

## Stephen Black and *Love and the Hyphen* (1908-1928)

Stephen Gray

The name of Stephen Black may be known on paper - on the paper documentation of literature in Southern Africa, buried in archives, newspapers and library manuscript collections - but it is hardly current in our contemporary attitudes to our literature. His novel, The Dorp (first published in 1920) is freely available, although seldom referred to, possibly because it seems unclassifiable; another novel, The Golden Calf (1925), an adaptation of a play of his called I D B, is extremely hard to come by; and a third novel, Limelight, about life in the arts in South Africa, is as yet unpublished.<sup>1</sup>

The outstanding and unique contribution Black made to the cultural life of South Africa in the period from 1908 to 1928 was, however, in the field of drama, and here it is easy to explain the fact that we no longer feel his presence - of the three genres, poetry, fiction and drama, theatre has always been the most perishable, the one least susceptible to preservation in permanent form. The fact that Black never published any of the 20-odd theatre plays - most of which were produced and acclaimed in South Africa - and never published his screenplays means that they appear no longer to exist. So the conscientious reconstruction of his art and its meaning in his times is hampered by many factors, not least of which is the notion that there could not have been a golden age of South African drama if we have never heard of it before.

The facts of Stephen Black's life are also peculiarly difficult to unearth. For a start, we are not sure of the year of his birth. As far as various researchers<sup>2</sup> and I can ascertain it was probably 1880, in which case 1980 was the year of his centenary. What is certain about Black, however, is that he died on 8 August 1931 (aged 52), so that at least 1981 can be the 50th anniversary of his death. Celebrations like these do give us a feeling of time passing and of course are quite arbitrary, but they also compel re-evaluations in our literature, and it's about time Black had his turn. He is a very large missing piece of the jigsaw of the history of theatre in South Africa, and recovering the impact and effect of his theatre today could give us a greater sense not only of the role drama has played in South African history, but of the factor of audience taste and expectations which results in our current attitudes to drama.

Stephen Black's theatre was a form that belonged to Victorian and Edwardian show business, and that type of showbiz came drastically to an end with the depression of the 1930's, for obvious financial reasons. For example, not one of the music halls or variety theatres in which Black played for so many

years still stands in South Africa. The site of the Tivoli Music Hall, once a pitstop for the stars of review, for acrobats, singers, dancers, mimes and comedians who came to it from all over the English-speaking world, now has the Cape Town post office on it. The story of the Standard Theatre is much the same; built in 1891 (when Johannesburg was five years old) and demolished in 1959, it stood on the site of the springbok fountain on Market Street.<sup>3</sup>

It is a period worth recreating, because one of the first aspects one comes across in researching Black is that in his own times he was very widely and very popularly held to be the father of indigenous South African drama. His prolific invention and the sustained nature of his work in theatre proves that this is a claim we should take rather seriously, for he was a full-timer and, what is more, made plays professionally. While for his other contemporary playwrights, both in English and in Afrikaans, theatre was an amateur or part-time affair, Black's theatre was the only one that functioned under its own management with a regular company, performing its own impresario's scripts.

According to the press of the time, this birth of the national South African drama happened on a specific date - Thursday 16 November 1908 - with the premiere of Black's first play, Love and the Hyphen.<sup>4</sup> It ran for ten days, until the following Saturday and was remounted for another ten performances over the following Christmas-New Year period, with some cast changes. By 15 January, its producer, Mr Arthur de Jong, could estimate that it had already played to no less than 30 000 people.<sup>5</sup> This production went on tour in late January 1909, to many railway-connected centres, including a season in the Standard Theatre and it travelled as far as Rhodesia, as became the custom with all Black's shows. It opened for a third time in Cape Town around Easter, 1909 and by the end of its first of many seasons had broken all records as South Africa's longest-running production. With substitute casts and rewrites, Love and the Hyphen was revived periodically and in 1916 Black wrote a sequel to it, Van Kalabas does his Bit, which takes its most popular character (Gert van Kalabas van Kalabaskraal) through the opening years of World War 1. A revised version of Love and the Hyphen was remounted in the 1927-8 season, when it played to a new generation of theatregoers and maintained its lead as a much-loved South African theatrical institution. Black's box-office records have long been broken by subsequent commercial shows, but there is to this day probably no South African play that has been seen more widely.

In 1928 it was edged off the boards by changing tastes, to be sure, but more specifically by the Schlesinger Organisation, which bought Black out of theatre and set him up in Johannesburg as editor of an independent satirical paper called The Sjabok. The old showplaces, meanwhile, were converting to handle the new rage of talking motion pictures - the first word said on film dates from 1927 - and poorer audiences who sustained the music hall had either grown richer or were staying home to enjoy that other new invention, commercial radio - which dates, in South Africa, from the advent of Radio JB on 1 July 1924.

The period of Black's career seems to coincide quite exactly with the rise and fall of an idea in theatre in South Africa, an idea of which he was more a symptom than a cause. It is the notion that there could be an independent unified land called South Africa which, no matter how heterogeneous, could have one dominant and common national ideal including all the categories of its cultural life. That ideal was the very substance of the life of the year, and even the month, in which Love and the Hyphen was launched. It was the time of the first sittings of the National Convention, which met in

October to hammer out the issues of Closer Union, which would lead to the unification of the four provinces in 1910. On our first night the Hon F S Malan, Minister for Agriculture of Cape Colony and Mrs Malan, attended the play, as did key representatives of the Military.<sup>6</sup> Closer Union was, naturally, the play's theme and the whole substance was what a historian like Eric A Walker calls the "liberal" and "civilised" Cape's stand to maintain its liberal social values and civilisation, specifically on the issue of traditional freedoms and the non-white franchise, challenged at the Convention by the conservatism of Natal and the two defeated Republics, now making their recovery of power. One could annotate almost every sequence, every line of the play with reference to the strategies of the Herzogites, the Smuts and Botha men, and the last days of the Schreiner government. Even the rule of martial law during the recent Rand strikes and the drift of farmers to the expanding towns are sub-themes in the play.

When the Convention delegates moved to Cape Town that December, ex-President Steyn of the Orange Free State would ask for a matinee performance of Love and the Hyphen, and many other dignitaries took their boxes well in advance (CAW, 2 January 1909). The Cape Argus wrote:

While our statesmen debate the national problems with closed doors, the wide-open door of the (theatre) let in the people to witness the artistic solving of the final problem of all - the solidarity of race and race, wherein is wrapped up the future of South Africa. Without seeming unduly to praise Mr Stephen Black, one must render him this meed of acknowledgement, that he has set Britain, Boer and Black ... laughing at each other's foibles, and the man who laughs at his own foibles is on the way to saving his soul alive ... Was (this) not the christening feast of the National Drama?

(CAW, 9 December 1908)

In sentiments like these the politics of the times and of the play totally mesh.

But if Love and the Hyphen was an occasional piece, that still does not explain how it came about. The clue lies in the following. The Argus critic continues:

Night after night great merchants and serious law-makers have rocked in their places and laughed their boyhood laugh once more. Forgotten for a lightsome hour or two (are) all the strife and strain of depression.

After the post-war boom of Milner's Reconstruction period, this depression and slump had apparently set in; its implications on a luxury art-form like theatre were grievous, just as the advent of television and the recession have been in the last few years. In July 1908 the Tivoli Theatre had, in fact, closed down; artists were stranded without even the Union-Castle fare home - like the Pennington sisters, lately of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, who ended up as the genteel sisters in our play. Because of the ruinous costs of importing and maintaining artists "the directors have decided to (re-open and) run the Tivoli on more local lines; to employ local talent, and to charge popular prices." There was also a "widespread feeling in favour of spending in the country itself as much as possible of the country's money" (CAW, 8 July 1908). Hence the coming into their own of, for example, the local Cape wines - which, incidentally, Mr de Jong featured in the Tivoli bars; in Act 2 of the play the climax is an exquisitely hypocritical scene in which the upper class snobs toast one another in the most expensive imported booze, only to discover they have been tricked into drinking "Capeerry and Port en Dop brandy".<sup>7</sup> It is a delicious moment of satire which

must have sent the audience stampeding into the bars for the local product and a fine example of subliminal advertising. Hence, also, the arrival of the local playwright and the whole notion of making our own.

In scratching together Love and the Hyphen Black and De Jong had only to in-span the poverty-stricken around them. There was Mr Charles Leonard (Van Kalabas), who was touring the platteland with 'Afrikaner' impersonations, conjuring, bell-ringing, Japanese juggling, chapeaugraphy and xylophone playing (CAW, 9 September 1908). Mr Lago Clifford (later Captain Hay-Whotte), the romantic tenor - and subsequently the first voice to be heard on the air in South Africa - was available, because his South African Follies had collapsed in Durban (CAW, 21 October 1908). From the streets they pulled in a troupe of retrenched civil servants who had been reduced to living as pierrot buskers (CAW, 25 November 1908). There were also outside bets like Mr George Paget (Frikkie), aged 24, born in Green Point, destined to become a star, who had no previous acting experience and was unemployed, but who had picked up Coloured patter in the Wale Street Magistrates Courts (CAW 23 January 1909). The orchestra in the pit was employed on contract and had to be worked into the play. And so, out of unemployment, despair and poverty, with showmanship and on a wave of fervour for the future, the first South African play was improvised.

The earliest script of Love and the Hyphen we have is a typescript revised in holograph by Black, which is certainly not the script that was staged on that first night, but which dates from the adjusted versions of the following New Year. That is as close to the origins as we can get, apart from the contemporaneous reviews. Over the twenty years of its existence on stage, about the only detail of the play that did not change was its title - a circumstance which is infuriating to the scholar in search of a definitive version. Obviously incongruous encounters between characters, as doors open and speedily close, are scripted merely as "business". The introduction of a soda siphon, one of the stock props of comedy theatre, one finds, is mentioned, but none of its action, as it goes berserk, squirting over party dresses and military uniforms in the hands of a clumsy imbecile, is described - all we have is the stunned apology: "Excuse me, Lady Mushroom, it went off in my hand", to which she drily replies: "Have some more, Captain" (p.41).

Into what category of drama, then, does Love and the Hyphen fall? Comedy with farcical tendencies, for one, much of the humour being ephemeral, topical and of the in-joke kind, constantly revised and ad libbed according to the audience; Black himself described it as a "Stage Satire". Basically, the earliest versions derive from the music hall or the vaudeville, which lives on in a meagre way in the form of the revue today. Other sources were the burlesque and the pantomime, genres now utterly transformed or extinct. A theatre like the Tivoli, which was lavishly equipped with a proscenium arch, could stage large-cast spectaculars and was primarily a variety theatre, presenting mixed bills (including short silent films) drawn from all the genres. But the Tivoli rarely went as far as presenting what we would call 'well-made' drama - the complete evening's play within a series of box sets. But standard sets were used for curtain raisers and for melodramas interpolated into the bill and it became a feature of the prepubility of Love and the Hyphen that it was to have all new sets, all new costumes and be one complete piece.

All the elements of the play fall under a larger heading common in the period - that of Society drama (what we would call drawing room comedy). Black's cast list of thirteen is explicit on this point: Lady Mushroom of the convex figure is "a leader of" Cape society; the fluffy-headed sisters Lynda and

Gwendoline de Gadde are "in" Cape society; Captain Hay-Whotte of His Majesty's Muddlers is "wanted by" society; Gert van Kalabas is "on the fringes of"; Tante Saatchie Pampoenkop is "beyond the pale of"; and Sophie and Frikkie, the Coloured servants, are the "slaves of" society. And, as is the tradition, all these barriers fall during the course of the play, the audience witnesses exposure after exposure and in the end everything is duly laughed into harmony and happiness.

To cut a very complicated and long story short, let me summarise some of the plot and the effect of its denouement. The Mushroom dynasty, it turns out, rather than being an old established Cape family of vintage stock, is seen to be an example of nouveau riche Colonial opportunism - their past is merely one of diamond digging and then shopkeeping and their sole aspiration is to marry aristocracy. Into this rising Colonial establishment marches King Edward's fashionable soldiery, who, despite their snob-appeal (the scarlet of their uniforms gives the match-makers of Cape Town an epidemic of "scarlet fever", as Sophie remarks), turn out to be humbugs and philanderers, exploiters and frauds and as they make a last-minute escape on the mailboat they leave South Africa to its own devices, free of Imperial domination.

The rising bureaucracy of the Civil Service, caricatured in Van Kalabas, is a proliferating monument to privileged laziness, its chief aim being, apparently, to pretend that one was 'Home-born' and to wipe out all traces of a countrified Afrikaans past. Social pretensions are, likewise, the motivation of the 'kitchen' class, and Sophie Wijnbek's loud-mouthed way of being heard is an exuberant assertion of her right to a place in this madhouse of chicanery, double-crossing and social climbing. And the absolute delight of it all is that everyone, good and bad, gets their just desserts. Black plots it all out without malice - rather, he does it with grace and bemused charm. Like it or not, we gleefully accept that everyone at the end of the play is to share in future glory.

Here is an abbreviated version of the last minutes of Act I to give an idea of how this is accomplished; this is a fair example of the piece showing us our "foibles". The setting is a garden party in Wynberg with a refreshment marquee in the background, behind which is a freshly painted backdrop of Table Mountain in the distance. The two dames of the piece, Tante Saatchie and Sophie, are played here by men in pantomime style. Captain Hay-Whotte and Gwendoline are spooning:

HAY-WHOTTE (taking her hand): Pretty little hand you have! Let me take it -

GWEN (falling into his arms): Oh Captain, this is so sudden!

HAY-WHOTTE (aside): The devil! Does she take that for a proposal?

GWEN: Captain, you will never, never, never break your word. It would break my heart. (Clasps him round the neck)

Enter Tante Saatchie.

TANTE S: Wat die duivel maak die kereel daar? Dit is scander lijk. Als dit mij nie's dochter is zal ek die vervlakte soldat goot uit klap.

HAY-WHOTTE: Aw, I say Miss Gwendoline, what the devil's that?

TANTE S: Van fraerij kom nuikerij!

HAY-WHOTTE: Wat bally stwange animals Lady Mushroom allows to gwaize in her grounds ...

TANTE S: Maar vrachting dit is 'n pragtig plek. Kijk toch die mooi tuin en die frij stule. Dit is vrachter bijtter als Basson's stoep.

Enter Frikkie

Hier koom een swart jong. Hier jij, waar is Mevrouw Mushroom?

FRIKKIE: Nou wort is dit? Wort for you comes here? Der missus will be werry engery.

TANTE S: Mij liefer heiland, hoor toch die swart jong! Jou vervlukste Hotnot. Ek klap jou net nou maar uit! (Bangs Frikkie with umbrella)

HAY-WHOTTE: Aw I say, bai God, my good woman, be off. About turn. Bai Jove, I'll dwive her out.

TANTE S: Jou vervlukste Khaki! Jou blickskottle. Toe loop.

She attacks the Captain with her bag, clubbing him and chasing him off.  
Enter Sophie.

FRIKKIE: Sophie, look at dis hooman. See gort der dem chick to come here by der garden party en see did nuik der Keptin op.

SOPHIE: Well I be dem. My good hooman, I adwises you to leaf der groans on der sport.

TANTE S: Jou fehle swart ding. Loop haal Nooi Mushroom.

SOPHIE: We dissen spik no Duts here. Lady Musroom is orful perticerlar erboat it. See did sack der cook larse week bekors one day see tork Duts to der bootsir!

Enter Van Kalabas.

VAN K: I should tink so. It's bally rotten form. Never spoke a word of der gibberish in my life.

TANTE S: Wat is jou naam, mijnheer?

VAN K (with dignity): I am Mr Gerald van Kalabas.

TANTE S: Allah cragtie! dis suiker mij neef Gerry Kalabas. Kom soon toch jou tantie.

VAN K: I don't know who der woman is. Some bally Boer, I suppose. You are making a mistake.

TANTE S: Ooo nee! Jij is complete so nes jou Oom Klaas. Ek ken jou telik bekkie. (Grabs him. Van Kalabas shouts)

SOPHIE: My good hooman, es you dissen makes your departure on der spot I will reques Frederick to injecting you.

TANTE S: Mij liefer heiland. Probeer dit maar. (Shakes her handbag at the three.) Your granfather was slaves; nouw is julle Engelse British subjects.

SOPHIE: Der hooman is completely lunatics!

VAN K: Trow her out. She's a bally rotter.

TANTE S: Nie jij, Gerry Kalabas ...

Musicians off-stage play "Wat jou goed en trek, Ferreira", this representing a street-band passing the house.

TANTE S (dropping her bundle): Ach hoor die lekker musik! (Gradually

begins to move to the rhythm and then dances. Sophie and Frikkie look on disdainfully for a while. Van Kalabas is overcome by the music and joins his aunt.)

SOPHIE: Ach look at Mr Van Kalabas, dancing wid der Duts person.

FRIKKIE: Allemach, is alte lekker. Ek kan mij nie meer hou nie.  
Kom on, ou Sophie. (Grabs Sophie and they dance.)

SOPHIE (shrieking): Wah. Got Allah!

Lady Mushroom and the De Gadde sisters enter. Tante Saatchie, on seeing Lady Mushroom, goes to her and embraces her long-lost second cousin. Lady Mushroom collapses into the arms of Van Kalabas.

Curtain.

(pp.21-3)

By the 1928 revival of Love and the Hyphen much had changed. Firstly, Love and the Hyphen was to prove not only the first work Black wrote for the stage, but, as it turns out, the new version was his last work for the stage as well. Between the two versions lie two decades of achievement as a manager and impresario, and a career as an actor in his own and others' plays. Secondly, the South Africa for which Black wrote the original version had of course profoundly altered in the interim (which Black especially felt after a six-year stay in London and then France); in the final version one feels the loss of the earlier optimism as Black reworks his piece of froth into a far more serious problem play.

Many of the changes are cosmetic and superficial: much of the old punning, the asides and parodies that stopped the show is merely cut - always in favour of more directly functional dialogue. Characters are deleted or spliced together: for example, the proprietress of the Elite Tea Rooms of the old Act 3, formerly a new character called Mrs Nick-Nack, is now none other than one of the De Gadde sisters who, having failed in the marriage stakes, has taken to business and in her we see the rise of the independent woman. The pace in the revised version is faster, but the humour remains - though it now comes from the mouths of individualised people rather than from the old stock types. We are now closer to the age of Noel Coward and later George Bernard Shaw than the music hall.

Most significant of all - and this completely transforms the impact of the play - Black added a preface and a postscript, which are, in effect, a new Act 1 and an Act 5. Act 1 is unexpected, for it thickens out the issue of the breaking of barriers of caste of the old play into stronger stuff: now Sophie (previously merely an irreligious Kaatje Kekkelbek) is actually courting a military man under Frikkie's nose and is fully intending to conceive by him so that, if she cannot, at least her child can try for white. The old play proceeds thereafter, but with this difference - Sophie is no longer a clown; she is a knowing woman, exploiting her situation to her own benefit, living with one white man, marrying the other coloured man as a concession to morality. One of her classic lines (to Frikkie) is:

"She's no bastard because she was born after I married you ... you black nigger."  
(p.72)

It is not easy to chart how a change of times may change an artist's sensibility; at all costs, one feels, easy generalisations are to be avoided. But, with the accession of the Afrikaner and Labour Alliance in 1924, some of the balances of power within the dominion had altered and, like other South African authors of the 20s (like Roy Campbell, William Plomer and

Laurens van der Post) Black now found himself against the government in some matters like the strictures on immorality. Not far behind were the miscegenation question and the Coloured Voters issue, plus the 'poor white' question and the rising 'native problem', all of which Black dealt with extensively in other plays, and which now duly take their place here.

The stand Sophie makes in the revised Love and the Hyphen was by no means one which would elicit public sympathy.<sup>8</sup> Nor were some of the other issues dealt with in Act 5, where Black takes a breathtaking leap by advancing the action by twenty years. In this postscript or Act 5, first of all Black has Sophie's white corporal return to find he has a nineteen-year-old daughter, Camelia Violet Smith, who is indeed 'passing'. Frikkie, who has faithfully maintained her for all those years, is emphatically rejected by her in favour of the status her newly-discovered white father gives her. The final focus of the whole play is this deserted, aged Frikkie who, as the entire cast leaves the stage, makes his bitter conclusion: "You can all go to hell" (p.93).

There are other updatings of theme: Gwendoline de Gadde has so prospered in business that she has now, in fact, bought the old Mushroom Mansion - Lady Mushroom herself lives on a minute allowance from her son-in-law and is happy even to be invited back to her old fortress of privilege for a cup of tea. Lynda, who happily married Major Spavin-Glanders in the previous play, is now a World War I widow without children, living on a pitiful soldier's pension. Captain Hay-Whotte, the old embezzler, has achieved such promotion during the war that he is a reformed man who now elects to turn his back on Britain in favour of the opportunities South Africa offers for middle class success. And Van Kalabas the layabout is now, of course, none other than South Africa's ambassador to Washington, making a fine living on the side as a liquor-runner to beat American Prohibition. Tante Saatchie, alas, has died, leaving her immense rural property and all her landed money to - Van Kalabas, no less, with the proviso that his children be brought up speaking Afrikaans, which he and Lynda (as they make a quick union) happily agree to honour.

1928 was also the Jazz Age and in Love and the Hyphen jazz means flappers and alcohol, motoring and, most of all, cigarettes for women. When Sophie clears out at the end, she goes with her radio and gramophone blaring jazz, in the back of a taxi reversed onto the stage by her son, horn blaring and everyone riding the running boards - they are off to the bioscope, no less. She may have lost her rights, but she is also doing all right in a society which can buy her silence with the consumer goods that give her the status she always desired. Only Frikkie is left out, as has been said, and we see that the old unionising hyphen that pulled everyone in the world of the play together in one jolly mix is now broken and the structure of the play falls apart as Black decides not to settle for a very happy ending.

In the 1930s that followed Black, South African theatre in English virtually closed down. New wealth post the Depression brought more imports from London, less local talent. The film industry that Black worked for, which boomed in 1918 and 1919 in Killarney, Johannesburg, making South African feature films, never got off the ground and had long sold out to the Hollywood version, as it has virtually ever since. With Black's death in 1931 the possibility of there being one national playwright, who wrote in all South Africa's languages about all South Africa's people on one stage - the ideal upon which Black based his theatre - seems to have faded and become forgotten.



## Notes

- 1 In the Stephen Black papers, Strange Collection, Johannesburg Public Library.
  - 2 In the Africana Collections, South African Library, Cape Town.
  - 3 See Arnold Benjamin, Lost Johannesburg (Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 1-5.
  - 4 See my "The First Night of Stephen Black's Love and the Hyphen". Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library, Cape Town, September 1980, for fuller details.
  - 5 With the Players column by Touchstone (D C Boonzaier), The Cape: A Weekly Review, Cape Town, 15 January 1909, subsequently abbreviated to Cape.
  - 6 Stage and Show column, Cape Argus Weekly, Cape Town (subsequently abbreviated to CAM), 25 November 1908.
  - 7 My own typescript transcription of the Boonzaier TS, South African Library, p.42, cited from here on, with my own transcription of the Preface and Postscript of the Black Collection TS, JPL.
  - 8 See, for example, The Cape, Cape Town, 1 February 1929, p.7.
- 

## **WORK IN PROGRESS**

**WORK IN PROGRESS** explores and presents ideas about contemporary South African society. WIP appears about five times per year.

**REGULAR FEATURES** include summaries of political trials, and items on strikes and other labour action and on labour organisations.

**ARTICLES** in previous editions have dealt with strikes, resettlement, community organisation, bus and consumer boycotts, education, the bantustans.

### **SUBSCRIPTIONS:**

Individuals: R7.50 for 5 issues.

Institutions and organisations: R15.00 for 5 issues.

Donor subscribers: salaried individuals are requested to subscribe at R15.00 for 5 issues. This will assist in subsidising people with limited or no income.

Subscribers are requested to consider donor subscriptions where possible, and also asked to actively encourage others to subscribe to WIP.

For group distribution and subscription rates outside of Southern Africa contact: The Editors, P O Box 93174, 2143 Yeoville.