"To Bewitch an Audience": Theatricalised Historiography as "Witchcraft" in Reza de Wet's *Breathing In*

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Abstract

This article is catalysed by a dual aim: It (1) names a yet unidentified canon of South African War Drama and (2) spotlights Reza de Wet's subversively feminist contribution to this canon with her drama *Breathing In*. To this end, I draw on performance theory, enhanced by feminist theatre studies, and research on (South) African women's drama and/or feminist dramaturgy that evokes conceptualisations of metadrama/-theatre. While I caution against the pitfalls of moralisation (by way of justifying/valorising the protagonist's abusive and murderous actions), I interpret De Wet's creation of this character as a feminist strategy to stage women's largely overlooked agency and inventive self-assertion in South African history—dramaturgically and otherwise.

Keywords: Reza de Wet; *Breathing In*; South African War Drama; South African women's drama

UNISA LASA
Journal of Literary Studies
Volume 42 | 2026 | #20720 | 18 pages
https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/20720
ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

Introduction

In this article I identify the South African War Drama as a yet unrecognised tradition in the South African drama canon. My glossing of this tradition of dramaturgical (re)stagings of the South African War is decidedly feminist in that I introduce and arrange the titles of the plays I classify as South African War Dramas according to the representation of women in them. I read Reza de Wet's *Breathing In* (premiered 2004; published 2005) as a unique and important contribution to this canon. *Breathing In* radically complicates the images of (especially Afrikaner) womanhood formed in and through South African War Dramas.[1] I situate *Breathing In* in the context of its production: Upon its premiere in South Africa, significant figures representative of right-wing white Afrikanerdom (e.g. Bok van Blerk and Robbie Wessels) were reviving South African War history from a sentimental and nostalgic hypermasculine perspective in stark contrast with De Wet's handling of this chapter in South Africa's past. I find special recourse to Marvin Carlson's work on theatre and cultural memory (2004), theories of metatheatre and meta-drama developed by Lional Abel (1963), Daniel Jernigan (2004), and David Roberts (2007), as well as Thérèse Migraine-George's (2008) feminist focus on African women playwrights' staged gendered representation. I marshal these scholars' work to conceptualise De Wet's (re)staging in *Breathing In* of collective cultural memory of a war over geographical, national, and gendered space, especially through her creation of a female protagonist that "bewitches" her male counterparts through skilful social roleplay and her manipulative recounting of the past.

Setting the Scene: Afrikaner Nationalist Re-turns to the South African War in the 2000s

In 2006, Afrikaans singer-songwriter Bok van Blerk released his song "De La Rey," placing the lyrics in the mouth of a Boer[2] soldier, decrying the conditions of Boers towards the end of the South African War (i.e., the Anglo-Boer War).[3] As the title suggests, the addressee is the Boer General Koos de la Rey,[4] the chorus functioning as a call to arms—translatable as "De La Rey, De La Rey / will you come and lead the Boers? / De La Rey, De La Rey / General, General / Like one man we will perish next to you, / General de La Rey."[5] In the following two years this song gained tremendous

1 Hermann Giliomee, in *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (2003), uses "burgher" as a term of designation for white people of Dutch descent for "the period 1652 to approximately 1875" and "Afrikaner" for the period that follows, even though "it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the term was reserved only for white Afrikaans speakers," but in "the 1980s the term started to become radically inclusive" (2003, xix). For the purposes of this article, I will apply Giliomee's use of the term Afrikaner as synonymous with Boer.

2 I apply the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definitions of "boer" here as "[a] soldier of the Afrikaner republics fighting against the British, esp. during the South African War (1899–1902) (frequently attributive). Also (in plural): the Afrikaner republican fighting forces" (OED n.d.).

3 Bok van Blerk is the stage name of Louis Andreas Pepler.

4 Jacobus Herculaas de la Rey (1847–1914)

5 The Afrikaans lyrics: "De La Rey, De La Rey / Sal jy die Boere kom lei? / De La Rey, De La Rey / Generaal, Generaal / Soos een man, sal ons om jou val / Generaal De La Rey." While clearly evoking

popularity in South Africa—especially among a conservative right-wing segment of its Afrikaans-speaking public. The album on which it features sold "an impressive 180,000 copies […] in the first six months after its release," spurring what Theo Sonnekus (2016, 466) calls "the De la Rey phenomenon." In 2007, the then South African state president Jacob Zuma began "mobilising his supporters with a[n apartheid] struggle song calling for his machine gun ('Umshini Wami')," justifying this move by referring to Van Blerk's nostalgic "De la Rey" (466). In 2008, Afrikaans playwright Deon Opperman collaborated with Van Blerk in writing an Afrikaans musical *Ons vir jou* (We for you / We are yours), set during the South African War. The musical's title derives from Van Blerk's and Robbie Wessel's song "Ons vir jou, Suid-Afrika,"[6] which, in turn, derives from C.J. Langenhoven's 1918 poem "Die Stem van Suid-Afrika" (The voice of South Africa), which was set to music in 1921, and became South Africa's national anthem from 1957 to 1994. The performance of *Ons vir jou* contained the song "De la Rey" and valorised the Boer General. When the leader of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (Afrikaner Resistance Movement), Eugene Terre'Blanche, was murdered on his farm two years later, Van Blerk's song was played at his funeral as an overt response to Julius Malema's singing of the struggle song "Dubul' ibhunu" (variously translatable as "Shoot the boer," "Kill the boer" or "Kill the farmer") during a speech he gave in his capacity as President of the ANC Youth League at the University of Johannesburg (Van der Waal and Robins 2011, 763). Following these events, the Afrikaner civil rights organisation AfriForum opened a case against Malema alleging that his use of the song was a provocation to racial violence and hate speech. Malema justified his use of the song by arguing that "Afrikaners had their 'De la Rey' song" (Van der Waal and Robins 2011, 763).

In 2004, two years before the release of "De la Rey," *Breathing In* premiered at the National Arts Festival in Makanda, then Grahamstown.[7] In form, content, and rhetorical approach, the play contrasted sharply with the militarised masculinity of Van Blerk and Opperman's deployment of South African War history that was to follow. While *Breathing In* also involves a Boer general, its political agenda is distinctly, even radically, feminist and anti-nationalist.[8] It entails an unprecedented depiction of Boer

"Die Stem van Suid-Afrika," it also retains fragments included from "Die Stem," transposed to the new National Anthem, e.g. the very title: "Ons vir jou," thus rendering this song intertextually Janus-faced.

6 Robbie Wessels is the stage name of Marthinus Lourens de Villiers.

7 *Breathing In* serves as De Wet's radical revision of her drama *Nag, Generaal* (Good night, General) first staged in 1988 and published in 1990 in *Vrystaat-trilogie*. *Nag, Generaal* comparably entails a female protagonist nursing an unnamed Boer General, but in this case, it is her own husband, and the Adjutant and Annie are absent. It has subsequently been translated, adapted, and staged in 2017 as *Asem* by Marthinus Basson.

8 In Stander's (2019) PhD dissertation on De Wet, he assembles and analyses various instances in press interviews in which De Wet distanced herself from formalised feminisms, concluding: "If she claimed not to be a feminist, she did not discredit a belief in gender equality; rather, she was detaching herself from conscious political activism. She did not want to appear as if her ideas on equality were mere regurgitations of a specific philosophy, so that her writing could be read reductively as a

women during the fin de siècle as disloyal to their nation, unlanded, independent, misandrist, and highly conscious of gender constructs. De Wet exploits and in fact thematises the very medium in which she writes: She literalises the theatricality of gendered cultural identity. While the politics of "Boer War" dramas generally centre on the injustices of the British and the legitimacy of Afrikaner landownership, *Breathing In* casts its critique of this nostalgic re-turn to the past as a battle between Afrikaner military men fighting for land and recalcitrant, itinerant Afrikaner women.

Breathing In: A Plot Summary

Breathing In is set on a rainy winter evening "towards the end of the […] war" in a "cowshed on a desolate [South African] farm" (De Wet 2005, 133). Anna, a middle-aged "travelling herbalist and wise woman" and Annie "her fragile daughter" (131) keep watch over and tend to a severely injured Boer general. This unnamed general is delirious and his dialogue throughout the play is limited to rally cries and freedom songs he utters as he dreams of battles he fought. On this night his young adjutant, Adjutant Brand, visits the shed, enquiring after the progress of the General's recovery. Anna redirects his attention to her daughter, claiming that Annie suffers from a mysterious affliction. As part of a seduction plot, Anna involves Brand in nursing and, eventually, wooing Annie. As instructed by her mother, Annie declares her love for Brand, who, in turn, develops a burning infatuation with Annie. Anna then tells Brand that her daughter is cursed; periodically Annie needs to inhale the breath of a dying man lest she herself die (173). Brand recoils but as Annie starts screaming, beset with what seems like agonising fits, Brand concedes to being their victim (185). Anna ties his hands and strangles him until he releases his last breath into Annie's mouth (187). The play concludes with Anna and Annie looting whatever they consider useful from the drugged General and his murdered adjutant and leaving the shed in search of their new hideout. It is based on this inference that I refer to *Breathing In* as De Wet's tapping into a history of (re)staging the South African War, while dramatically departing from the Afrikaner-patriarchal sentiments that generally underpin this tradition.

The South African War Drama and Its Representation of Women

The South African War has haunted the work of South African prose writers, poets, playwrights, and film producers throughout the twentieth century, and it persists to do so at present.[9] In this article I restrict my contextualisation of *Breathing In* to drama, especially plays that showcase the experiences and concerns of Afrikaners. To my

mouthpiece for a cause" (95). Based on this inference, I maintain my description of *Breathing In* as feminist.

9 Examples include Afrikaans crime fiction writer Chris Karstens's fictionalisation of figures and events from the South African War in his novel *Op pad na Moormansgat* (To Moormansgat) (2022), P. P. Fourie's *Die dood van Rachel April* (The death of Rachel April) (2025), and Afrikaans poet and playwright Antjie Krog's recounting of the impact of the South African War on especially her female ancestors in her recently published *Blood's Inner Rhyme: An Autobiographical Novel* (2025).

surprise, the South African Drama canon is quite small and not yet extensively theorised.

According to what I have been able to find, extant South African War Dramas include the following published and unpublished texts:

Harm Oost's *Ou Daniël: Oorspronkelik Afrikaans toneelspelletje* (Ou Danie: Original Afrikaans playlet) 1906; I.G. Horatius's *Mag is reg: Treurspel vir die Boere-Oorlog in vier bedrijwe* (Right to power: A tragedy for the Boer War in four acts) (1917); D.C. Postma's *Oom Paul: 'n Simboliese drama in vier bedrywe* (Uncle Paul: A symbolic drama in four acts) (1934) and *Generaal de Wet* (General De Wet) (date of staging and/or publication undetermined); Eugène N. Marais's *Nag* (Night) (1937); W.J.B. Pienaar's *Die geheime Bloemfontein-konferensie* (The secret Bloemfontein Conference) (1938); W.A. de Klerk's *Die jaar van die vuur-os* (The year of the fire ox) (1952); Guy Butler's *The Dove Returns* (1955); Bartho Smit's *Moeder Hanna* (Mother Hanna) (1956); Melt Brink's *Die verlore Seun: Een uit die vele voorvalle in die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (The prodigal son: One of many incidents in the Second Freedom War) (1961); N.P. van Wyk Louw's *Die pluimsaad waai ver* (The plume seeds are blown far) (1966); Pieter Fourie's *Die plaasvervangers* (The substitutes) (1975) and *Die joiner* (The joiner) (1975); De Wet's *Nag, Generaal* (Good night, General) (1988); Deon Opperman's *Dear Mrs Steyn* (1990) and *Donkerland* (Dark land) (1996); Chris Vorster and Ilse van Hemert's *Op soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz* (In search of General Mannetjies Mentz) (1999);[10] Chris Vorster's *Kwaggapolitiek* (2000); De Wet's *Breathing In* (2005); Opperman's *Ons vir jou* (We for you/We are yours) (2008); Pieter Toerien's *Hensop* (Hands-up/Hands where I can see them/Hen soup) (2016); Nicola Hanekom's *Land van skedels* (Land/Country of skulls) (2018); and Cecilia du Toit's *Kamphoer* (Camp whore) (2019).[11] [12] Notably, most of these plays were written in Afrikaans, with only three exceptions—*The Dove Returns*, *Dear Mrs Steyn*, and *Breathing In*—and most of the plays were authored by male playwrights, with three exceptions: De Wet's *Nag, Generaal* and *Breathing In* and *Land van skedels*.

My work on assembling and surveying the canon of South African War Dramas is preceded by the invaluable research of Johan Coetser (1999, 131–149). Although he delimits his article to the—mostly unpublished—(1) Camp and Commando plays produced during the South African War and (2) the better recorded-for-posterity dramas (about, but) after the War, leading up to 1920, he carefully considers this sub-canon as

10 This is an adaptation of Christoffel Coetzee's 1998 novel *Op soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz*.

11 The two main reference sources consulted to compile this list are Danie Botha's "Voetligte en applous! Die beginjare van die Afrikaanse beroepstoneel" (2008) and the online Encyclopaedia of South African Theatre, Film, Media and Performance (ESAT 2025). I also thank my reviewers for bringing more titles (included above) to my attention.

12 While she does not offer an overarching theorisation of the South African War Drama, Marisa Keuris has produced valuable research on some plays I have put forth here under that ensign. This includes journal articles on Pienaar's, Hanekom's, and Louw's South African War Dramas (2012, 2018, 2020).

generative of the themes explored in later twentieth-century dramas, such as De Wet's *Nag, Generaal*.[13]

Among the most prominent themes Coetser identifies in these plays is that of the "Volksmoeder," that is, the "Mother of the Nation." It refers to the early- to mid-twentieth-century Afrikaner nationalist gender ideal of the Afrikaner woman as a self-sacrificing mother figure, who must set an example of propriety to young, white Afrikaans women (Cloete 1994, 1; Devarenne 2009, 633; Smit 2015, 4), an image of womanhood that, as Stander (2023, 901) points out, has mostly been discussed as a disempowering gender construction in late twentieth-century South African gender, queer, and feminist (literary) historiography (Du Toit 2003; Kruger 1991; Walker 1990). Within the ambit of South African theatre studies, she has attracted the scholarly attention of Marisa Keuris (2012, 2018) and of Hester Rossly van der Waal (2005). Van der Waal (2005, 2–11), in particular, reads De Wet as resistant in her writing to this type as a gendered moral ideal.

This index of South African War Drama titles enables roughing out an inventory of images of Afrikaner womanhood—both in the canon of South African War playwrights and of female characters. De Wet is not only the first female playwright to add her voice to this register of South African dramas; she also departs from dominant representations of women in this canon. Never do historical figures associated with the South African War (such as Nonnie de la Rey, Johanna Brand, Susanna Smit Steyn, Sarah Raal etc.) feature as biodramatic protagonists as Christiaan de Wet, Paul Kruger, and Marthinus Theunis Steyn do. Women are generally presented either as victims interred in concentration camps—as in Opperman's *Dear Mrs Steyn*, Hanekom's *Land van skedels*, Toerien's *Hensop*, and Du Toit's *Kamphoer*—or shown hiding in their farmsteads, fearfully awaiting their fate and hoping for their patriarchs' victorious return—as in Marais's *Nag*, Smits's *Moeder Hanna*, and Opperman's *Donkerland*.[14] In most instances, these women are loyal to their husbands, fathers, brothers, and their people, afraid of the English but at home in their patriarchally enforced gender roles. Rarely are they physically violent, but when they are, brutality is reserved for English soldiers or executed out of self-defence (as in Marais's *Nag* and Opperman's *Donkerland*). In *Breathing In* De Wet advances a very different narrative: Anna, the protagonist, is a nomad, unmarried, unlanded, murderous, misandrist, independent of men regarding protection and breadwinning, and yet exploitative of men and satisfied by the torment she subjects them to. The men she is shown to torture and kill in *Breathing In* are not British soldiers, but key representatives of her own nation: a Boer general and his adjutant. Nothing in this drama suggests Anna's treachery as indicative of her allegiance

13 Another mentionable scholar in this regard is Andries Wessels (2011, 185–204) who presents an overview of the South African War in Afrikaans literature. His discussion of dramas is brief, however, and grouped under the same heading as poetry.

14 *Donkerland* is published with his other plays *Boesman, my seun*, *Magspel*, *Stille Nag*, and *Môre is 'n lang dag* as an omnibus entitled *Vyfmylpaal* (2004).

to another group. Anna is at war with patriarchal chauvinism and its mixture of fanatical patriotism and misogyny.

Anna's exhibition of these attitudes and her execution of her machinations involve professional theatre's representational apparatuses: She bodies forth self-created personas, directs her daughter to do the same, devises persuasive stories that, to the audience's confidence, are scripted (albeit unbeknownst to her victims), and she employs techniques characteristic of theatre making, such as the strategic donning of costumes and the ritualistic use of props, chosen with an eye to a particular effect. While Anna is not a professional actress, her overt weaponisation of socio-psychological playacting invites the analytical perspectives of theories of metadrama and metatheatre and other scholarly appreciations of what De Wet herself has called "the sheer theatricalism of total theatre" (*Drama Rhodes Review* 2007, 4), that is, the medium as message, to evaluate *Breathing In* as a dramatic intervention in the canon of South African War Drama.

The "Sheer Theatricality of Total Theatre": *Breathing In* and Metadrama

Carlson (2004, 17) suggests that dramas as literary texts, by dint of their performance contexts and intended staged destinations, must be understood as more self-aware of their intrinsic inter(and intra-)textuality, especially in relation to preceding dramas:

> Although […] all literary texts are involved in the process of recycling and memory, weaving together elements of preexisting and previously read other texts, the dramatic text seems particularly self-conscious of this process, particularly haunted by its predecessors. Drama, more than any other literary form, seems to be associated in all cultures with the retelling again and again of stories that bear a particular religious, social, or political significance for their public. There clearly seems to be something in the nature of dramatic presentation and mechanism for the continued recirculation of cultural memory.

Carlson bolsters this claim by evoking Schechner's (1985) concept of performance as pertaining not only to theatre but to forms of expression (including dramaturgy) as conduct that entails "twice behaved behaviour" (37), that is, acts always repeated with a(n often self-conscious) difference. Theatre is predicated on the expectation of the contrasting co-incidence of disciplined replication (of literary, mythological, historical, and semantic pretexts) and spontaneous/strategic responsive improvisations/ innovations upon implementation. This line of thinking seems to inform Elaine Aston's (1995) discussion of "the female performer as the author of a potentially subversive theatrical site/sight in mainstream historical stages," a feminist method that not merely repeats but also undercuts the ideological outcomes of patriarchally canonised dramas and provokes new meanings from them. This is achieved, among other means, through "gestural signs," i.e., "style and systems of facial and body movements" (28–29). While Aston's remark focuses on the (re)staging of canonically acclaimed dramas, I find her argumentation useful to apply, metaphorically, to feminist dramaturgical appropriations

of tropes established by and consolidated in male-dominated and patriarchally steered drama canons, such as, in the case of *Breathing In*, within and against the South African War Drama. With *Breathing In*, De Wet calls upon and recycles well-established tropes and motifs characteristic of the South African War Drama, but with a refractory difference: She foregrounds the patriarchal thematic commonplaces in this canon, a gesture typical of her contemporary female/feminist (South) African playwrights.

In reference to a millennial local/African-feminist theatre context, Migraine-George (2008) identifies women playwrights' self-awareness of the secondary social parts/roles they are hegemonically expected to perform/fulfil. Such playwrights, as she points out (redolent of Carlson's claim), instrumentalise drama's inherently self-conscious generic potentials: "Because theatre is the space of representation *par excellence* and therefore offers a central context to reflect on the issue of representation in its discursive, aesthetic, and political meanings, it has been used by women especially to contest and subvert abusive forms of (mis)representation" (5). Migraine-George brings into focus a tendency among African woman playwrights to reveal gender performativity in performance. This is exemplified by the way Anna, in *Breathing In*, undercuts her gender role by turning it into an agentive tool, leveraging Afrikaner nationalistic gender-stereotypes with self-serving violent intent.

While Migraine-George makes no reference to De Wet, De Wet often flagged her aim to expose gender performativity in and through her playwriting (De Villiers 1987, 45; Huismans and Finestone 1995, 90; Van Zyl 2004, 4). So, for instance, she expresses her non-essentialist stance on gender by declaring (in Huismans and Finestone 1995, 90): "I don't believe in categorising people. It falls into the patriarchal trap of needing to define and separate. If you accept divisions then you are accepting those structures. I believe to become psychically androgynous is the answer. And this categorising seems to work against it." She brings this statement to bear on her writing by explaining how she enjoys to pertinently invent (especially female) characters who (socio-theatrically) transgress and transcend their traditional gender roles in her dramas (Huismans and Finestone 1995, 90). Seemingly to this end, in *Breathing In*, De Wet appears to utilise a technique that Abel (1963, 59) delineates in what Claycomb (2017, 141) deems a thoroughgoing and oft cited, appropriated, and refined theory of metadrama or metatheatre: the creation of a character that acts as a metaphorical theatre maker (scripter, director, and actor) within the diegetic parameters of the play:

> Everyone has noticed that there is a play within a play, for Hamlet puts on a show in order to catch, as he says, the "conscience of the King." What has not yet been noticed, though, […] is that there is hardly a scene in the whole work in which some character is not trying to dramatize another. Almost every important character acts at some moment like a playwright, employing a playwright's consciousness of drama to impose a certain posture or attitude on another.

In Abel's reading of *Hamlet*, the character fulfilling the role of the theatre maker might shift from scene to scene, but in *Breathing In* the female protagonist, Anna, performs

this part throughout the play, and her theatre making entails exactly that which Migraine-George theorises in her work on African woman playwrights. Anna is the character that most ostentatiously and consistently controls her immediate social environment by "scripting" her fellow characters' behaviour. She succeeds in achieving her aims by deploying conventional patriarchal injunctions: On the one hand, she performs a stereotypical femininity and instructs her daughter in a similar performance of passivity, sexual availability, erotic exhibitionism, nurturing, and hospitality; she plays to Brand's own gender socialising as an Afrikaner man in her demand that he perform the valorous, heroic, and (as a soldier) mortally self-sacrificial act to save her daughter's life, to which he submits, dying at her hand.

Abel's spearheading idea of metatheatre, as Claycomb explains (2017, 141–142), has been loosely used to describe various forms of drama-about-drama, theatre-about-theatre, drama-about-theatre, theatre-about-drama—in short: meta-/self-conscious theatre/drama, prompting him to make the following distinction:

> I […] use the notion of metadrama as a writing concern, wherein acts of writing, performing, and spectating all fall under the lens of the playwright's purview, while metatheatre describes an effect in performance in which the production and acting of the play give rise to a sort of audience consciousness that the content and form of the play reflect back on the real existence and consequences of writing, performing, and spectating in the audience's own world.

As *Breathing In* entails no metaleptic frame breaking, no direct audience address, and no forms of professional or amateur stagings of (inset) plays, I discuss *Breathing In* here as "metadramatic" rather than "metatheatrical."

While useful for my analysis of *Breathing In*, the previous quote by Able merely forms a partial bedrock for a larger cluster of argument. Daniel Jernigan (2004, 292) develops Abel's theory to propose a twofold view of the perceptual outcomes of metadrama and metatheatre: one relying on the Ontological Order Tenet (life/reality as dream/illusion) and another he names the Social Order Tenet (society and social identities/roles as constructed and thus performative). Jerrigan's formulation of the Social Order Tenet echoes David Roberts's (2007, 37) view of metadrama-/theatre's "self-explicating" function, that is, showing "the world as a stage," thereby exposing socio-political-cultural constructs. My reading of *Breathing In* relies on these paradigms termed by Jerrigan and Roberts as De Wet uses dramatic devices to critique Afrikaner nationalist gender constructs based on mythologisations of the South African War.

In *Breathing In*, Anna's (so-called) theatre making project appears to be fuelled by two main strategies: the employment of socio-psychological imperatives by which she (1) plays to (and manipulates) her male counterparts' figurations of her as a trickster/witch because she is an intelligent and crafty woman independent of men and disaffiliated from their nationalistic war effort, and (2) through her presentation of herself as a manipulative "historian." These monikers (while never explicated, but clearly implied

by Brand), I suggest, are intricately embroiled with each other and I read *Breathing In* as De Wet's yet overlooked challenge to a chiefly Afrikaner chauvinist (re)staging of the South African War whereby she asserts women's cultural agency as/through theatre making.

Anna as a Theatre Maker

From the beginning (and, indeed, throughout) the play, Anna alludes to the fact that what is about to transpire is a rehearsal of what has occurred often before, thereby evoking the operations of theatre as a tool in service of her super-objective. Herewith De Wet also situates *Breathing In*, metadramatically, in a lineage of South African War Drama. Early in the first act, in anticipation of Brand's arrival, Anna resolves to comb Annie's hair, while she suggestively remarks: "You know how they always love your hair" (De Wet 2005, 136). Brand and the General are not Anna's and Annie's first victims, and they will likely not be their last, as Anna predicts (188). This is doubly analogous to theatre: It takes place again and again, and the successful outcome that this repetition serves is exacted by means of theatrical tactics; Anna devises personas, inhabits them herself as well as persuading others to do so, especially by the conversion of everyday objects into props, costume, and decor, fabulating stories and coercing Annie and Brand to play parts in a private, social "drama."

De Wet platforms Anna's consciousness of performance's capacity and limits to reveal gender performativity through Anna's instructions to Annie to perform for Brand (by flattery and the posturing of victimhood) and, conversely, by Annie's blundering implementations thereof. Annas's injunctions reveal her acuity about the conventionalisation of social performance and its twisting in service of, for instance, predatorial coquetry. As an opportunist, she notices the traps of the essentialist logic that governs Brand's gender assumptions. As Anna preens Annie, she pinches Annie's cheeks to colour them, instructing her to "smile" (140–141), reminding her to "please" Brand and to make him "feel at ease" (136). Upon Brand's advent, Anna persists with her orders, now in a flattering and exhibitionistic tenor. She postures eager hospitality and strict maternal propriety, within Brand's purview, by commanding subservient and cordial behaviour from her daughter befitting her role as a "Volksmoeder": "Say good evening to the adjutant. He is an important man" (142); "Say something, my girl. Show that you're thankful" (149); "You must thank the Adjutant for being so good to you, my girl. Where are your manners?" (155)—directives to which Annie responds promptly, mechanically, rendering Annie uncanny, reminiscent of both a professional theatre actress and a ventriloquist's dummy. Repetition implies fixity, but performance bodes deviation.

That which is repeated in *Breathing In* is done so, in Schechner's terms, with a difference—Annie confuses her part with her newfound affections for Brand, and she adjusts her conduct accordingly by sincerely admitting her feelings for him. Hereby the scripted/theatrical nature of Anna's ploy is exposed. To Anna's fury, Annie (moved by her unexpected and unmerited infatuation with Brand) strays from the story Anna

instructed Annie to tell him (157), but, as a skilled improvisor, Anna resolves to see it as advantageous to her agenda: Annie's fondness of Brand feeds his vulnerability to Anna's dupery. As with Anna's previous victims—whom she repeatedly hints at (136; 156; 157; 188)—she succeeds at luring Brand into her deathtrap: He (unknowingly) becomes an actor in Anna's theatre project. Brand concedes to Anna's prompt to wear an enemy soldier's shoes (155), thus compromising his performative identity as a Boer patriot, on the one hand, crossing over, proverbially, to the dark side, and on the other, showing his (equally proverbial) feet of clay. He acquiesces, submitting to Anna's orders to charm Annie by cheering her up through storytelling (149), keeping her warm by caressing her (153), giving Annie a looted locket (163), kissing her (164), and even helping her dress (169), all of which fan his infatuation with Annie and cause him to succumb to Anna's murderous plot. Anna systematically lulls Brand into confusing the perilous part she has devised for him and his own, personal, objectives. If he was the Boer soldier committed to the nationalist cause he professes to be, he would not concede.

Anna's critical view of the performative nature of Boer culture's gender norms aids her to navigate the constraints of her environment and to exploit problematic attitudes towards women—which she plays to the hilt. She performatively confirms Brand's culturally conditioned outlooks, while steering his mind (almost hypnotically) in the direction of her own predatorial plan. Her psychosocial theatre making rhymes with professional illusionist theatre, an artform that entails trickery. Through Anna's successful befuddling of Brand's grip on his sense of reality, he comes to see her, with great alarm, as a witch as he finds himself bumping against a contradiction in his own professed sense of self. This is ascribable to the uncanny outsider position Anna inhabits in her and Brand's shared geo-social milieu.

"[B]itches from Hell": Anna's Resemblance to Gothic Monsters in Fin De Siècle Literature

While Anna and Annie are never explicitly identified as witches, vampires, werewolves or succubae, these distinct yet related gothic figures are invoked both by Anna's explanation of Annie's affliction, the harrowing cure it (by Anna's witness) conditions, and by Brand's maledictions. The supernatural, the chthonic, inflected through Victorian Gothic paradigms, are provocatively suggested in *Breathing In*, albeit in an Afrikaner milieu. When Anna inquires after the payment she wishes to receive for her treatment and care of the General, Brand reminds her of the sacrifices the General has made for his nation, and he concludes insultingly: "But what can I expect from a woman like you? A homeless, rootless wanderer! A parasite! […] You don't know the meaning of patriotism!" (De Wet 2005, 141–142). Brand's invectives accumulate in response to Anna's confessions of looting to eke out a basic existence, as he calls her a "scavenger," a "carrion crow," a "vulture" (145), a "fraud," and a "thief" (146). Picking up on his hints at her perceived parasitism and the vampiric metaphor it inspires, Anna jokingly assures him that "she won't bite" when she beckons him to sit next to her as she is about

to explain the history behind and cause of Annie's ailment and its cure (169). Henceforth, Brand's insults acquire gothic overtones. Overwhelmed by Anna's story and Annie's fits, and an apparent sense of himself as ensnared, Brand moans that he feels as if he had "died and gone to hell" (177). He recalls his first encounter with Anna as follows: "When you ran into the road, the moon shining on your pale face … my horse shied and nearly threw me. At first, I thought you were a ghost. Maybe you are" (177), and he scolds her to "go to hell!" (178). When he realises that he is "trapped" and "tricked" into Anna's ruse in which he realises Annie was complicit, he derides them both, coarsely, as "bitches from hell" (186). Brand eventually conceives of Anna and Annie as either fiendish in nature or associated with the demonic, with witchcraft.

Like many scholars and historians before and after him, Cohen (1996, 16) suggests that the women of Salem who were persecuted for witchcraft "died because they crossed a different border, one that prohibits women from managing property and living solitary, unmanaged lives." In this vein, Fanghanel's (2020, 269) gloss of the word "hag" both confirms and elaborates Cohen's remark and lays bare the factors that prime Brand's view of Anna (2020, 270):

> The hag, from the Old English hægtese, meaning "witch," is also cognate with haga, from which the far more benign word "hedge" has its etymological origins. The hedge, or haga, marks the boundary between the polis of the settlement—the protection of the sovereign—and the unruly world beyond it (beyond the pale, the point beyond which banishment operates).

These aspects, indeed, are what constitute Brand's charge against Anna: Her lifestyle pays little ideological adherence to national borders and locations; as a "Boer woman" she is uncanny. Within the ambit of a South African War Drama, however, the language Brand uses to militate against Anna and Annie is markedly Victorian in its overtones, but De Wet, as Stander (2016, 33–38) explains at great length, is influenced by (especially fin de siècle) Victorian Gothic tropes in her dramaturgical exploration of Afrikaner identity. De Wet reappropriates this Victorian Gothic literary paradigm to stage Brand's and the General's fear of the foreigner—the dissident Boer woman—from within.

Brand's evocation of hellish monsters with which to insult Anna and Annie recalls the late nineteenth-century British Gothic novel, commented upon as follows by Halberstam: "[T]he nineteenth-century Gothic monster […] concentrates its imaginative force upon the […] monsters at home. The figure of the parasite becomes paramount within Gothic precisely because it is an internal not an external danger that the Gothic identifies and attempts to dispel" (1995, 15). Brand's phobia of the British blinds him to the dangers bred locally. Anna's relegated outsider position provides her (at Brand's expense) with a privileged vantage point; she has acquired the acumen to craftily exploit hegemonically determined gender expectations, not only as an illusionist (and therefore "witchlike") socio-psychological theatre maker, but also as a manipulative historian.

Anna's Theatricalised Historiography as Witchcraft

De Wet makes Anna's display of her keen memory and her dexterity at recounting past events (whether with honesty or as a rhetorical trick at work, a sleight of hand) a central character trait, especially in contrast with her male counterparts' inaptitude in this regard. Anna's persuasive posturing of her narratological command on the past places her in a psychological power position in relation to Brand. Metaphorically speaking, Anna operates as a masterful historian in a play that dramatically and self-consciously (re)stages a magisterial chapter in South African history, thereby making historiography (with the female protagonist as "historiographer") one of its central themes.

Brand and the General's (stilted) proficiency as recounters of past events is restricted to their efforts to report on disastrous and traumatic combat. When the General speaks in his sleep, Brand recognises it as a flashback of a gruesome battle they both survived (De Wet 2005, 164), and when Anna instructs Brand to sooth Annie through storytelling, she firmly mutes him as he narrates tales of combat (149). He apologises to Annie: "I can't remember very much … before the war … What … happened before the war … It seems … too long ago. Feels as if the war … has been going on forever" (150). Brand rehashes this admission when, towards the drama's climax, he mutters to himself: "I've lost all sense of time. I don't know what's happened. […] It feels like weeks, months" (176). At this point Brand admits that he cannot even remember exactly under what conditions he met Anna and Annie, but Anna reminds him: "The wagon was in a ditch. You helped to lift it out. And we were grateful. I thanked you and I asked if I could be of service. That's why you brought me here" (177). In contrast with Brand, Anna presents herself as having a firm grip on her memory of the past, if only of the history that sets and pertains to the situation in the shed where her, Annie's, Brand's, and the General's lives are at stake.

Anna's most dazzling display of herself as a historiographer is featured when she relates to Brand the disturbing tale of the betrayal she experienced by Annie's father before the War (170–173). After Annie's conception, he abandoned Anna, which incited her to take an abortive herbal concoction but, learning that he is in love with another woman, she changes her mind, figuring that a child will offer her a *raison d'etre* beyond disappointed love. Consequently, Anna tries to reverse the attempted miscarriage by means of incantation. Anna claims to have realised, eventually, while nursing a dying man, that Annie, because of the harm she suffered in the womb, needs to be revived, periodically, by inhaling a man's last breath. The sincerity and the truth of this account have been questioned by L.S. Steyn (2015, 16), who reads it as an indication of Anna's genuine superstition, and by Basson (in Luyt 2012), who, conversely, suspects it as one of Anna's tricks (as a misandrist serial killer) with which to ensnare Brand. Even Brand initially rejects this testimony's truthfulness when he responds derisively: "You vile, lying woman!" (De Wet 2005, 174). Whatever the case may be, this tale serves Anna's purpose: She ultimately succeeds in persuading Brand to surrender himself to her request. Historiography, especially when staged, may have lethal outcomes. As Hayden

White points out, it is always cast in literary models (1973, 54) which, as Claycomb notes (2017, 138), are particularly noticeable in dramaturgical form.

Theatre holds a special cathartic capacity, as De Wet reminds us (in Solberg 2003, 187) when she asserts: "I think it is […] terribly important to understand that theatre […] is a sacred precinct, and that it can be used to heightened consciousness, that it is capable of changing your chemical make-up, changing you biologically in some mysterious way." Theatre can be politically dangerous and rhetorically and affectively powerful, and on these terms, I read *Breathing In* as an exposure of and as combative with the chauvinist dimensions of the often propagandist canon of South African War Drama that precedes it.

Staged History as "Witchcraft"

The links between historiography, theatre, and trickery are most clearly spotlighted when Anna (meta)theatrically inches Brand towards giving up his life in service of Annie's survival. De Wet shows Anna's success as a "historian" as premised on her skill as a social actress; Anna, by way of speaking, "enchants" Brand through a dramatic metamorphosis of herself into an alluring storyteller, costumed in seductive attire, and by marshalling her talent at creating the temporary illusion of herself as a younger version of herself. Anna thus reveals herself as not only craftily adept at altering her conduct towards his desires, but also at reliving and channelling a past Brand has no access to. It is done so at the hand of Anna's manoeuvring of Brand's (and the theatre audience's) perception of her aged, performing body. In the stage directions De Wet describes Anna as "[m]iddle aged" although "her age and even her appearance seem to change from time to time" (De Wet 2005, 133). This is most pronouncedly showcased in the stage directions that immediately precede Anna's recollections of the events that she claims to have constituted Annie's affliction (2005, 169):

> ANNA moves quickly to the trunk. Looks inside. She takes out a dress, puts it on. It is a close-fitting dark red dress with a low neck. This changes her appearance dramatically. She suddenly looks younger and the white flesh of her swelling breasts make her seem almost alluring. She twists her hair up loosely. A few tendrils stray into her neck. There is a perceptible change in her bearing. She seems taller and more shapely.
>
> BRAND enters. He stops in the doorway and looks a little confused, almost as if he doesn't recognise ANNA.

Once Anna captures Brand's attention she draws it to her actual age, by pulling candles closer to her face, asserting "I want you to see me very, very clearly. I want you to see … all my suffering. In my eyes. In the lines in my face. The grey in my hair. And my mouth. The way the words come out of my mouth. Each … bitter word that I have to spit out" (171). In so doing, De Wet reminds the reader of the published drama's staged history and potential future destinations. Here *Breathing In*'s metatheatricality operates by means of its author's aligning of Brand's and the audience's gaze to conceive of what

Claycomb has noticed, namely that "in performance both the performativity of identity and the efficacy of the live, speaking body together create a rhetorical effect" (2017, 2). Comparably, Susan Bennet remarks that the "live, performing body renders the script three-dimensional, but it itself has been scripted, as it were, prior to its subject matter. Its very physicality—indeed its liveness—is an account of all experience leading to the present moment, the archive of life lived" (2006, 35). Anna wants Brand to see her as bearing the burdens of her past on her body; conjunctively, De Wet lifts the curtain on the machinations of theatre's manipulative workings to sway an audience's socio-psychological and political affections and affinities. After all, in an interview with Dorothea van Zyl (2004, 4) about *Breathing In*, she confessed to her wish to "bewitch" her audience. The audience in question here is dual: Brand (on a diegetic plain) and De Wet's target audience/reader, possibly informed by an amnesiac canon of (predominantly) Afrikaner nationalist (re)stagings of the South African War.

Conclusion

This article presents De Wet's *Breathing In* as "breathing in," as it were, revisionist perspectives to a predominantly patriarchal canon of Afrikaner nationalistically inflected South African dramas. I argue that this intervention operates along the lines of a (South African) feministic application of metadrama. This entails the dramatisation of a female protagonist who acts as a metaphorical theatre maker. I speculate that De Wet's creation of Anna functions as a gesture by which the playwright platforms (especially Afrikaner) South African women's underacknowledged (and often politically dissident) creative agency not only in *Breathing In*'s South African War-setting, but also in the play's millennial performance context in which the uprising of a militant strand of Afrikaner nationalism manifested in Afrikaner mainstream culture, both in popular music and on the theatre stage. By figuring Anna's theatrics as entailing a form of historiography in service of perceived witchcraft, De Wet pays tribute to the (for better or for worse) enchanting power of theatre, an animate yet grossly neglected literary genre in South African canonising agencies.

Acknowledgement

I wish to acknowledge the source of my postdoctoral research fellowship's funding: Stellenbosch University's Subcommittee A, as well as the scholarly input of my host, Dr Jeanne Ellis.

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