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Abstract

Stephen Black's comic theatre has vanished from contemporary South Africa as effectively as its tangible appurtenances: the elaborate Edwardian theatre buildings, the palimpsests of improvised scripts, the photos and other documents, its living performers and even its audiences. There are cultural-historical reasons for this. Time passes; ways of entertainment die; aspirations change. But Black, a master entrepreneur of the colonial heyday, should not have been so forgotten.

The Comic Theatre of Stephen Black in South Africa



Stephen Black (dramatist), 1880-1931.

Stephen Black's comic theatre has vanished from contemporary South Africa as effectively as its tangible appurtenances: the elaborate Edwardian theatre buildings, the palimpsests of improvised scripts, the photos and other documents, its living performers and even its audiences. There are cultural-historical reasons for this. Time passes; ways of entertainment die; aspirations change. But Black, a master entrepreneur of the colonial heyday, should not have been so forgotten.

Firstly, his career. Whereas most careers in South African show business before 1960 (i.e. before Athol Fugard) were scattered and fragmentary, or by-products of careers in other fields of literature (C. Louis Leipoldt, H.I.E. Dhlomo and Alan Paton are examples), Black's main activity as a writer was for the stage. Between 1908 and 1917, and then in 1928 and 1929, he wrote and produced well over a dozen scripts. Although he also wrote three novels and free-lanced as an article-writer in between theatre seasons, and lived as the editor of independent 'alternative' scandal-sheets in 1917-18 and from 1929 to his death, his main mode of making a living was in theatre — he was for over two decades South Africa's only actor-manager, very widely held to be the 'first South African dramatist' and a man who had an immense popular following. His two favourite scripts, *Love and the Hyphen* and *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, were performed in repertory more than 600 times apiece.¹ To give an indication of the drawing power of Black's theatre, *Love and the Hyphen* has played to an estimated 30,000 patrons by its 20th performance,² and in the years to come the various Black companies would carry it and other Black plays far and wide to many of the railway-connected centres of the South Africa and Rhodesia of his day. He was hardly an unknown figure in his own time.

Secondly, the nature of Black's theatre. It was a type that put a high premium on topicality, and this was only semi-scriptable. Black wrote satirical comedy, the nearest equivalent of which today is the drawing room comedy of manners, yet his scripts never fossilised into high culture artifacts, as has become the fate of writers who strongly influenced him, like Sheridan and Wilde; it was a point of pride and advertisement with Black that his shows were always up-to-the-minute and spiced with in-references to the doings of the actual day. As a result, it is not only difficult to pin down a completely detailed text of any one show, but impossible to recreate its night-by-night particularity. In gaining relevance and immediacy in a living actor-audience interplay, Black sacrificed the 'universals' of drama writing; rather than high art, Black wrote functional editorial commentary.

Another factor which works against the reconstruction of Black's theatre is its style, which today is but dimly remembered in the oratorical delivery of 'old-fashioned' elocution in school and parish amateur dramas. Black wrote pre-naturalism;³ also, his actors were trained not in straight theatre but in music hall, that is, in the lost styles of burlesque and pantomime, song and dance routines, impersonation and mimicry, and light opera (his progenitors were equally Little Tich, W.C. Fields,

and Gilbert and Sullivan). The productions themselves were typical of the Edwardian mixed bill, which itself was an evolution from the low class variety stages into respectability, rather than a devolution of high class drama. That means, far from starting from any Aristotelian unities of time, place and action, Black started from a wide range of styles and began linking them together into plays that were, at first, little more than the sum of the sketches they tenuously bound together. Purity of style and consistency of technique were not Victorian and Edwardian theatrical norms: today it is difficult to reconstruct the critical atmosphere by which Black's theatre was shaped. From the contemporaneous reviews, however, it is possible to deduce that each Black script quite adequately contained sufficient items on the expected dramatic menu: parody, romance, spectacle and scenery, drama (i.e. melodrama), music (including interludes for large resident pit orchestras), use of physical skills (gymnastics, juggling, balancing acts, chapeaugraphy, etc.), and topical comment. When later in his career Black tried to rarefy his scripts into less varied, more homogeneous structures, the attempts failed to elicit any great critical approval.

Thirdly, since the plays were occasional pieces, it seems unfortunately clear that once the original occasion was no longer a currency for an audience, the play that celebrated it died accordingly. Black was born of the Unification of South Africa, and his first play, *Love and the Hyphen* (1908), specifically celebrates that happening, even though it survived eighteen years beyond Union in endless permutations. His second play, *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, was launched in 1910 to discuss further and measure the implications and promises of that same Union, which, in Black's view of it, was a mandate to the writer to write about all of South Africa's people for all of South Africa's people. By 1929 the very boards upon which Black and his companies had always played were closing to him as the talking movie took over venues which had been open to theatre since the 1890s. When Black himself died in 1931, an impecunious Bohemian without any financial assets other than the rights of his plays, the dynamic of his whole brand of show business died with him.

The disappearance of this period of sustained and inventive play-making poses the critical problem of Stephen Black. It is a problem not unique to South Africa, for research techniques and appropriate methodologies for a study of other than high-class theatrical forms have been developed only recently to deal with similar problems throughout the English-speaking world. In Black's case, the most crucial factor causing this gap in the history of the theatre in South Africa is that he chose not to publish. Perhaps it was no free choice; of the three major

genres of Western literature — poetry, fiction and drama — the last-named is the one that has least frequently been seen through into print. Black himself certainly never prepared final drafts of his plays. Where the possibility of raising money on them from publication was concerned, he converted them into other forms. His long-running play of the diamond fields, *I.D.B.*, for example, was recycled (once he was detached from active play-making during a sojourn of some six years as a farmer in the south of France) into a novel, *The Golden Calf*.⁴ In London in 1914-15 (when he worked as a reporter on *The Daily Mail*) he prepared a silent screenplay entitled *The Yellow Streak* in 33 interiors and 20 exterior scenes, which was never shot, but it was the 'literary version',⁵ a long short story on the same theme of a black Rocky-type boxer, which brought in the money.⁶

The record of Black's plays for theatre and for screen, then, is a haphazard and incomplete one, despite the energetic collection of Blackiana in the South African Library in Cape Town and the Strange Collection of the Johannesburg Public Library. There what we have of Black's theatre is in the form of manuscripts and typescripts, with copious holograph corrections, acquired from his family and various associates over the years since his death. These are what in other circles would be called 'prompt copies', amounting to some ten plays only, some of which are incomplete. Fortunately, the texts of *Love and the Hyphen*, *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* and the sequel to the first-mentioned *Van Kalabas does 'His Bit'*, which comprise a sort of trilogy, are reasonably completely preserved.

The case of the *Love and the Hyphen* text is a curious one. Two almost identical typescripts of the 1908-09 script exist, and by correlating them against the lengthily descriptive reviews and second reviews of the time, a more exact date of performance can be narrowed down to early 1909.⁷ In the Strange Collection, however, there is a third script of *Love and the Hyphen*, dated 1928, which includes the three acts of the earlier version, somewhat restyled, and adds to them a prefatory act, and a post script act in which the action is advanced twenty years, i.e. updated to the time of revival.⁸ These two different versions compared give an index to changes of taste in theatre, changes of political insight in Black, and a general growth of sophistication in his dramaturgy and in his audiences. The additional framing acts of the 1928 version give the older central section resonance and perspective, and result in an implicit historical commentary which is without equal in the day-to-day annals of theatre in South Africa.⁹ The sequel, written (confusingly enough) between the original versions and the revised version, carries the action of 1908-09

and some of the characters of that *Love and the Hyphen* into the First World War, the watershed event which produces an early 'stranger to Europe' strain of thought about the colony-motherland relationship in Black's representative types.

The play which is related with these *Love and the Hyphen* variants, but distinct from them, is *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, which is more 'well-made' and which relies to a lesser extent on topical allusions and improvised interpolations. The only extant script of *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* is a very early draft, written long before the first night. Although this copy is marked in holograph with notes about speech dynamics for the part of Samuel Shearer (who appears in only the first, the third and the last of the four acts), there are no notes, diagrams or doodles about entries and exits, blocking or style of gesture, so that one presumes it is merely an early copy used at one of the many private readings Black held in Cape Town in 1909 while the production was in preparation.

In attempting to reconstruct a complete and coherent text of *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, one has to have recourse to the easily recoverable category of secondary texts: reviews, programme notes, publicity hand-outs, articles, surveys and gossip columns, and the memoirs of those who were there, either published or collected orally. Here another part of the problem becomes clear. In his review of a performance of *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, the critic of the *Johannesburg Sunday Times* began thus:

I don't think I ever missed the great and glorious advantages of a Colonial education until the other night, when I went to see *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* I had much the same feeling as when I went to see the French plays at the Royalty Theatre in Dean Street... That is, I had to keep my wits on tenter-hooks and my ears keyed to concert pitch, to find out what it was all about.

I am not a linguist. At the best I speak an indifferent English, so that dialogue carried on in Dutch, in Kaffir and in Yiddish is as Greek to me. This was all the more irritating because the ball of language was being tossed backwards and forwards from all parts of the house, while I, in the solitary grandeur of the O.P. Box, sat unmoved, a melancholy and not to say depressing figure.¹⁰

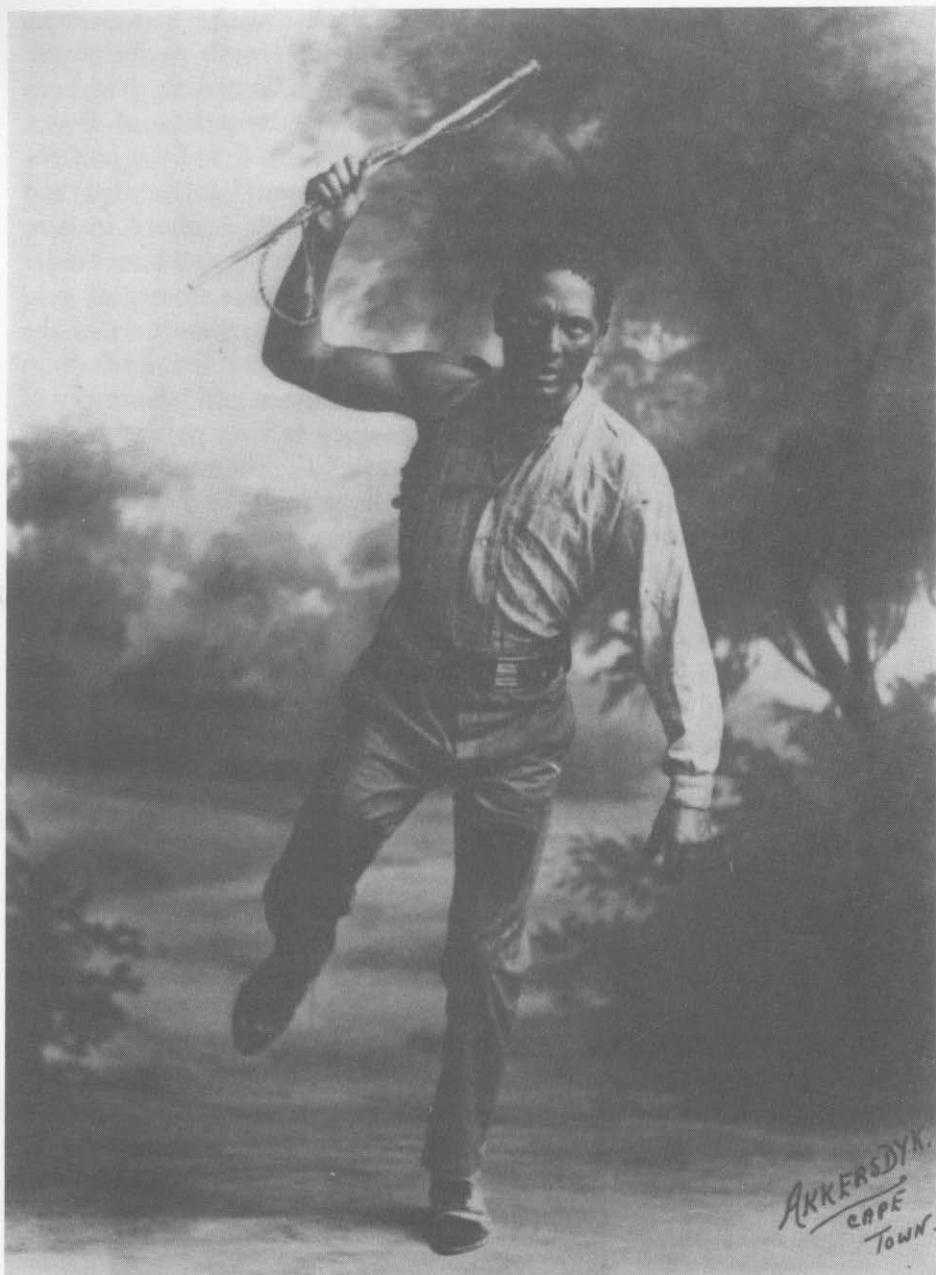
'Gadabout' goes on to admit himself an 'incompetent critic', which is more than some do at the time, and crystallises the language barriers across which Black found it most successful to work.

The essence of Black's success in play after play, then, was his exploitation of local language resources, which made his plays 'South African' in sound and in texture. Black was not the creator of 'South African' stage dialogue, though; on variety bills in smokers and concerts the impersonation of stock cartoon types had been a regular feature since at

least Andrew Geddes Bain in 1838. But Black was the first to draw impersonation sketches into the structures of full-length performance. One of his star actors, Charles Leonard, a Jewish comedian, had been touring the countryside with one-man shows of imitations of Boers, Britons and Blacks when he was recruited into the first *Love and the Hyphen* company, and his Afrikaner yokel character (Van Kalabas) was incorporated into the script more or less as found. Leonard in turn became the lead in *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, as a Jewish rag and bone trader in the rural areas, metamorphosing act by act into a floater of gold mines, a Randlord and a key social figure of the Parktown set of the 1900s. Other stock characters include the colonial maiden, back from finishing school with a stock of new theories on women and labour (out of Olive Schreiner), the Boer pipe-smoking, stoep-talking patriarch, and Black's own alter ego, the independent journalist, editor and proprietor of his own weekly, waging a battle on behalf of the frontier anti-nomianism of the freedom of the early press against the encroachments of the magnates' newspaper syndicates.

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 mine worker, a liquor runner, a Nonconformist convert and lay preacher. Mbene's language changes from pigeon 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' — one which Black used as a satirical mouthpiece for over twenty years. ('Good gracious, Ignatius!' is a characteristic exclamation.) It would need a linguistcian expert in the 1910s and 20s of dominion South Africa to measure the true verbal riches of Black, and none have come forth to date to testify to his polyglot versatility. There is a reason: the shibboleth of purity of diction which pertains in English departments in South African universities ignores the study of the creolisation of local English; it is *The Importance of Being Earnest* that remains in the repertoire, not Stephen Black.

Yet, language issues apart, Black himself derives from and remains squarely in the long tradition of European comedy. *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* is at a substructural level merely another *Much Ado about Nothing*: the



Stephen Black as Jeremiah Luke Mbene in his play *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* — Cape Town, 1910.

issue of morally just rewards is typically expanded into parallel plotting between the love theme and the money theme (here specifically the gold of the Witwatersrand), and tokens like rings and heirlooms act as magical charms of truth (in Black's play a pair of baby veldskoens provides the final revelations). The comedy pattern of the play as an initiation of the young into maturity and, inevitably, marriage remains intact. The options of war and peace are poised throughout, and the magnificently plotted resolution of all dissonance into one final all-inclusive harmony maintains a driving momentum throughout. Laughter en route, too, is achieved by the same old Shakespearean means: discrepancy of awareness between characters, misunderstandings caused by mistaken identity, mistiming of plots accompanied by discoveries and reversals, as doors fling open and slam shut, and so on. Black's comedy technique is utterly orthodox; only its application to the social scene of his times can be considered pioneeringly inventive.

This raises another facet of the problem which, I feel, is crucial to an understanding of why Black is missing on the South African stage today. In comparing his range to Shakespeare's I mean to show that his worldview was similarly all-inclusive. In his twenties during the Second Anglo-Boer War, he lived to see the communications network within the subcontinent expand to include the farthest reaches. Union itself implicated the greater whole (and although the Act of Union excluded 'Native' rights, Black's plays did not). By the Depression of the 1930s that network had collapsed into the beginnings of the more formally segregated society of today. Urban theatres in Black's period of operation were unsegregated, or at least commonly opened their upper circles and galleries to 'non-white' patrons. The crimping effect of proto-apartheid on theatre audiences has not only meant that attendances have been separated out into classes and colours, but that the very notion that the entire range of the society can be portrayed on a stage as normal business has been increasingly lost. The children of apartheid, several generations on, no longer know that the land could have had a sense of being one, and that its theatres could have reflected this spirit as found, in all its completeness.

Now, in September, 1981, I became involved in reviving *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, for the first time since 1929, for production in Johannesburg, presented by the Performing Arts Centre of the University of the Witwatersrand. In the try-outs for this run, held in June in Durban, many strangely moving details about Black's theatre fell into place. It was, for example, the first time in the lives of the student players that they had worked together in a 'multiracial' company (this having become

legal again only eighteen months before). It was also the first time that they, like 'Gadabout', had come upon the linguistic meeting and mixing which Black used. Although all of the players were Johannesburg residents, another first was their encountering the hard fact that, after generations of education in the Transvaal, from the reconstruction days of the 1900s, the public and private schools of the 20s and 30s, the differentiated systems of the 50s and the 'group areas' syllabuses of Bantu Education and the Transvaal Educational Department of the present time, almost no information about the dispossession of the agriculturalist, the advent of taxation, the Battle of Johannesburg between Boer republican and British imperialist, the rise of capital in the city, the enfranchisement of white women and the disenfranchisement of black men, the Land Acts preceding 1913, etc., etc. — all crucial issues in Black's plays — had seeped through to them. For them, coming to an understanding of these issues through the script and in the rehearsal room was, in fact, tantamount to a re-education in their own immediate past. Black's liberal humanist tradition had not had valency in their lives, and had to be recreated step by minute step.

The satirical style of this tradition had to be recreated as well: the bold, confident gestures, the haggling with the audience, the asides that break the fly-on-the-wall detachment of an audience and elicit partisanship and complicity, the shameless pandering to a sense of sentiment and of raucous fun that gives a solidarity to the audience-actor relationship, and the emphasis on intricate plotting which makes the whole theatrical experience a tongue-in-cheek guess-along for all concerned. Black's own technique of playing the game of 'wit and outwit' with an audience, notably in the endlessly multiplying double entendres and (his own stock-in-trade) the translingual pun, all required a performance technique for which there was no precedent in the young drama student's experience.

Sequences like the following needed careful comedy teamwork:

JACOB VAN KNAAP: What you want to see me about?

SAMUEL SHEARER: Well, I heard you suffer from headaches.

KATOO VAN KNAAP: He never got a headache in his life.

SHEARER: Appendicitis... biliousness... ?

JACOB: Jah, I used to have awful pains in my belly —

KATOO: Jacob! You forget your managers. (*to Shearer*) His English is a little bad, he means his stomach.

JACOB: The doctor said I had a stone inside me.

SHEARER: A stone inside you - how many carats?

HENDRIK VAN KNAAP: He never eats carrots — he eat pumpkins.¹¹

The posed quality of this dialogue, building expectations of a pretension knocked, a misunderstanding going berserk, is allied to another tactic Black employs to satirise the quality and the inner thoughts of South African life. His plays are studded with blatant and multiplying racial insults: almost no line is devoid of rudeness, implied or enunciated. So densely packed with the most ingracious swearing are the plays, that I can only assume that this was another of his strategies: to exorcise racial feelings by indulging in a carnival of racist terminology. No stereotypical slur in a Black play is ever made gratuitously; it is always connected to a moment of revenge, of embarrassment, of outrage, of wheeler-dealing, or of social awkwardness. In other words, use of invective is always a result of social factors clearly illustrated by the situation which causes it.

JACOB: If this Jew come here looking for gold, I shoot him dead.

Enter Goldenstein, Polish Jew aged about 40; dirty, unkempt and bearded. Obviously a smous dealer.

GOLDENSTEIN: Vell meester, meester, vy shall you shpeak like dat about your friends? I only vant to do pishness.

JACOB: Issen you then sick of talking with me — I tell you I won' sell.

GOLDENSTEIN: Five thousand pounds.

KATOO: Won' you give six thousand?

GOLDENSTEIN: I couldn't do it, really, really. Where's my profit?

KATOO: A Jew make a profit from anything.

GOLDENSTEIN (*smiling deprecatingly*): Oy, yoy yoy! I vish I was a Yid then.

(Act One, p. 7)

Disparagement and innuendo uttered across racial categories, then,



Stephen Black's *Helena's Hope*, Ltd., Johannesburg, 1910.

was another embarrassment which the student cast of *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* had to face. In contemporary South Africa offending the feelings of other 'racial groups' is in fact illegal, and there have been recent cases of, for example, blacks suing whites successfully for being called 'Kaffirs'. Whether or not expunging the words of racial denigration from the everyday public vocabulary by statute, by censorship and by other means, expunges the racialism they imply is highly questionable; at a guess, I would say that it merely drives such urges underground from plain literal expression of aggression into the devious subconscious of a racist state. The point here, however, is that the children of apartheid have been born into an age of glorious, ramifying euphemism in which the very words of racial contempt are now taboo, inarticulate. Black's simple antidote to this — making racism sound *funny* — has not been applied on the South African boards for a long time;¹² the near hysterical shrieks of audiences at the Durban try-outs for the revived *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* attest that there are still untapped nervous energies in South Africa yearning to call a spade a spade. In that respect, the effect of *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* has not dated at all.

In conclusion, the problem of the discontinuity in South African culture between the world of theatre of Stephen Black and the present time seems part of a larger problem than any that can be handled by the literary researcher. I have implied many extra-literary motives for why Black should be preferred to be forgotten today. In a society which thrives on its own sense of never changing, of being perpetually the same, any notion that it could ever have been different is in itself undermining.

Also, of course, Black was an English-language dramatist, and an early example of a New Literature figure who was able to import metropolitan theatre norms and customs and exploit them without being dominated by them. The same feat is common to all New Literatures struggling between a sense of derivation and of independence, and virtually a given of any colonial culture, whether in fact or in effect. But what I have suggested are the 'black holes' of English-language culture and its continuity in South Africa are there for other reasons: (a) being once part of a British hegemony which downgraded the products of its own outermost reaches, it never achieved the stability and enshrinement that a place in the metropolitan tradition would have afforded; and (b) being no longer part of the dominant language-culture in South Africa, it is neglected as having had no acknowledgeable part in the shaping of an Afrikaans-only literary history.

The revision of attitudes to the history of theatre in South Africa can

only begin once the ideological base of the present cultural pattern has been reassessed, and theatre as a forum for open debate has been re-invented.

NOTES

1. See D.C. Boonzaier, a critic who indefatigably boomed Black, 'My Playgoing Days: 30 Years in the History of the Cape Town Stage', *The South African Review*, Cape Town (9 March and 24 August, 1923). *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* alone played a hundred times between March and October, 1910.
2. With the Players column by Touchstone (Boonzaier), *The Cape*, Cape Town (15 January, 1909).
3. See his account of British stages on his first visit to London, 'Letters from an Afrikaner Abroad', particularly No 7, *The Cape* (31 December, 1909), reproduced with many other pieces on theatre by Black in *English in Africa*, Grahamstown, Vol. 8, No 2 (September, 1982), pp.67-90.
4. London: T. Werner Laurie, 1925.
5. Black's own description on the screenplay TS., Strange Collection, Johannesburg Public Library.
6. Published as 'The Mock Champion', *Pearson's Magazine*, London (February, 1915).
7. See my 'The First Night of Stephen Black's *Love and the Hyphen*', *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library*, Cape Town, Vol. 35, No 1 (September, 1980).
8. See my *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (London: Collings, 1979), pp.58-61.
9. See my 'Stephen Black and South African Drama, 1908-1928', *Critical Arts*, Grahamstown, Vol. 2, No 1 (July, 1981).
10. 'The Stage: At His Majesty's', *Sunday Times*, Johannesburg (8 October, 1911). See also 'Stephen Black and Local Writing', Isabel Hofmeyr, Neil Lazarus, Irwin Manoim and Carola Steinberg, *Hamlet through a Haze of Halcohol*, Hons. dissertation (unpublished), Department of English, University of the Witwatersrand 1976, pp.103-112.
11. *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* TS., Strange Collection, Act Two, Scene 2, p.6.
12. An exception is Pieter-Dirk Uys's satire, *Die Van Aardes van Grootoor*, which uses ersatz invective to circumnavigate the letter of the law.