

## Ndilapa Nkosi

by Orde

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Reviewed by Jane Bennett

Ndilapa Nkosi is a slim collection of poetry which offers the first publication of the long title poem and several short pieces of work (one of the latter - "Going back to 55/56" - has been published before, in Izwi Vol 11 no. 5, 1972). In the author's introduction to the book, Orde Levison claims an extraordinary autonomy from political or social connection for himself:-

Regarding myself: I am not a politician and my work has no such overtones. Picasso, once asked what his political affiliations were, replied: 'In Spain there is a king, therefore I am a royalist.'  
(Peculiarly unfortunate implications for a South African, I should have thought .....)

The prerogative of a man to affirm a personal autarchy, however impossible this may seem to be ideologically-speaking, is not within the scope of a critic's concern. To accede to the separation of that man's writing from its politico-social influences and implications would however be both naive and dishonest. For the sake of psychological accuracy alone, the maxim Orde appropriates for himself - "tel homme, tel artiste, tel vie" - needs expansion : "tel vie, tel homme, tel artiste, tel vie".

In his preface to Forced Landing, Mthobi Mutloatse (1978) says: "...for someone to state he is apolitical is a lousy political lie" and in 'Critical Responses to Contemporary South African Theatre' Ian Steadman (1980), explaining the absurdity of separating the theatre from political questions, points out that: "politics, especially in South Africa permeates every capillary of social life". 'Ndilapa Nkosi', described by the poet as a "Lyrical comedy", is in fact dependent wholly upon a politico-social consciousness for any effect it may have. The poem/drama moves through a discussion between seven people who are trapped by the ramifications of "Aparthar" -

Aparthar/that is the politics/we know .... we don't/know/exactly what politics is eh/it is a lot/oflaws/which say you are not allowed to/this and that/... the eh/stairways/there is another side for us.

A distance between the situation in which these characters live and breathe and their obvious South African context is suggested by talk of green people who are battered at Agnayn by blues and kerries, of the year 949! -

I knew I had a brain at/that time/I knew I/could count from then,

of the Sands and grains economy of "our Acirfa Huous", of beaches at point-sea and bergmuiz and of Green Administration Boards. These disguises of nomenclature are never less than diaphanous and lend a whimsical air of unreality to the whole poem. This must, in fact, be a part of Orde's intention in using allegory in this rather artificial way - certainly the "comedy" of the poem is dependent upon the sense of absurdity this artificiality creates. But allegory, unlike myth, is a limited literary model; what happens in 'Mditapa Nkosi' is its emasculation of the effect of Orde's consistently successful transcription of a particular linguistic code. There is immense potential for dramatic performance in the dialogue, but Orde's attempt to de-localize, to de-temporize in this way results simply in the reduction of the issues and people involved in the poem. Explicit universalization of a text's significance, especially when made from within the text itself, can be dangerous. The title of the poem is a Sotho translation of the reply of the child Samuel when he heard the voice of Yahweh calling him in the temple ("Here am I, Master" - The Old Testament; 1 Kings 13. Interesting to note that Yahweh's message is one of death and destruction to a house which has lost respect for His Name.); the poem's dedication declares its affinity with the work of Mr. S. Beckett and Etienne Leroux; Orde's use of superficial allegory - all these things state the poem's identification with the "universal themes" of human history. But to draw such deliberate metaphorical connections is to reduce the intensity of the focus on the issue under scrutiny, and to allow an audience to abrogate responsibility for the social and dramatic significance of what is being said.

The nature of a "green" life, and of that life's relationship to a "blue" one, is explained - often diffidently and without rancour - by six characters in the poem; the role of the seventh is largely one of encouragement -

"speak/speak from the heart/Lungisa".

Their satyragraphic refusal to deny "the spirit/of god/inside us" in the face of pass legislation and oppression seems born more of an infinite capacity for inconclusive resignation than of optimistic strength. One of the most forceful moments of the dialogue occurs when Arthur is asked -

"why/don't you kill/the blue people/then/  
why don't you kill them".

The reply -

"there is no need/that there is somebody/  
who has got to kill/what we can do is/ talk  
together/and live together/and/be together/  
that's all" -

defuses any possibility of energy, and summarizes the plea made by both the form and content of the poem:- the patience of sympathetic/empathetic interaction will surely move a woeful community towards cure -

"the people are crying/they are crying/we must  
look around/and see/what is wrong with you".

The poem's conclusion -

"the person who has got the power/must try and fix these things/  
and/that we all have a little power" -

has to struggle against the whimsical atmosphere of the land of Sands and grains (Rands and cents?) and against the slow passivity of Nomsa's "we wait until the time...the sign will come" for its polemical impact. In the fixity of a written text, its victory is dubious; in dramatic performance this could very well change. It would be interesting to see.