

A Long Walk to Purgatory: The Tales of Dante and Mashudu, by Chariklia Martalas

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Dorothy L. Sayers (1949, 9–10), writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, called Dante “a poet after our own hearts” and described his *Divine Comedy* as having “enormous relevance both to us as individuals and to the world situation of today.” It is in something of the same spirit, perhaps, that one should take Chariklia Martalas’s play *A Long Walk to Purgatory: The Tales of Dante and Mashudu*, which situates the great-granddaddy of Italian letters in relation to South Africa, both in its colonial and apartheid past and in its troubled but hopeful present, even to the extent that he can tell Virgil, as he does at the end of the play, that “this was all shap-shap” (Martalas 2023, 87). It may feel incongruous to find Verwoerd and Van Riebeeck in a theological vision of the Christian Middle Ages, and even jarring that Dante’s once venerable guide should be reduced to comic relief, looking forward to “good vetkoek and bunny chow” (Martalas 2023, 85), but these inventive touches are what enable the play to become a potentially effective reimagining of Dante’s worlds rather than lapsing into a merely servile imitation of them. If anything, one hopes for more difference from the original, since the play structures itself by revisiting specific cantos of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*: the “selva oscura” of the opening, the gates of hell, Minos’s judgement of the lost, the swamp of the Styx, and so on up to the earthly paradise on the mountain’s summit, and these scenes, despite some creative embellishments, are fundamentally unchanged. Rather than have the architect of apartheid simply stand in for Judas in the mouth of Satan, for example, he might have been roasted on a spitbraai. Hadadas might have replaced harpies in the forest of suicides. Purgatory might have been specifically identified with Table Mountain; Dante did place it in the Southern Ocean after all. It also feels surprising *not* to find allusions to those cantos that would seem best suited to the South African context. Where, for example, are the Sowers of Discord, whose brutal dismemberment punishes the artificial division of humanity?

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But to focus more fruitfully on what the play does achieve rather than what it might have, its heart is the relationship it develops between Dante and Mashudu, the young South African poet he comes to guide through the same visionary afterlife through which Virgil once guided him. Where this might again seem merely to repeat Dante's original strategy, it works instead to emphasise Martalas's own reading of the *Comedy*, a typically modern one, the apotheosis of the self-help programme: "The Dark Wood is not just a place that Dante finds himself lost in. The Dark Wood is a state of mind" (Martalas 2023, 2). Reading the allegory this way proves the timelessness of its appeal, and justifies the play's project of translocating Dante's story into contemporary South Africa. What was true in medieval Florence is true here and now, or as one celebrated local author expressed it, "Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves, and another among Men. It is a man's part to discern them, as much in the Golden Wood as in his own house" (Tolkien 1991, 459). Dark or Golden, the bewildering wood we all find ourselves in sooner or later is as disconcertingly familiar on home ground as it is on foreign soil.

A Long Walk to Purgatory wisely avoids limiting its target audience to readers of Dante's poem. It may begin with offstage voices chanting the opening lines in the original Italian, but it also repeats, fragments, translates, and reinforces them with sound and lighting effects, and it allows the characters themselves to tell their own stories directly, in ways that familiarise the strangeness of the otherworldly. Using Virgil as narrator, humorist, and commentator likewise provides a tool for rendering the inaccessible accessible. Although there is some risk of Dante and Mashudu's relationship becoming cloyingly sentimental in places (and it is a pity more could not be made of the potential for culture clash and misunderstanding between a man of the fourteenth century and a woman of our own time), a good deal will depend on the way the text comes to life in performance. The important thing is that much of the inherent power and theatricality of the *Inferno* is allowed to come to the fore in a framework that recognises its continuity with our lived reality. What Sayers (1949, 9–10) wrote of Dante's startling modernity has a bearing here; where his Europe seemed "remote and strange ... to the Liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—[it] had much in common with our own distracted times, and his vivid awareness of the depths and heights within the soul comes home poignantly to us who have so recently rediscovered the problem of evil." The world war, the atomic bomb, and the Holocaust were Sayers's immediate points of reference, but her words may have no less resonance, if Martalas is right, with South Africa's own infernal history and its purgatorial hopes of achieving freedom.

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