dat die praktyk van *blackface* gewoon deur reisende teatergeselskappe vanaf Engeland ter plaatse oorgeneem is, is dit nogtans belangrik om na te gaan hoe hierdie praktyk ontvang is in die Kaap en hoe dit versprei het in koloniale Suid-Afrika. In die bespreking word daar eers gekyk in hoe 'n mate die sogenaamde *blackface minstrelsy troupes* (oorsprong in die VSA) in koloniale 19de eeuse Suid-Afrika (1830's tot 1970's) ontvang is, en daarna word die gebruik van *blackface* deur wit akteurs in die vroeë 20ste eeu (1910 tot 1930's) bespreek.

Keywords: blackface; early English South African theatre; blackface minstrelsy; *Othello*; postcolonial

Introduction

In most contemporary studies in which the practice of blackface is discussed, it is seen as a controversial and racist practice. While many studies are available globally on different aspects of this practice (e.g., origin and history, the broad spectrum of media where it is used, different permutations and developments of this practice in various countries, etc.), one finds only a few studies focused on the use and practice of blackface in South African theatre studies. This is surprising when one considers the major role played by race in the general history of South Africa, as well as more specifically within the history of South African theatre.

The focus in this article is on the practice and occurrence of blackface on the South African English stage from a historical theatre viewpoint as framed within a postcolonial perspective of this topic. Although one can assert that the practice of blackface was probably simply taken from the origin of this practice in the United States and mainly introduced to South Africa via travelling minstrel troupes from America and travelling theatre companies from the United Kingdom, it is important to see how this practice was received in colonial South Africa. The discussion will first address the use of this practice within early English theatre in South Africa as influenced by the blackface minstrelsy travelling troupes of the 19th century (1830s to 1870s), while the second part of the article will focus on the use of blackface by white actors on the South African stage to portray black characters in the early 20th century (1910 to 1930s).

Studies on the early development of theatre in South Africa include the comprehensive works of F.C.L. Bosman (*Drama en Toneel in Suid-Afrika Deel I: 1652–1855* [1928], and *Deel II: 1856–1912* [1980]), Olga Racster (*Curtain Up!* [1951]), P.W. Laidler (*Annals of the Cape Stage* [1962]), Jill Fletcher (*The Story of South African Theatre: A Guide to Its History from 1780–1930* [1994]), and others. These studies focus on the early years of the establishment of a European theatre in South Africa (the 18th and 19th centuries) as mainly represented by English theatre, the so-called Dutch-Afrikaans theatre (forerunner of Afrikaans theatre), as well as to a lesser degree French and German theatre. This period is characterised by numerous visits by travelling theatre and entertainment companies (often from America, the United Kingdom, but sometimes also from Europe) en route to other colonies (e.g., India and Australia).

Numerous studies on the origin of blackface (especially those focused on Anglo-American blackface minstrelsy) and the further developments of this practice in many countries globally, as well as in various media, are available, and additional research is frequently being published. For the purposes of this article, I used a few sources (Hornback 2010, 2018; Thelwell 2013, 2020; Thompson 2021, and others) that I considered relevant for the South African context of the 19th and 20th century. A special issue (“Routes of Blackface”) edited by C.M. Cole and T.C. Davis for *TDR (The Drama Review)* in 2013 included, with general theoretical and historical discussions on blackface, also two articles focused on South Africa (Thelwell’s discussion of how Blackface minstrelsy reflected race discourses in preindustrial South Africa, and Davids’s discussion of the Kaapse Klopse).¹ While one finds brief references to this practice in some South African sources (e.g., Gray 1984), this topic has not received the same attention in South African theatre studies as those found in the Anglo-American and other national contexts (e.g., Australia, Canada).

While Shakespearean studies in South Africa have for a long period (especially with the work of Martin Orkin [1987; Loomba and Orkin 2002]) critically discussed Shakespeare’s place within colonial and postcolonial South Africa, one finds relatively few references to the use of blackface in his productions in these discussions. Many South African studies on *Othello*, of course, foreground the issue of race and (post-) colonial space or locality (South Africa), but it is only Seeff (2009) who mentions the

¹ In the Introduction to the *TDR/The Drama Review* (Cole and Davis 2013, 10) special issue (“Routes of Blackface”) her article on the Kaapse Klopse is summarised as follows: “Nadia Davids focuses on a very different instance of blackface minstrelsy in South Africa: the contemporary Cape Carnival. The form known in Afrikaans as *klopse kamers* originated as an emancipatory procession by the city’s coloured population through colonial South Africa, and today it expresses a cultural dislocation wrought by slavery. Davids places this blackface form within two key South African theoretical discourses—‘race’ and place—in order to interpret the Cape Minstrel Carnival as both an expression of racial anxiety and, more significantly, a repository for the Cape slave experience. Davids ends by exploring the potential of this blackface performance to be a powerful transformative mask and not merely a racist caricature.”

use of blackface in her discussion of Janet Suzman's 1981 production of *Othello* at the Market Theatre.

In this discussion, the practice of blackface in early South African English theatre is foregrounded. This practice also occurred in Afrikaans theatre, but because of the extensive nature of such a discussion, it will entail a study of its own.

The Establishment of Early English Theatre in the Cape

According to Jill Fletcher's *The Story of South African Theatre: A Guide to Its History from 1780–1930*, the British annexation of the Cape (after defeating the Dutch occupiers) in 1806 introduced at the same time a new period of cultural activity at the Cape. Although the Dutch had established a sizable community of white settlers between 1652 and 1795, cultural activities were mainly limited in the early days to some forms of musical entertainment and the beginnings of theatrical entertainment (the so-called "mummings"²). German and French settlers also introduced some theatrical entertainments to the Cape inhabitants, but the development of a European South African theatre tradition only took off with the arrival of the British in the 1800s.

Although Fletcher gives an excellent overview of the origin and establishment of European theatre in the Cape and South Africa in general, her study is largely based on the extensive studies undertaken by F.C.L. Bosman published in two parts, namely, *Drama en Toneel in Suid-Afrika Deel I: 1652–1855* (published in 1928), and *Deel II: 1856–1912* (published in 1980). His works are written in Afrikaans (with many quotes from the *Cape Argus* and other English newspapers of the period, as well as from Laidler and Racster). In Part II—the period of interest for this article—he inserts a long piece written by D.C. Boonzaier in English (Bosman 1980, 374–440).

Bosman discusses in considerable detail the period of 1856–1912 in Part II and in Chapter 2 (1980, 46), noting at the outset that this period was dominated by English theatre. The first forms of cultural activities by Dutch, French and German settlers at the Cape (mentioned above by Jill Fletcher) from the first period (Part I: 1652–1855) were continued by the English, but according to Bosman with great changes taking place, namely, the development from amateur theatre (called by him "liefhebberytoneel") to professional theatre ("beroepsteater"):

The part professional theatre (i.e., professional actors supplemented by amateurs, voluntary or paid) of Sefton Parry in 1855, initially continued in 1857, became a fully-fledged professional theatre in 1861; thus, the English professional theatre became the absolutely dominating form of theatre in Cape Town, yes, South Africa. ... The English

² According to Fletcher: "These 'mummings', staged by soldiers for soldiers, were probably short scenes remembered from the 'rederijkerskamers' (amateur societies) in Holland and were confined to the barracks" (1994, 15).

professional theatre dominates in the field of English theatre, but dominates even more, as a public phenomenon, also Dutch theatre. (Bosman 1980, 46; own translation)³

Bosman's book (Part II) is a substantial work of 533 pages with both a person's register and glossary, as well as long lists of productions. Bosman's dedicated work (not only in Part I and Part II of *Drama en Toneel in Suid-Afrika*), but also in other publications as continued by his student (L.W.B. Binge), is of immeasurable value to theatre historians.

According to Bosman (1980, 47), the preponderance of English theatre was a direct result of the increasing anglicisation of the Cape after 1855 and the rapid rise of other English (or mainly English) cities like Kimberley after the discovery of diamonds in 1867, and Johannesburg after the discovery of gold in 1886, as well as the establishment of mainly English port cities such as Port Elizabeth and Durban. Sefton Parry (described by Bosman as the founder of English professional theatre in South Africa [46]), developed his company by importing from the United Kingdom many travelling actors and thus establishing a new tradition at the Cape, namely, that of the travelling professional theatre company (67). Bosman distinguishes two periods of early English theatre, namely, (1) 1856–1872: the rise and establishment of professional English theatre in South Africa, and (2) 1873–1912: a “golden” period of expansion and enrichment of this theatre. Another important figure—Captain Disney Roebuck—introduced the period of great actor-managers who brought to the Cape (and the other cities) well-known companies, actors, as well as the best and most popular British plays and productions. It is thus clear that any fashion, trend, or new theatrical convention found during this period on the British stage would also find its way to the South African English stage.

Blackface

A general assumption in most contemporary studies on blackface (e.g., Black Performance Studies, Critical Race Theory, Shakespearean Studies, Postcolonial Studies) on the stage (but also in movies, television, ballet, opera, so-called traditional cultural use,⁴ advertisements, etc.) is that its origins are clearly based on a racist ideology.

Although most sources link the practice of blackface with the beginnings of the American minstrel tradition (1830s), it is also clear from other sources (e.g., Hornback 2018) that this practice probably had a much longer history that can even be traced back to the Middle Ages in Europe. The practice is found in many countries and can take

³ “Die halwe beroepstoneel (d.w.s. beroepspelers aangevul met amateurs vrywillig of betaald) van Sefton Parry in 1855, aanvanklik voortgesit in 1857, word volle beroepstoneel in 1861; ook d.w.s. die Engelse beroepstoneel, word die volstrek oorheersende vorm van toneel in Kaapstad, ja, Suid-Afrika. ... Oorheers die Engelse beroepstoneel verreweg op gebied van Engelse toneel, nog veel meer oorheers dit, as openbare verskynsel, ook die Hollandse toneel!” (Bosman 1980, 46).

⁴ For example, the “Swarte Piet” persona in Dutch culture.

many forms. Although remnants of the racism that typified the early uses of blackface still linger in some countries, other communities have appropriated this practice for their own use, for example, the Cape coloured community with the annual Kaapse Klopse held in Cape Town (Cole and Davis 2013, 10).

Most sources⁵ focusing on the genesis of the practice of blackface in the United States and the United Kingdom discuss the large-scale use of it in the minstrelsy tradition and usually foreground the link between black (and coloured) stereotypes by means of highly caricatured portrayals (by white males using black or brownface) and articulate a clearly racist ideology. These portrayals are purposefully depicted as “humorous” and aim to confirm for the mainly white audiences certain perceptions regarding black people that typify them in a derogatory and inferior manner.

Blackface Minstrelsy in South Africa

An important study published in 2020, namely, Chinua Thelwell’s *Exporting Jim Crow: Blackface Minstrelsy in South Africa and Beyond*, is the most detailed work currently available on the influence of blackface minstrelsy on 19th century performance culture in South Africa.

In his research Thelwell also foregrounds the role played by touring American minstrel companies from 1830 to 1870 to the Cape colony—often via the United Kingdom. In this book and in an earlier article, “‘The Young Men Must Blacken Their Faces’: The Blackface Minstrel Show in Preindustrial South Africa” (2013), he argues that these types of entertainment reinforced black racist stereotypes and in fact contributed to the protection and conservation of a particular British settler identity during this period. According to Thelwell, the earliest minstrel troupe, Joe Brown Band of Brothers (an amateur group), already visited Cape Town in 1848. Most professional groups visited the Cape as well as the rest of the country (Durban, Grahamstown, Kimberley, Johannesburg, Pretoria, and other towns) from 1862 to 1872—usually en route to the other British colonies (i.e., Australia, India). These groups (of which the Christy’s Minstrel Troupe was the most famous) often included both American and British members, so that: “Blackface minstrels in South Africa blended ‘plantation material’ with folk and sentimental music from the British Isles” (2013, 69). According to Thelwell (71):

Although the repertoires of the Christy’s Minstrels troupes that toured South Africa were quite varied, racial commentary was the most appealing element of their shows. A typical Christy’s Minstrels program was composed of songs that were inspired by African American culture and the folk and sentimental songs of the British Isles. However, even though the non-racial sentimental music distinguished the repertoire of

⁵ There are numerous sources available that discuss especially the American minstrel tradition as well as the practice of blackface within popular culture (movies, advertisements, television, etc.). Within American studies, Lott (1993), Mahar (1999) and Thompson (2021) are all seen as seminal studies in this field and should be read to get an idea of the many complex issues of this topic.

Christy's Minstrels from that of other English and American troupes, it is clear from the reviews that for English colonists the most striking characteristic of the performances was the blackness of the onstage characters. During the tours of the 1860s, the Christy's Minstrels troupes included a number of "plantation songs" in their repertoire, some of which very clearly presented a minstrel fantasy of the happy black laborer.

While most Anglo-American theorists demonstrate in their studies how the so-called comical portrayals of black people in blackface minstrelsy in both America and the United Kingdom were based on a clearly racist ideology that considered black people as inferior to white people, Thelwell (2013, 74) indicates that the same belief was prevalent in South Africa during this period:

The relationship between minstrel-show caricatures and 19th-century South African race discourse was mutually reinforcing. Many minstrel songs and sketches performed in South Africa offered images of thieving, disorganized, and hypersexual black characters. Newspaper commentators who enthusiastically remarked on the authenticity of minstrel caricatures did so because English settlers in South Africa already perceived African laborers in these ways. Minstrel caricatures were understood to be authentic because they reflected many of the race discourses of the time, and the power of these discourses was reinforced as white settlers saw them repeatedly acted out on the stage.

In Bosman's study one mainly finds short mentions of the various minstrel troupes visiting the Cape (especially the various Christy's Minstrels troupes), and sometimes longer discussions of their programmes (particularly during the heyday of their performances in the 1860s to 1880s). As mentioned by Thelwell, it is also clear from Bosman's remarks that the audiences (overwhelmingly white English colonists) received these performances with great enthusiasm and with no critical disapproval at all. Minstrel performances often had their own programme, consisting of songs, dances, and burlesques/comic interludes, but shorter minstrel pieces (songs and short burlesques) could also often form part of an evening's theatre entertainment (comic pieces often concluding the programme). Apart from numerous mentions,⁶ Bosman also gives short discussions of the following troupes: Steel and Norton's Christy's Minstrels, Harvey-Dougherty-Lelie-Braham Christy's Minstrels, Carolina Minstrels, Steel-Leslie-Taylor and Mammoth Minstrels (Exhibition). From his descriptions, one can deduce a strong American (so-called plantation) influence on the songs and comic burlesques, while Bosman (1980) constantly refers to the characters as "negers."⁷ For example, on page 171 he mentions the Ethiopian Minstrels singing a "Variety of Negro Melodies" or even on page 264 where he lists the following 1869 programme: "Minstrels; Nigger Burlesque *Music Lesson; La Africain(e) or High Tall Yawn Uproar*, burlesk; Burlesqua: *La Somnambula*." During the heydays of 1869 to 1871 he mentions, for example, the Grand Ethiopian Burlesque, two "negerklugte" and *The Mischievous Nigger* (279) and a "*Negro Stump Oration*" (280), which was apparently a famous comic presentation of

⁶ See Bosman (1980, 68, 112, 132, 133, 134, 139, 140, 141, 161, 162, 163, 178, 179, 185, 191, 192, 193, 214, 243, 254, 258, 263, 264, 268, 274, 280, 287, 291, 298, 307).

⁷ Afrikaans for negroes and used in the old Afrikaans texts for black people in general.

the Christy's. According to Bosman: "Die sukses van al hierdie uitvoerings laat geen twyfel nie" (The success of these performances was without any doubt) (1980, 280). Bosman also refers to the Christy's "geweldig sukses" (immense popularity) during the period of 1874 to 1882, when Captain Disney Roebuck continued to import British performers and companies.

The Wheeler Company, known for their comedies, arrived in June 1885 (a trio of Wheelers). One can deduce from the following description by Bosman that they also used blackface (with all the accompanying physical and verbal characteristics, e.g., facial and physical caricatures and a type of negro pidgin talk) to entertain their audiences:

Frank Wheeler was the life and soul of this entertainment, which used to start with an old-fashioned farce like "A Kiss in the Dark," this item being followed by a minstrel programme designated "Our Social Gathering," which was in turn succeeded by a negro absurdity in which Frank would raise shrieks of laughter and send the audience home in the best possible humour. (1980, 381)

Many studies on the use of blackface by white male actors/performers refer to both the aspect of an *authentic* portrayal by these actors, and to the technique of *impersonation* used by them. The so-called authenticity of these portrayals can be interpreted from different perspectives: various minstrel troupes vied with each other regarding who was more authentic (also seen in their advertisements, etc.); the portrayals themselves were described by reviewers as being "authentic" representations, while the reception of these portrayals of black workers by white audiences were also often described as reflecting reality (i.e., authentic).⁸ The "reality," however, was that these characters (black males and females) were impersonated by white males (actors) within a particular colonial period (after the abolition of slavery) where racial tensions existed in many of the communities, and these portrayals mainly depicted the white colonist's perspective of black workers. Thelwell (2013, 70–71) foregrounds this perception in his work and makes an argument for why this viewpoint was so important for the British settlers (as it was for the American plantation owners), namely, to have a subservient workforce:

Blackface minstrel portrayals of black laborers could be easily adapted to fit the needs of a South African system of labor that did not necessarily depend on slavery but did rely on an unskilled proletariat African class. In both the United States and South Africa, black subservience was a necessary component of the natural racial order in the white imagination, and minstrelsy often provided hyperbolic images of what the racial order could look like. In most instances, blackface minstrelsy provided imagery that British settlers believed to be accurate representations of people of African descent. In other moments, minstrel images provided English settlers with a template that described not necessarily what they believed Africans to be, but an ideal of what Africans could become with the "proper" discipline and civilizing influences.

⁸ A full-length study on this topic is provided by Johnson (2003).

In the discussion which follows on how blackface circulates through both popular forms of entertainment and works associated with high culture like *Othello* and *Othello* burlesques, one finds the same link between the comedic portrayals of black characters (based on exaggerated facial features, appearance, and movements by the blackface actors) and a particular race ideology that sees black people as inferior to white people.

Othello: High and Low Culture

Since the main characters in Shakespeare's famous play, *Othello*, already foreground the racial dimension of the relationship between the black Moor and the white Desdemona, it is to be expected that this play occupies a very prominent place in blackface studies.

According to MacDonald (1994, 233), it is, however, interesting to note that *Othello* manifests in both "high culture" and "low culture" forms. In regard to so-called "high culture," one finds a long tradition of actors who played the role of Othello in blackface (and in some periods in brownface)⁹ in America, the United Kingdom, and in various other countries (i.e., South Africa). It is, in fact, quite remarkable to see how late in the 20th century white actors in America and the United Kingdom still portrayed this character in blackface. Many studies discussing this practice often mention films where blackface was also used by actors portraying Othello, for example, by the famous British actor Laurence Olivier in the controversial 1965 film version of *Othello*.¹⁰

Adele Seeff, in a comprehensive study entitled *South Africa's Shakespeare and the Drama of Language and Identity* (2018, 43), demonstrates how the performance of Shakespearean plays since the start of British settlement at the Cape, in fact, reinforced the colonial ideology (the establishment and extension of the British Empire) of the period:

Shakespeare as high cultural, iconic dramatist, troping Englishness and Britain, was ideally suited for the lead role in a nationalistic, ideological project "over there" in the Cape Colony. Invoked by the British administration at the Cape to perform (imperial) Englishness at the Cape Colony on the stage of the African Theatre, Shakespeare stood in for the greatness of the English language and of English culture and might have been understood to proclaim the advancement and continuity of an English identity.

⁹ Watch on YouTube Ayanna Thompson's keynote lecture (Shakespeare Society of South Africa) filmed 16 May 2019 at the Fugard Theatre in Cape Town on the various portrayals of Othello by white actors in blackface (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOxqewmnbgl>).

¹⁰ Bosley Crowther (a critic writing a review of Olivier's portrayal of Othello in *The New York Times*, 2 February 1966: "The Screen Minstrel Show 'Othello': Radical Makeup Marks Olivier's Interpretation"): "Olivier 'plays Othello in blackface'—his lips 'smeared and thickened with a startling raspberry red' and his exaggerated accent which he described as reminiscent of 'Amos'n Ády'. [To the sensitive American viewer—Olivier looked like a scene in a 'minstrel show']."

According to Kris Collins (1996), one finds in this period in direct contrast to *high culture* (Shakespeare's *Othello*) also examples of *low culture* (Shakespeare burlesques). In an article entitled "White-Washing the Black-a-Moor: Othello, a Negro Minstrelsy and Parodies of Blackness" (1996, 95), he describes these performances as follows:

Like all blackface Shakespearean parodies, adaptations of *Othello* portrayed the inadequacy of the black man in the culturally exclusive domain of Shakespearean drama, but furthered his debasement by construing his marriage with Desdemona as a humorous, laughable social/sexual deviation. Othello as portrayed on the minstrel stage was a comic inversion of the Othello cast on the mainstage. The hero's identification with the slave population, rather than being de-emphasized, was exploited as a source of comic effect. By using burnt cork black makeup, a black stump speech, and by referring to contemporary racial tensions the minstrel productions of *Othello* posited as their center for comic discourse what the mainstage productions denied: an African—"negro"—heroic Othello.

Collins (1996, 96) also mentions that "female parts in negro minstrel productions were played by men in blackface," which, of course, added another comic layer to these performances for audiences.

Hornback (2010), in his discussion of this history, also does not see these burlesques or travesties as only parodying high culture, but sees them as also parodying the work of "Black Shakespearians." He refers to the establishment in New York City of the African theatre in 1821 where black actors specialised in Shakespearean plays, notably *Richard III*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, as serious actors, i.e., high culture. He discusses, however, also in detail how the actors of these performances were continually persecuted, harassed, and parodied by white actors in minstrel shows—substantiating thus what Collins describes above when referring to the *Othello* burlesques.

He (Hornback 2010, 148) lists several popular examples: Alexander Do Mar's *Othello: An Interesting Drama, Rather!* (London, ca.1850), where Othello appears as a minstrel with a banjo; G.W.H. Griffen's *Othello: A Burlesque* (New York, ca. 1870), *Desdemonum: An Ethiopian Burlesque in Three Scenes* (New York, 1874); *Dar's de money* (i.e., "Desdemona"), and *Othello Burlesque* (London and New York, ca. 1880).

Seeff (2018, 56) foregrounds the important role played by the travelling minstrel and theatre companies to disseminate the various permutations of Shakespeare plays ("minstrelsy, burlesque, burletta and travesties") between the United States and the United Kingdom. The "vogue for burlesque on both sides of the Atlantic spread to southern Africa" and continued for a few decades (1840s to 1890s):

Blackface burlesque yet another Shakespearean language, belongs properly with the spread of Anglophone Shakespeare, not only because it deforms its parent language, English, but also because it is a hybrid English-American creation and its appearance in southern Africa follows the abolition of slavery in Britain and the Cape Colony ... I

would not want to overemphasize the pervasiveness of blackface burlesque in southern Africa, but wherever it popped up, it was extremely popular. (Seeff 2018, 56)

Seeff (2018, 72–73) mentions as an example one of those listed by Hornback, namely, Maurice Dowling’s *Othello Travestie: An Operatic Burlesque Burletta in Two Acts*, where Othello is described as “Moor of Venice, formerly an Independent Nigger, from the Republic of Haiti,” and one who spoke in minstrel black dialect.¹¹ She also notices the link between humour and racism in this piece:

Burlesque, for all its sauciness, cannot shake off issues of race (or Other), miscegenation, and sexuality that cohere at *Othello*’s center. Dowling’s Othello referred to by Iago as Master Blacky, answers Cassio’s summons to the Saggitary with, “Otello soger—him no run away” and then proceeds to address every white man in the piece, including a policeman as “Massa.” (Seeff 2018, 73)

Seeff states that although these burlesques were very popular, relatively few of them were performed. However, according to Thelwell (2020) (whose research included dedicated searching for these performances in the Cape Town library by working through many newspapers of that period), there were, in fact, many hundreds of these burlesques performed all over the country in the 19th century.

The reason for this probably lies in the format of the so-called “variety performances” of the 18th and 19th centuries where several shorter pieces made up an evening’s entertainment. The information on the early theatre histories (Bosman 1928, 1980; Laidler 1962; Racster 1951) is also often very sketchy and only lists the main items, for example Laidler’s quote (1926, 83) from an advertisement used by the Wheeler Comedy Company (approximately in 1866):

Mrs B. Wheeler’s charming Ballads,
Mr B. Wheeler’s irresistible Irishisms.
Wyburd’s enjoyable Recitations.
Frank Wheeler’s unapproachable Impersonations and Negro Delineations.

From this short discussion one can deduce that the practice of blackface was introduced to the early years of English theatre at the Cape (and later across the country) by means of travelling blackface minstrelsy troupes and other theatre companies that imported to South Africa theatrical trends and fashions from mainly British theatre.

In the next discussion of early 20th century English South African theatre, this practice continued, as can be seen in Stephen Black’s plays.

¹¹ Seeff (2018, 74–75) also mentions *Macbeth* as being reworked in this genre: “Burlesque performances are also recorded in Pietermaritzburg Natal in 1870, where a ‘Nigger burlesque’ of *Macbeth* was performed by the 32nd Light Infantry, and, apparently, very well received by audiences according to the *Times of Natal*, November 16, 1870.”

Early 20th Century (1910–1930): Stephen Black

Stephen Gray recovered Stephen Black's plays in a study published in 1984 as *Three Plays (Love and the Hyphen; Helena's Hope, LTD; Van Kalabas Does His Bit)*. Gray mentions in his long Introduction that although Stephen Black's work was very popular during the early "Union days," very few people today remember him. None of his plays were published in his time, and Gray had to conscientiously recover these plays from various texts:

The approach taken to editing the three plays in this collection has performed more than a rigorously scholarly one. Where the three texts here have displayed lacunae, I have taken the liberty of completing them. Where texts have been of different drafts of a script, I have systematically collated them, to establish a full copy text as a seamless whole. (Gray 1984, 22–23)

According to Gray's study, Black's three plays (and other work) were very popular during the period from 1908 to 1928¹² and endured record-breaking runs:

Thursday 16 November, 1908—with the première of Black's first play, *Love and the Hyphen*. It ran for ten days, until the following Saturday, and was remounted for another ten performances. ... By 15 January, its producer, Mr Arthur de Jong, estimated that it had already played to no less than 30 000 people. This production went on tour in late January 1909, to many railway-connected centres, played a season in the Standard Theatre, and travelled as far north as Rhodesia. ... *Love and the Hyphen* opened for a third run in Cape Town around Easter 1909, and by the end of this, the first of its many seasons, had broken all records as South Africa's longest-running show. (Gray 1984, 9)

The other two plays by Black were also very popular and attracted large audiences for many years. The reason for the popularity of Black's plays during this period probably lies in their use of satire to address many contemporary issues—especially the various racist stereotypes portrayed in these works, which the (mainly white) audiences enjoyed immensely. According to Racster (1951, 107–108):

Originally drawing phenomenal houses at the Tivoli in 1909 (*Love and the Hyphen—MK*), but much strengthened and improved, was put on by Leonard Rayne at the Opera House. Again, this novelty of modern domestic life in South Africa with Native servants playing an important part, amused large audiences. The original cast consisted of Lago Clifford, Charles Leonard, Bob Mathews and Dora Nazeby. It was followed by Stephen Black's *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, wherein the "jumble of races which South Africa presents, with its mixture of Boer, Jew from Poland and raw, half-cooked Kafir" was looked upon as a satire without offence.

¹² According to Gray (1984, 80), "Stephen Black's theatre was a forum that belonged squarely to the continuum of Victorian and Edwardian show business and that type of entertainment came drastically to an end with the depression of the 1930's."

Many black and brown characters (not only in Black's plays) were portrayed by white actors during this period as can be found in some entries in the early theatre histories (e.g., Fletcher [1994, 12] gives a sketch of Mr Frank Wheeler as Mr Julius Coffee Esq in blackface). None of the descriptions of these examples discussed this practice in negative terms as indicated by Racster, but to the contrary, these actors are often praised for giving an authentic portrayal of black characters.

Jeremiah Luke Mbene (Stephen Black's *Love and the Hyphen*)

Gray gives in the book's Introduction (1984, 29) one of the few direct references on the use of blackface on the South African stage when he gives the following description of Jeremiah Luke Mbene (a black character played by Stephen Black himself):

The character which flummoxed the likes of "Gadabout", however, and which was usually played by Black himself in black-face ... was Jeremiah Luke Mbene, the Xhosa who starts as a pliant, gullible farmhand and body-servant, and who during the elaborate action is drawn to the urbanising Johannesburg to become a mineworker, a liquor runner, a Nonconformist convert and lay preacher on the Lovedale-Zonnebloem model. Mbene's language changes from pidgin Xhosa-English, through fanagalo and officialese, into the unctuous circumlocutions of his Exeter Hall mentors. His pompous habit of indulging in biblical citation and moral homily, on the telephone in lengthy (and renewably improvised) monologues, gave rise to a new stock character, that of the malapropistic Christianised "Native"—the one which Black used as a satirical mouthpiece for years to come.¹³

A photo of Stephen Black as Jeremiah Luke Mbene is given in the book (32) where the use of blackface by the actor can be clearly seen.¹⁴

The comic elements of the play are mainly found in the stereotypical and even caricatured portrayals of black, brown and some white (Boers and Jewish) characters. These portrayals were not only focused on their appearance, but as was the case with blackface minstrelsy and the *Othello* burlesques, were also reflected in their use of the English language. Gray (1984, 32) links the mainly white characters' many racist remarks to Black's intention "to satirise the quality and the inner thoughts of South African life" in his plays. Important is the following insight of Gray given directly after this remark, namely that these types of racist depictions were very popular during the colonial period:

His plays are studded with blatantly offensive racial insults; almost no line is devoid of rudeness, implied or enunciated. I believe that this is explained by more than just the fact that colonial days were very racist. So packed with the most ungracious denigration

¹³ Note the link between this local example and some of the stock characters in Anglo-US blackface stereotypes, such as the "Zip Coon" figure. See Rosenberg's article (2013).

¹⁴ A photo on the opposite page gives a picture of the actress Miss Mabel Morton as Grietje February in brownface.

are the plays that we can only assume that this was another of his strategies: to exorcise racial feelings by indulging in a carnival of racist terminology.

Although Black's plays were meant to be satirical portrayals of the South African society of this period (1910–1930), the link between the comic dialogue, stereotyping of the various races and the use of black and brownface demonstrates clearly for the contemporary reader of these plays the underlying racist ideology embedded in this society.

It is interesting to note that the practice of blackface and its link to a particular racist ideology can be found as well in British theatre of this period. Steve Nicholson discusses in *Images of Africa in Early Twentieth-Century British Theatre* (2010, 123) a number of plays of which the authors are unknown (i.e., *Leopard Men*, *Ungungwanga*, *Mavana*), and one by a well-known author, John Galsworthy's *The Forest*, which were staged in Britain between 1924 and 1929 “in which imagined Africa were made present not just as backdrops but as major features of the drama.”

According to Nicholson, this interest was not only limited to the theatre of this period, but:

The display of Africa in fictional films and documentary travelogues went back to the late nineteenth century, and the tradition of showing off the Empire through living exhibitions of its peoples and cultures also had a considerable history. (2010, 123)

From his discussion of the plays mentioned above, as well as from photos of these performances, the white actors representing black characters used blackface in the portrayal of these characters. Although some black actors were sometimes used in these performances, Nicholson states that:

Occasionally, African performers were cast in minor roles—adding a touch of extra glamour and perhaps legitimacy to a production: “All the natives are real ones, not stage ones”, as the caption to one publicity photograph proudly declared. But the main parts—and often the minor ones—were played by Caucasian actors, coloured up to represent “natives.” (2010, 123)

Conclusion

From a contemporary postcolonial perspective, it is probably easy to notice a link between the practice of blackface (as found in blackface minstrelsy, portrayals of Othello and other black characters) by white actors and the colonial race discourse found in South Africa during the 19th century and early 20th century. The genesis and establishment of English South African theatre were closely connected with the British theatre of the same period. As a colony of the British Empire (like the other British colonies), early English theatre in South Africa simply reflected what was happening on the British stage in this period. As Bosman (1980, 50) states at the beginning of his discussion of English theatre in South Africa: “Dit bly 'n Engelse invoerartikel deur

Engelse toestand bepaal en nie Suid-Afrikaanse nie” (It remains a British import determined by British conditions and not South African).

Well-known British actor-managers brought travelling theatre (and minstrel) companies to South Africa and sourced the most popular shows/performances and performers in the United Kingdom to perform here. The popularity of blackface minstrelsy, the use of blackface by white male actors to portray black characters, various stereotypical portrayals of black people (even after the abolition of slavery in the United States and British colonies) were apparently enthusiastically received by British audiences, as well as in South Africa (as indicated by Bosman, Gray, Racster).

Although one finds little information on the racial demographics of audiences during this period, probably because most audiences were simply white, a few remarks in some sources do give a glimpse of what these audiences looked like. Bosman mentions (1980, 177–78)¹⁵ that the audiences were made up of people from all levels of society, from the governor to at least on some occasions, perhaps even coloureds! However, even Bosman sometimes does not seem sure if “coloureds” were always allowed in all theatres. In a footnote (420) on page 126 he asks regarding Sefton Parry’s new Cabinet Theatre: “Were coloureds allowed?” and adds: “There was a separate entrance to the gallery,” with the implication that it was thus probable. The class system at the Cape was clearly reflected in the pricing structure of tickets, and “coloured” people were usually placed in the gallery, as the quote below shows.

Lawrence Wright (Internet Shakespeare Editions) refers to the visit of one of the theatre legends of the 19th century—Leonard Rayne—who visited Cape Town in 1898 and mentions that the:

gallery of the Opera House was packed with “Coloured” and Malay supporters—racial mixing not being considered appropriate even in the more relaxed atmosphere of Cape liberalism. (Wright n.d.)

Although this discussion focused on certain historical periods (18th to early 20th centuries) of South African English theatre, both the practice of blackface (and increasingly the use of brownface) as well as segregated audiences continued for a large part of the 20th century.

Although the use of blackface as seen on the English South African stage was a practice imported to all the British colonies in the 18th and 19th centuries, its continued use during the 20th century in South Africa by some white actors to portray black or brown characters highlights the entrenched nature of this practice on the South African stage in these years. For example, the portrayal of Othello by white actors (in both English and Afrikaans productions) only ended when John Kani played this role for the first

¹⁵ Bosman (1980, 177–178): “die publiek bestaan uit alle range en stande, van die goewerneur tot, altans by sommige geeenthede, miskien selfs kleurlinge.”

time on 16 September 1987 at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg. This, however, did not prevent some bigoted audience members (and even the public at large) from making racist remarks about Kani—an indication of entrenched racist ideology even in the 1980s, as well as the legacy of blackface acting.

Although mixed race audiences slowly became part of many performances after the 1930s, a new political dispensation (the National Party's introduction of the so-called apartheid ideology from 1948 till 1994) used legislation to forbid mixed-race audiences (even Bosman's "kleurlinge" were not allowed to attend performances with whites during this period). While some theatre companies and theatres (notably the Space Theatre in Cape Town and the Market Theatre in Johannesburg) defied these legislations by using mixed-race actors on stage before mixed-race audiences, the various arts councils (i.e., Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal [PACT], Performing Arts Centre of the Free State [PACOFs], Cape Performing Arts Board [CAPAB]) were forced to adhere to these laws. It was only in 1978 that these theatres were officially allowed to admit mixed audiences in all theatres, as noted by Eichbaum (1986, 6):

On 5 June 1978, the then Minister of Community Development, Mr Marais Steyn, announced in Parliament that 26 theatres, including 12 in Johannesburg, had been granted permission by the government to open their doors immediately to all races for live performances.

One of the most ironic impacts of the apartheid laws on ordinary South Africans (especially the so-called coloured community) was the "try for white" characters appearing on stage during the 1950s and 1960s. Donald Inskip (1977, 60–67) gives a short discussion of Basil Warner's *Try for White*¹⁶ (first performed 27 January 1957 at the Hofmeyr Theatre in Cape Town) and described it as the first authentic South African play in English. The irony of this play ("the sheer authenticity of its subject and its characters, all rooted in Cape Town" [62]) was that all the characters were played by white actors (in this case in brownface) in front of white audiences. According to Inskip (1977, 63):

If *Try for White* were to be presented today, after well-nigh 20 years of bureaucratic efforts to "solve" and compartmentalise the searing dilemma it presents, it would very likely evoke only melancholy self-analysis and fruitless recriminations from white spectators, whereas any "coloured" playgoers who by some miraculous aberration of officialdom were "allowed" to see it would no doubt greet it with hostility allied to derision.

¹⁶ Other South African English plays that explored the theme of "try for white" were Lewis Snowden's *The Kimberley Train* (1958) and Athol Fugard's *The Blood Knot* (1961), while an Afrikaans play, Bartho Smit's *Die verminktes* (1960/1976), also used this theme.

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