

## “Theatre as a Memory Machine”: *Magrita Prinslo* (1896) and *Donkerland* (1996)

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Theatre, as a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself, seeking to depict the full range of human actions within their physical context, has always provided society with the most tangible records of its attempts to understand its own operations. It is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts.

(Carlson 2004: 2)

### Introduction

In Jill Fletcher’s well-known book on the history of South African theatre, entitled *The Story of South African Theatre: 1780-1930* (1994), she gives a fascinating overview of the establishment of a theatre tradition in South Africa during the 18th and 19th centuries. The influence of certain historical events and the impact of various political regimes at the Cape of Good Hope during this period all left traces on the development of such a tradition. The colonisation of the Cape of Good Hope first by Dutch settlers (1652-1806) and then the more prolonged colonisation of the Cape and South Africa by the British (from 1806 till 1961) led to the development of two mainstream European theatre traditions in South Africa: one that was mainly influenced by the British theatre tradition, and one that was clearly to a greater extent influenced by the European (Dutch, German, French) tradition. Afrikaans drama and theatre developed from the latter tradition.

I want to highlight in this article the importance of only two plays in this tradition: S.J. du Toit’s *Magrita Prinslo* (1896) and Deon Opperman’s *Donkerland* (1996). Whilst du Toit’s play is scarcely known or remembered by contemporary Afrikaans audiences and is relegated to the annals of South African/Afrikaans theatre history, Opperman’s play is well known, has received the most prestigious Afrikaans (literary) award (the Hertzog Prize) and is today widely studied by students, scholars and researchers.

The discussion will be placed within the broader context of a contemporary interest in drama and theatre studies, with a focus on the relationship between theatre and memory. This interest is evident in a number of recent studies (notably Marvin Carlson's *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*). The discussion which follows is in two parts. Section 1: A comparative reading of two Afrikaans plays, namely *Magrita Prinslo* (1896) and *Donkerland* (1996). The theme of Afrikaner nationalism is seen as a common theme linking these two historical plays, and the focus in this section will be on some of the main concepts and ideas associated with this theme (the (re)interpretation of certain events within Afrikaner history and the relationship with the indigenous people of this land; the Afrikaans language; and the *volksmoeder* theme). In Section 2, "To Remember and to Forget", a more general discussion is given on the relationship between memory and theatre. In the conclusion, an appeal is made to address the implications of "forgetting" within the South African theatre context for individual, as well as for collective theatrical memory.

## **1 Two Afrikaans Plays: *Magrita Prinslo* (1896) and *Donkerland* (1996)**

### **1.2 *Magrita Prinslo* by S.J. du Toit (1896)**

The significance of du Toit's play lies mainly in the fact that it is considered by most theatre historians (Bosman, Binge, Fletcher) to be the first published play in Afrikaans<sup>1</sup> in South Africa. *Magrita Prinslo* is on one level just a simple love story; the story of Magrita's loyal and unshaken love for Pieter Botha, even after she is wrongly informed by his love rival, Koos Potgieter, that he has died. The historical context in which this romantic love triangle is set, that is, the Great Trek, can, however, be seen as the main focus of this play. The romantic intrigue plays out against the backdrop of important events associated with the Great Trek – the infamous Slagtersnek incident (where the British hanged 6 so-called Boer traitors in 1816 in public); Commandant Hendrik Potgieter's Trek to Natal (1838); and Commandant Piet Retief's murder at the hand of the Zulu King, Dingaan (17 February 1838). These historical events are all regarded as important events within Afrikaner history and became the focus of many historical studies of the period. The persons connected with these incidents (especially the various trekker leaders, amongst others Hendrik Potgieter and Piet Retief,

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1. "Magrita Prinslo, written by Dominee S.J. du Toit who had been so active in 'Die Genootskap' was the first Afrikaans play to be printed, and sold out almost immediately" (Fletcher 1994: 110).

became as Giliomee states (1983: xvi) “archetypal figures of Afrikaner history”.<sup>2</sup>

The trekker leaders, as well as the trekkers themselves, were often depicted in later reconstructions of these events by Afrikaner historians as a group of people bound by the religious belief that they were a chosen people and like the Israelites of the Old Testament on their way to the “promised land” (Praeg 1992: 63-64). According to their belief the *volk* would survive all adversity (especially attacks by the various barbaric native tribes) and were destined to bring “civilisation” to the dark hinterland of southern Africa.

### 1.3 *Donkerland* by Deon Opperman (1996)

Deon Opperman’s *Donkerland* (1996) also commences with the Great Trek, but depicts eventually in this epic play (it is 160 pages long and performance time is approximately 5 hours) more than 158 years of Afrikaner history (from the Great Trek in 1838 to 1996 – two years after the first democratic elections were held in South Africa). As stated in an article which I (2009: 2) wrote on this play, “[v]arious important historical events that took place during this whole period are highlighted in the 10 episodes/scenes that make up this play (for instance, various wars with the Xhosa and Zulu, The Anglo-Boer War, the discovery of gold, the urbanisation of the Afrikaner, the rise of African nationalism, the new democratic dispensation in South Africa and the diaspora of the Afrikaner).

Most reviewers and commentators have seen the play as a tour de force – and an ambitious endeavour to comment on six generations of Afrikaner history. It has generally been interpreted as depicting the rise and fall of Afrikaner nationalism (Graver) and of conveying a rather pessimistic outlook for the Afrikaner’s future in the ‘new’ South Africa (Giliomee).<sup>3</sup>

2. In the Introduction to Bosman’s reworked version of S.J. du Toit’s play, he carefully lists all the changes that he made to du Toit’s play, inter alia his decision to add a scene to the first act in order to foreground the reasons for the Great Trek, as well as to give greater prominence to Piet Retief. His changes thus emphasise the historical context of this play, and make the love interest subordinate to this context.
3. Loren Kruger (1999: 127) also commented on this aspect:

Deon Opperman’s *Donkerland* (1996), a revisionist dramatization of the rise and fall of Afrikaner nationalism through the eyes and lives of an Afrikaans family, the De Witts, and their farm, Donkerland (Dark – and, by implication, rich – Land) from 1838 to 1994, stands on the cusp of this transformation. On the one hand, *Donkerland* may be the last Afrikaans play on this epic scale (five hours) to receive state subsidy. On the other, Opperman broke with Afrikaner “sacred history” that had

Thus: from the short (12 pages) and simple play of S.J. du Toit in 1896 to the epic and complicated play (160 pages) of Opperman a century later (1996). The themes introduced in du Toit's play, as well as the use of certain theatrical techniques echo in Opperman's play 100 years later – but are now given from a completely new perspective.

#### 1.4 Afrikaner Nationalism

The author of *Magrita Prinslo*, S.J. du Toit, played a pivotal role in the language and cultural movements of the first “Afrikaners” in South Africa in the 19th century. He was an important figure within the development of Afrikaner nationalism,<sup>4</sup> and with his participation in various important endeavours (as one of the founding members of the Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners [Fellowship of True Afrikaners], as well as of the Afrikaner Bond; editor of *Die Patriot*;<sup>5</sup> and author of numerous articles and books)

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sustained even mildly critical playwrights like W.A. de Klerk and Louw. Produced by PACT at the Afrikaans-language *Kleinkarooftes* and revived at the English-language Grahamstown Festival, the play reminds members of both privileged groups just how linked their pasts and presents have been and just how intimate have been the consequences of domination of the majority.

(Kruger 1999: 127)

4. According to Giliomee in an article entitled “The Beginnings of Afrikaner Nationalism 1870-1915”, S.J. du Toit played a pivotal role in two of the three reasons/developments that led to the development of Afrikaner nationalism: “firstly, the establishment in Paarl in 1875 of the Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners (GRA) by S.J. du Toit, C.P. Hoogenhout and 6 others, and the subsequent publication of a newspaper (*Die Patriot*), a nationalist history, a grammar and some school texts in Afrikaans .... The first Afrikaans publications are regarded as major manifestations of Afrikaner nationalism” and “In the second place, key importance is attached to the establishment of the first two modern political movements among Afrikaners: the one by *Onze Jan Hofmeyr*, who founded the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Boeren Beschermings Vereniging (BBV)* in 1878, and the other by S.J. du Toit, who launched the Afrikaner Bond in 1880” (1987: 121).
5. In Rob Antonissen's *Die Afrikaanse letterkunde van aanvang tot hede* (1964: 29), he also discusses the importance of du Toit's role in *Die Patriot* (as editor from 1878-1904) and describes why this publication was so important:

*Die Patriot* is die volledigste beliggaming gewees van die Afrikaanse Beweging in die eerste vyftiental jare. By 'n eenvoudige boerevolk wat die moeilikhede van die Nederlandse skryftaal nie baas kon raak nie, het hy 'n skryflus gewek en dit amper tot skryfdrif aangewakker. Die meeste

contributed a great deal to the establishment of this ideal. Davenport (1966: 28) gives a succinct description of the important role this *Genootskap* played in propagating the idea of Afrikaner nationalism: “[T]he *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* (Fellowship of True Afrikaners), which was launched at Paarl on 14 August 1875 by a small group of dedicated men, proclaimed the intention ‘*om te staan ver ons Taal, ons Nasie en ons Land*’ (to stand for our Language, our Nation and our Country). Its members fastened on to the concept of the Afrikaner people as a culturally distinct element within the population of South Africa: a blending of Hollander, German and Huguenot for the most part, knit together by two centuries of common history into a national group fully identified with the South African soil and speaking a common language, Afrikaans” (1966: 28).

S.J. du Toit wrote *Magrita Prinslo* with a specific intention in mind, namely to promote and develop the Afrikaans language – and by implication also Afrikaner nationalism. The use of drama and theatre in the service of nationalist ideals is not only found in the South African context, but according to Carlson (2004: 33), “[t]he appearance of modern nationalism, which swept across Europe in the years immediately following the Napoleonic period, significantly involved the theatre in almost every new nation, and in each a central function of the theatre continued to be what French Revolutionary leaders had sought, a place where the legends and historical events were continually recirculated as a part of the process of developing a new national consciousness .... The rise of nationalism gave a new prominence to the dramatization of historical material in the nineteenth century”.

As highlighted and discussed at length by various historians (especially by Giliomee in his seminal work *The Afrikaner: A Biography*), certain particular ideas or themes can be found clustered around Afrikaner nationalism.

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dig- en prosastukke wat as representatief van dié tyd kan geld, het in sy kolomme verskyn .... Die Afrikaner het in hóm ’n spreekbuis gevind en deur hóm voeling gekry met die sosiaal-ekonomiese en politieke gebeure in sy land [*Die Patriot* was the most complete personification of the Afrikaans Movement in the first fifteen years. He aroused in the simple Boer nation, who could not master the intricacies of the Dutch written language, a liking for writing that bordered on a passion for writing. Most of the poetic and prose texts which are considered to be representative of this era, were published in his columns .... The Afrikaner found in him a mouthpiece and received through him a sense of the socio-economic and political events in his country].

(Antonissen 1964: 29)

Various important Afrikaans texts were first published in *Die Patriot*, for instance the first “Afrikaner” history book (*Die geskiedenis van ons land, in die taal van ons volk* [The History of Our Country in the Language of Our Nation, 1877]; the first Afrikaans novel written by C.P. Hoogenhout (*Catharina*, 1879), and also the first anthologies of Afrikaans poetry (1878)].

Some of the most important ideas which will be discussed and which are found within both S.J. du Toit's *Magrita Prinslo* and Deon Opperman's *Donkerland* are the following: the establishment of an Afrikaner identity (for example mainly by means of a reinterpretation (often through the highlighting) of historical events deemed important for the Afrikaner; the Afrikaner's relationship with the indigenous people in South Africa; the role played by the *Afrikaans* language; and the development of an idealised *volksmoeder* concept).

In a short play, such as *Magrita Prinslo*, these ideas/themes are merely introduced, while *Donkerland* has the scope to present these ideas in much more detail and with much more dramatic impact.

#### 1.4.1 Afrikaner Identity as Linked to Certain Historical Events

In the following short discussion I will highlight only two aspects: (1) the historical events mentioned and referred to in both plays, and (2) the depiction of the relationship between the "Afrikaners" and the indigenous people, and also with the English-speaking people of South Africa.

Although it is a very short play, *Magrita Prinsloo* refers in fact to most of the main incidents in early Afrikaner history (1815-1838). The play commences with a *tableaux vivant* ("tafereel")<sup>6</sup> which recalls the Slagtersnek incident,<sup>7</sup> gives a prophetic reference to what is most probably the Battle of

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6. Each of the "scenes" in this play commences with a particular "tafereel" (*tableaux vivant*), an interesting theatrical convention which probably is a theatrical residue of the use of this convention in European (especially Dutch and Flemish) theatre where this convention started as early as the 14th century. According to G.W. Brandt (1993: 49), "[a] particular characteristic of Dutch theatre which impressed German audiences were the *vertoningen* (i.e. *tableaux vivants*): these occurred at key points in the dramatic presentation when the actors formed themselves into a picturesque grouping and held it for a while, as it [sic] were constituting a painterly composition" and also: "The presentations of *tableaux vivants* now grew into one of the most typical traditions in the theatre history of the Netherlands, both South and North .... From quite early on, the *tableaux vivants* were a specialty of the Rhetoricians' Chambers, and the practice continued in the time of professionalism" (p. 365). Du Toit's use of this convention (there are 13 "taferele" in this short play) can thus be seen as a continuation of a very old tradition, as well as a demonstration of how early Afrikaans drama is linked to the European (in this case, Dutch) theatre tradition.

7. In S.J. du Toit's book *Die geskiedenis van ons land, in die taal van ons volk*, which had the stated aim to correct the biased versions of South African history as recorded during that period by British historians, du Toit was the first Afrikaans historian to highlight the Slagtersnek incident as a significant

Majuba<sup>8</sup> of 1881 between the British and the Boers, refers to the battle between the Boers and Mzilikaze (Chief of the Matabele) at Vegkop, and culminates in the murder of Piet Retief and his men at the hands of Dingaan’s impis and an assault on the Potgieter Trek.

*Donkerland* has the scope to depict more events over a longer period: from 1838 with a focus on the Anglo-Boer War and with political developments up till 1996. The drama is divided into two main parts. Part I encompasses the period from 1838 to 1902 and consists of six episodes divided into two groups of three scenes each under the headings “Plant die stok” [Plant the Stick] and “Graf in die gras” [Grave in the Grass] with an interval in between. The first group of three episodes (“Die pad na Kanaän” [The Road to Canaan] (1838), “’n Stukkie grond” [A Little Piece of Land] (1840), “Lank genoeg geterg” [Teased Long Enough] (1881)) deals with the period from Pieter de Witt’s trek from the Cape, his establishment of the farm, Donkerland, and the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War. The second group of three episodes (“Vuur en bloed” [Fire and Blood] (1899), “’n Balling gekom” [An Exile Arrived] (1901), “’n Merk vir die eeue” [A Mark for the Ages] (1902)) continues to deal with the war, its destructive effect on his family and on the farm. Part I ends with the death of Pieter de Witt – ironically enough, not on his beloved farm, but as an exile abroad.

Part II covers the period from 1929 to 1996 and consists of four episodes divided into two groups of two scenes each under two headings, “Boompie by die pad” [Little Tree at the Roadside] and “Die wiele van Afrika” [The

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event preceding the Great Trek. (See Praeg’s long discussion, linked to du Toit’s book, on the importance of this incident for the Trekkers (1992: 51-69).)

8. When Hester Faber, the widow of one of the men hanged at Slagtersnek, visits his grave in the first scene of the play, she seems to experience a prophetic vision of British soldiers being killed by the Boers:

Di dag fan wraak kom .... Reeds het Nel, wat syn yge flees en bloed ferrai het, fer hom self opgehang. En daar – (*sy wys of sy iits siin*) daar fêr, fêr in di noorde siin ek ’n Spitskop, bloedrood fan di wraakfuur. – Kyk, daar maai di kogels fan di Boere di Engelse af soos koomhalme foor di sekel. Kyk, hulle spring af fan di kranse, hulle hang an di rotse. Kyk, di aasfo’els hou fees. – Ja, Ja – Slagtersnek is gewreek” [The day of revenge is coming .... Already Nel, who has betrayed his own flesh and blood, has hanged himself. And there – (she points as if she is seeing something) far away, far in the north I see a *Spitskop* blood-red in the fire of revenge. – Look, over there the bullets of the Boers are cutting off the lives of the British like corn-stalks before a sickle. Look, they are jumping off the cliffs, they are hanging from the rocks. Look, the vultures are feasting. – Yes, Yes – Slagtersnek has been revenged].

(du Toit 1897: 2)

Wheels of Africa], with an interval in between. The first group of two episodes (“Ver van die stadsgeluide” [Far from City Sounds] (1929) and “Die salf van eie gom” [Salved by Its Own Resin] (1948)) deals with the recovery period after the Anglo-Boer War, the discovery of gold and the urbanisation of the Afrikaner. Klein-Piet, Pieter de Witt’s grandson, is now the owner of Donkerland. The second group of two episodes (“Swart klip” [Black Stone] (1976) and “’n Klein strepie mensdom” [A Little Line of Humankind] (1996) shows the rise of black nationalism, the disintegration of the de Witt family and the eventual failure of Donkerland.

Since most historical events include dealings with the indigenous people or tribes of southern Africa – in a lesser or more violent manner of interaction – it is interesting to note how interactions on a more *personal* level within these two groups are depicted in these two plays. The main relationship is simply one of servant and master – in the household, on the farms and on the various treks. In *Magrita Prinslo*, two indigenous characters are found: Swartman (a black man) and Danster (a Hottentot, Khoi). Both the patronising manner in which they are addressed by the white characters, and their own submissive demeanours when given orders are probably to be expected within the context of described relationships of that period. What is, however, quite surprising is the relatively important roles played by these two characters in this play, as well as the extent to which the conversations between the two of them gives a glimpse of how they judge and interpret their dealings with their white masters. Swartman even fulfils an important dramatic role in the play: with his talent to throw *dolosse* (he is a soothsayer) he correctly predicts the future outcomes of the main dramatic events (both the romantic reunion of the two lovers and the murder of Retief). Danster is also a character with interesting qualities and one can even describe him as a trickster figure – one who clearly has a very ironic viewpoint of his so-called masters. These two characters are thus not marginal characters, but occupy important dramatic spaces in the play.<sup>9</sup>

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9. Although Antonissen (1964: 45) does not refer to the roles played by the two indigenous characters of the play (Danster and Swartman), he does mention a poem written by du Toit (“Hoe di Hollanders di Kaap ingeneem het” [How the Dutch took the Cape] – written the same year as *Magrita Prinslo*. In this poem we also find a “Danster” speaking and, according to Antonissen, it is seldom that we find in this period an example of such a

kritiese selfbeskouing en relativering van die witman se standpunt [critical contemplation of the self and relativisation of the white man’s point of view]. The similarities between this Danster and the one found in *Magrita Prinslo* are striking. In another poem, “Di klaaglied fan di laaste Boesman” (1896), Danster also criticises “in ’n wrang i.p.v. komiese toonard ... die Dususman se kyk op die Suid-Afrikaanse



In *Donkerland*, Opperman goes even further: although the main focus of the play is the portrayal of six generations of the de Witt family's fortunes in South Africa by following the life of the white patriarch, Pieter de Witt, we do find in the “shadows” a parallel life being portrayed, namely that of Meidjie, the black matriarch. Her descendants also figure in the historical events that occur during these 158 years – sometimes fighting together with the Afrikaners (in the Anglo-Boer War, for instance), but, with the rise of African nationalism, also experiencing increasingly opposing Afrikaner *baasskap*. In a parallel movement, the decline of Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa is juxtaposed by a concurrent rise of African nationalism in this country – a movement mirrored in the microcosm of the inhabitants of Donkerland. Although Meidjie has stood in “the shadows” after meeting Pieter and remains there until his death, her descendants have moved out of the shadows and as from 1996 will be the new owners of this farm.

The relationship with the other European group in the country, the English-speaking countrymen, is also fraught with tension. In the first scene of *Magrita Prinslo*, after the emotional outburst of Hester Faber when visiting her husband's grave, and her dramatic death after conveying her prophetic vision of the Boers' revenge of the Slagtersnek incident, other references are given which illustrate the antagonistic relationship between these groups. The trekkers' remarks at the beginning of the play that it is unbearable for them to stay in the Cape Colony because of the British government and, for example, the discussion later between Commandant Hendrik Potgieter and Commandant Piet Retief to determine if the trekkers should go to Natal where they will again be confronted by the British presence there, particularly highlight this relationship of strife.<sup>10</sup>

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geskiedenis” [in a bitter rather than humorous tone ... the Dutchman's version of the South African history].

(Antonissen 1964: 48)

10. In the Second act on page 5:

*Hendrik Potgieter.* – Ja, myn liwe Neef Piet, dis alles waar. Mar ek sê fer jou as ons wil rus hê fan di Engelsman, dan moet ons fan di sé af bly. Di Engelsman sal dit nooit met goeie oge an siin dat ons 'n yge séhawe het ni; hy sal ons nooit by di Baai met rus laat ni. En jy weet mos 'n Engelsman is nes 'n krokodil: so lank as syn stêrt nog in di water is, dan is hy baiing sterk, mar soos syn stêrt eers uit di water uit is op di droge grond is hy niks wêrd ni. Daarom laat ons mar hiir 'n republiek stig. Di Engelsman is baiing liif fer handel en fer geld; hy sal self wel met ons kom handel [Hendrik Potgieter. – Yes, my dear Piet, it is all true. But I tell you now that if we want to have peace with the Englishman, we must stay away from the sea. The Englishman will not accept it in goodwill that we will have our own harbour; he will never leave us in peace in the Baai. And you know the Englishman is just like a crocodile: as long as

In *Donkerland*, the relationship between the Afrikaners and the British is dealt with in more detail, and a number of episodes are devoted to the lead up to the Anglo Boer War (in the episode entitled “Lank genoeg geterg” [Teased Long Enough] (1881)), the war itself (in the episode entitled “Vuur en bloed [Fire and Blood (1899) and its bitter aftermath for the Afrikaners (inter alia the concentration camps and destruction of the farms in the episodes entitled “’n Balling gekom” [An Exile Arrived] (1901) and “’n Merk vir die eeue” [A Mark for the Ages] (1902)).

### 1.4.2 The Afrikaans Language

It is important to note that S.J. du Toit wrote this play (the only one he ever wrote) for a very specific occasion, namely for the second Language Conference on Afrikaans (“di Afrikaanse taalkongres”, held in the Paarl City Hall in January 1897). According to sources, the actors were in most cases also delegates attending this conference. All of S.J. du Toit’s endeavours during this period centred on the establishment and promotion of the Afrikaans language – of course, within the bigger ideal of establishing an Afrikaner identity and promoting the ideals of Afrikaner nationalism. This play was thus not merely the product of someone interested in the drama genre, but rather a calculated act<sup>11</sup> to use all literary means at his disposal to further the cause in which he believed so strongly. S.J. du Toit is famous for being one of the first activists for Afrikaans and Afrikaner nationalism and

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his tail is in the water he is very strong, but as soon as his tail is outside the water on dry ground he is good for nothing. Therefore let us establish a republic. The Englishman loves commerce and money very much; he will certainly come and trade with us himself].

(du Toit 1917: 5)

11. Note in this regard Anna Minnaar-Vos’s remark:

Die eerste Afrikaanse toneelstukkies, soos dié van ds. S.J. Du Toit, D.P. du Toit, Melt Brink en J.H.H. de Waal, is doelbewus geskryf met die oog op die taalstryd van die Eerste Afrikaanse Taalbeweging en staan nog op die vlak van die egte volkstoneel. Hulle doel het hierdie stukkies darem gedien, want belangstelling vir die Afrikaanse toneel is baie beslis gewek – tot so ’n mate selfs dat daar in die krygsgevangenekampe in Indië gedurende die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog ook stukkies in Afrikaans opgevoer is [The first Afrikaans plays, like these of Rev. S.J. du Toit, Melt Brink and J.H.H. de Waal, were deliberately written in view of the language struggle of the First Afrikaans Language movement and are still viewed as being part of a national theatre or a theatre for the people. These pieces did fulfil their aim, because interest was created for Afrikaans theatre – to such a degree that even the prisoners of war in India during the Second Boer War performed these pieces].

(Minnaar-Vos 1969: 26-37)

for his publications related to these issues. As a literary figure he is better known for his poetry than for this play.

Opperman, in *Donkerland*, addresses the Afrikaans language issue in a quite comprehensive and innovative manner. I have addressed the importance of this aspect in a chapter in a forthcoming book entitled “Afrikaans and Afrikaner Nationalism in Deon Opperman’s *Donkerland*”.<sup>12</sup> In this chapter I focus especially on the role Afrikaans played within the context of Afrikaner nationalism from two perspectives: (1) firstly on the language itself (in other words Afrikaans as the language of the Afrikaner, the official recognition of Afrikaans, its relationship with the other indigenous (black) languages, as well as with English in South Africa; and (2) secondly on the use of numerous literary and textual references to introduce most of the scenes, consisting mainly of quotations of a number of well-known literary figures within the Afrikaans literary history (also a well-known poem by S.J. du Toit, “Vrystaatse vryheidslied” [Free State Freedom Song]. As I state in my conclusion of this chapter,

[i]t is not only the references as such that are significant. Most of the figures behind these references (Celliers, Leipoldt, Opperman, van Wyk Louw) are also iconic figures in Afrikaner literary history, and thus, in themselves, equally evocative for the Afrikaner. The use of language in this manner in the play, namely, to evoke a wide and comprehensive world of reference through brief literary references, gives *Donkerland* a richness and depth that match the epic scope of its dramatic portrayal of 158 years of Afrikaner history in South Africa.

(Keuris in Chirambo, Makokha & West-Pavlov [2011])

#### 1.4.3 “Volksmoeder”/“Mother of the Nation”

Although the concept of the “volksmoeder”/“mother of the nation” received prominence mainly during and after the Anglo-Boer War, the seeds for this concept were already present in the 19th century as indicated by Cheryl Walker (1990: 22): “The concept of volksmoeder harnesses many of the elements of the 19th-century settler ideology, of gender – female domesticity and nurturing, virtue of race purity – to a strong emphasis on patriotism and loyal conformity by women to the demands of a male-dominated nationalism”. Elsabe Brink (in Walker 1990: 273) also highlights the political dimension of this concept when she states that “[i]n terms of the volksmoeder concept, the Afrikaner woman was depicted not only as the cornerstone of the household but also as a central unifying force within Afrikanerdom and, as such, was expected to fulfil a political role as well”.

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12. Chapter in a forthcoming book edited by Chirambo, R., Makokha, J.K.S. & West-Pavlov, R. *Reading African Literatures: Critical Perspectives on Stylistics, Thematics and Language Use* by Rodopi Publishers, Amsterdam.

The historical Magrita Prinsloo, as well as the fictional Magrita Prinsloo of du Toit's play, both attest to the importance of this insight. The historical Magrita Prinsloo's name resonates in the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek (1938, Pretoria) where one of the nine ox-wagons was named after her. Her name appears again with another important historical and cultural event, the inauguration of the Women's Memorial (Vrouemonument) in Bloemfontein in 1913 in celebration of the Boer woman's role during the Anglo Boer War – especially the suffering experienced in the concentration camps. A well-known Afrikaans poet, Jan F. Celliers, was commissioned to write a sequel to du Toit's play for this event. In this play, "Heldinne van die oorlog" [Heroines of the War], the main character is the granddaughter of Magrita Prinsloo.<sup>13</sup>

In Opperman's *Donkerland*, we find an ironic reversal of the original "volksmoeder" idea: the white patriarch's (de Witt's) young wife (interestingly enough called Magriet) dies in childbirth and the black woman (Meidjie) – earlier saved by de Witt and for the rest of their lives part of his world (she is a servant in his household till her death) – becomes the black matriarch in the play. *Donkerland*, in fact, gives the parallel story of both the white patriarch's and the black matriarch's families. Their lives are intertwined and the change in power relationships in this microcosm is a reflection of the concomitant decline of Afrikaner nationalism and the rise of African nationalism.

The African counterpart to the idea(1) of the Afrikaner "volksmoeder" is the "Mother Africa" concept. According to Lockett,

South African English writing by black male authors has equally distorted the character of the black woman in the Mother Africa figure, a black version of the earth mother. This stereotype elevates qualities of courage, strength, pride, maternal love as positive, and offers a contrast to the negative images created by white writers. Yet "Mother Africa" is based on a comparison between the land, Africa itself, and the characteristics of the woman: like Africa she is idealized as prolific, steadfast and giving. Underlying this stereotype is the concept of property – the woman, like the land, traditionally belongs to the black man.

(Lockett 1988: 320)

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13. [which] can be seen as the culmination of Afrikaner nationalist sentiment in 1938, the year of the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek. The celebrations centred around symbolic ox wagon treks across the country culminating in a *volksfees* and the unveiling of the cornerstone of the Voortrekker Monument by three female descendants of the Voortrekker leaders. Two of the ox wagons were named after mythologised Voortrekker women, the female heroes of the Voortrekker clash with the Zulus at the Blaauwkrantz, viz. Magrieta Prinsloo and Johanna van der Merwe.

(Marlene van Niekerk in Kriger & Kriger 1996: 141-154)

And “[w]hile the Mother Africa figure generally offers a positive image of black women (and for this reason is often accepted by black women themselves), it is based on biological or sexual functions, and draws its strength from an ideology that views women as the property of men and glorifies motherhood as the highest aspiration of all women ...” (p. 35).

It is clear that the Afrikaner “volksmoeder”, the “Mother Africa” and the “mother of the nation” concepts are all ideological concepts<sup>14</sup> as McClintock (1991: 116) also states: “Within African nationalism, as in its Afrikaans counterpart, women’s political agency is couched in the presiding ideology of motherhood”. Whilst the Afrikaner “volksmoeder” is mainly placed within a domestic sphere,<sup>15</sup> African women “have transformed and infused the ideology of motherhood with an increasingly insurrectionary cast, identifying themselves more and more as the ‘mothers of revolution’”. In both plays the seeds of these ideas are present: Magrita Prinslo is portrayed as steadfast and loyal in her love for Pieter Botha, and courageous in the face of an *impi* attack on their trek – she represents everything symbolised by the Afrikaner “volksmoeder” idea. Meidjie in *Donkerland* is portrayed as the matriarch of the black family (her family tree appears on the page opposite Pieter de Witt’s at the end of the play) and she can thus be seen as representing the “Mother Africa” or “mother of the nation” idea. Although by no means a “mother of the revolution” herself, her descendants are active in the political turmoil of the eighties and nineties of South Africa.

#### 1.4.4 Conclusion

S.J. du Toit wrote this one play only, amidst numerous other publications, and it is clear from all the documents consulted that he wrote it with a clear purpose in mind, that is, the propagation of the general idea of Afrikaner nationalism and the particular ideal of the development of the Afrikaans language. *Magrita Prinslo* – the first printed Afrikaans play – may be forgotten today by most South African theatre-goers, but many of the issues and themes introduced in this play resonated a century later in *Donkerland*. One can discern in *Magrita Prinslo* the first awareness and introduction of the concept of an Afrikaner nationalist consciousness by a group of people

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14. Also see Gaitskell & Unterhalter in Yuval-Davis & Anthias (1989), chapter entitled “Mothers of the Nation: A Comparative Analysis of Nation, Race and Motherhood in Afrikaner Nationalism and the African National Congress”, for a discussion on the relation between these three concepts and the “nation”.
  15. McClintock (1991: 109): “The icon of the volksmoeder is paradoxical. On the one hand, it recognizes the power of (white) motherhood; on the other hand, it contains that power within an iconography of domestic service”.

who saw themselves as *Afrikaners* within the historical context of the mid-1800s in South Africa.

Deon Opperman is a contemporary Afrikaans playwright, who has written many plays and who is still today a prolific playwright and producer – not only of plays for the stage, but also for other theatrical media (television plays, television series and musicals). His epic play, *Donkerland*, continues with many of the ideas imbedded in Afrikaner nationalist ideology and tries to give a panoramic view of the rise and decline of Afrikaner nationalism by the end of 1996. Opperman is still interested in contemporary Afrikaners' experience of the “new” South Africa and continues to portray their beliefs and experiences in new plays (*Kaburu*, 2007); television series (*Kruispad*, 2008, *Hartland*, 2011 – seen with *Donkerland* as a trilogy of the Afrikaner) and musicals (*Ons vir jou*, 2008; *Tree aan!* 2011).

## 2 To Remember and to Forget

In Section 1 different levels of *reconstruction* took place: firstly my *tracing* in the first Afrikaans play in 1896 by S.J. du Toit (*Magrita Prinslo*) of the earliest intimations of Afrikaner nationalism, and foregrounding in limited comparative discussions how many of the subthemes of Afrikaner nationalism introduced in this short play echo 100 years later in Deon Opperman's *Donkerland*. In Opperman's play this theme is addressed more comprehensively – recalling more than 150 years of Afrikaner history portrays not only the rise of Afrikaner nationalism but also its demise. By depicting particular historical events in these two plays, another level of *remembrance* was introduced, that is, remembrance as well as *reinterpretation* of historical events through the lens of particular interest groups. As many historians have indicated, historical events are often revisited and reinterpreted *after* the occurrence of the events – often with a particular intention in mind (e.g. Afrikaner nationalism). The role played by collective memory is also important, especially in terms of public commemorative events such as the inauguration of the Women's Memorial (1913)<sup>16</sup> or the Great Trek Centenary (1938).

In this section the discussion shifts to a more general view of the relationship between theatre and memory within the South African context. Memory studies are found in various disciplines<sup>17</sup> and have a long tradition

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16. Note Grundling's interesting chapter, specifically on this subject, entitled “The National Women's Monument: The Making and Mutation of Meaning in Afrikaner Memory of the South African War” (in Cuthbertson, Grundlingh & Suttie 2002).

17. Favorini (2008: 3) lists the following disciplines:

As a concept, memory's traces may be found in historiography (the memory/history issue emerges in the first quarter of the century),

with many famous theorists contributing to this field (inter alia Plato, Aristotle, Henri Bergson, John Locke, Emmanuel Kant, C.G. Jung, Sigmund Freud, Maurice Halbwachs, Michel Foucault, Edward Casey and others). In contemporary drama and theatre studies a number of important books have been published: Jeanette R. Malkin’s *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* (1991), Marvin Carlson’s *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (2001), and Attilio Favorini’s *Memory in Play: From Aeschylus to Sam Shepard* (2008).<sup>18</sup> The interest in this relationship can also be seen in the enthusiastic response of many international scholars to the 17th Performance Studies (Psi) Conference theme “Camillo 2.0: Technology, Memory and Experience” (held at Utrecht University, 25-29 May 2011).<sup>19</sup>

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philosophy (history of memory, philosophy of mind), and languages and literatures (memory as “theme”, poetic memory, autobiography). As a category of things or processes memory suffuses religious studies (ritual reenactment, Holocaust studies), art history (retrospectives, influence, “Neo”-formations, revivals), film studies (documentary, *homage*, remakes), and Medieval and Renaissance studies (memory arts and systems). As a neurocognitive capacity, memory permeates a variety of fields in the physical sciences, such as evolutionary biology (memory faculties as naturally selected), physical education (body memory), and cognitive science (research on the neurophysiology of memory traces and networks, sometimes identified respectively as “local” and “global” orientations) – among others.

(Favorini 2008: 3)

18. Jeanette Malkin’s book focuses on a postmodern perspective in memory studies in theatre and she notes in her introduction that “an important group of theater texts written since the 1970’s exhibit an exceptional preoccupation with questions of memory, both in terms of their *thematic* attention to remembered (or repressed) pasts, and in terms of the plays’ ‘memoried’ *structures*: structures of repetition, conflation, regression, echoing, overlap, and simultaneity”. She refers to playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Heiner Müller, Sam Shepard, Suzan-Lori Parks and Thomas Bernhard. In Marvin Carlson’s well-known book, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, he discusses the various forms which memory can take in the theatre – especially from the viewpoint of the spectator/audience, for instance how audiences remember how an actor played a role, various performances of the same play by different directors and/or actors, the use of the same set/parts of the same set for different productions, etc. In the Introduction to his book, Attilio Favorini gives a comprehensive (and historical) overview of “how playwrights represent memory and how they dramatize the memory/history binary”.
19. According to the organisers in a document entitled “Welcome to Camillo 2.0”, on page 2,

One aspect which the above three authors, however, do not address in their books in terms of memory and theatre, is the matter of preservation of our individual and collective memories of theatre performances. How do we preserve plays in South Africa which are important for our collective cultural memory? It is understandable that the only remains of *Magrita Prinslo* – a play written and performed more than 100 years ago – are the text, some short descriptions and references in theatre and language histories (Antonissen) or a few personal reminiscences (du Toit). In my endeavours to trace *Magrita Prinslo*'s footprint in Afrikaans cultural history I could find only a handful of short descriptions and references in a number of literary (Antonissen, Dekker) and theatre histories (Bosman, Binge, Fletcher), and in studies devoted to Afrikaans language history (e.g. Steyn 2010: 182). The only descriptions of the *performance* itself is found in L.W.B. Binge's 1969 theatre history of the period 1832-1950 (1969: 25-26), and in the biography of S.J. du Toit written by his son, J.P. du Toit, better known as "Totius", entitled: "Ds. S.J. du Toit in weg en werk" (1977).<sup>20</sup>

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[t]he title of Psi#17 refers to Giulio Camillo's Memory Theatre, a 16th-century invention that was supposed to provide the visitor with access to all existing knowledge, as well as provide the possibility to orate about this "as if he were Cicero himself" .... The performing arts have a long history as a memory machine. From classic tragedies to kingly plays, from ritual dances to parades (to name just some of the many forms), the performing arts have been used to revive history, to re-present the dead, to remember historical events, to commemorate and to reconsider. The medium of performance is a technology of remembrance as well as a way of inscribing memories into individual and collective memory.

20. In die jaar 1896 het Ds Du Toit s'n drama "Magrita Prinslo" geskrywe en aan die Paarl laat opvoer. Dit was 'n heerlike aand. Die stadsaal was propvol en g'n een het onbewege vandaar gegaan nie. Soos ons weet is dit 'n drama uit die Voortrekkerstyd. Lang, en met groot voorliefde, het Ds. Du Toit die idee gekoester om die tyd in 'n heldedig te besing, maar die geleënhed was hom daarvoor nie gegun nie. Wat ons egter nou in "Magrita Prinsloo" besit is 'n stuk egte nasionale literatuur. Die drama word meer en meer gewaardeer. Op baie plekke is dit reeds opgevoer [In the year 1896 Rev. du Toit wrote his play "*Magrita Prinslo*" and performed it in the Paarl. It was a lovely evening. The city hall was packed to capacity and no one was left untouched by the event. As we know, the play takes place during the time of the Voortrekkers. Rev. du Toit had entertained the idea for long and with a lot of predilection to celebrate that period in an epic poem, but the opportunity never presented itself. What we now have in "Magrita Prinslo" is a piece of real national literature. The play is valued more and more. It has been performed in many places].

(du Toit 1977: 327)



Traces of a further history of this play is found in the sequel to du Toit’s *Magrita Prinsloo*, which Jan F. Celliers was commissioned to write for the inauguration of the Women’s Memorial in Bloemfontein in 1913, entitled: *Heldinne van die oorlog* (1924). The main character in this play is the granddaughter of Magrita Prinsloo. The well-known theatre historian, S.P.E. Bosman, also later reworked the play, the title was modernised to *Magrita Prinsloo*, and this version was performed at the Day of the Covenant celebrations held in 1922 at De Aar. I was unable to trace the history of du Toit’s play beyond this date, although it could, of course, have been produced at other occasions where no records were kept of these productions. S.J. du Toit and even “Magrita” resonate a century later in Deon Opperman’s *Donkerland*, namely in a direct reference to one of S.J. du Toit’s poems (“Vrystaatse vryheidslied”, p. 37) and in the name of Pieter de Witt’s first wife, “Magriet”.

In trying to reconstruct the impact of Deon Opperman’s *Donkerland* on contemporary South African theatre audiences I was again limited to mainly textual “evidence” (as in the case of *Magrita Prinsloo*), that is, the text, reviews, a few articles, etc. Is it acceptable that all we have left of *Donkerland* are, also, only the text, a number of reviews,<sup>21</sup> articles and possibly some intended master’s and doctoral studies on Opperman’s oeuvre? The only real difference between my search for information relevant to these two plays was in the retrieval process: most of the information on *Magrita Prinsloo* was found in old theatre and literary histories (Antonissen, Bosman, Binge), and in articles found in archives, while

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D. Botha (2006: 135-136) also refers to information given by Binge in terms of where the well-known Afrikaans actor, Hendrik Hanekom, played a role in this play:

Later sou Hanekom ook sukses behaal met Magrita Prinsloo. Volgens Binge (1978: 127) het hy in 1922 oorgekom van Beaufort-Wes na De Aar om dit tydens die Dingaansfeesvierings in Bosman se Bioskoop op te voer. Dit was “een van die opvoerings van Hanekom wat mense jare daarna nog sou onthou” [Hanekom also achieved success with Magrita Prinsloo. According to Binge (1978: 127), he came in from Beaufort-West to De Aar in 1922 during the Day of the Covenant festival to perform the play in Bosman’s Bioscope. It was one of Hanekom’s performances which people remembered for years afterwards].

(Botha 2006: 135-136)

This was, however, according to Binge (1969: 127), the reworked version of du Toit’s play by S.P.E. Boshoff – one that was so popular that it was produced many times.

21. Reviews by inter alia G. Anstey, L. Bester, J. Botha, P. Conradie, N. Jackson, P. Laws, B. Muller, P.C. van der Westhuizen.

*Donkerland*'s reviews and articles were found on the internet. It is quite understandable that a play written and performed more than 100 years ago should yield its information with some difficulty; it is, however, unacceptable that we should a century later and living in a technological age experience the same problems.

It is clear from enquiries from the various theatre and arts festivals (KKNK, Aardklop, Grahamstown, etc.) that no video/DVD records of performances are made or kept. In fact, little archiving of any productions is kept at any of the arts festivals.<sup>22</sup> (The National Arts Festival at Grahamstown keeps some records, but does not have a comprehensive archive of all the productions.) The situation in terms of the preservation of our South African theatre heritage in general, is in dire straits. In discussing the matter with various theatre practitioners (Prof. Marié-Heleen Coetzee, Head of the Drama Department at the University of Pretoria; Prof. Nico Luwes, Head of the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts at the University of the Free State; Prof. Marie Kruger and Dr Petrus du Preez of the Drama Department of the University of Stellenbosch; Prof. Temple Hauptfleisch (former head of the HSRC's Centre of Theatre Research and now emeritus professor at the University of Stellenbosch); Prof. Mark Fleischmann of the Drama Department of the University of Cape Town; Prof. Loren Kruger (expert on South African drama and theatre and currently at the University of Chicago, USA); everyone agreed that little is being done to preserve our theatrical heritage. The various drama and theatre departments do often make DVD recordings of their own (student) productions, but not all departments keep a systematic record of these recordings. In correspondence with playwright Deon Opperman, he stated that, as a producer of drama and theatrical productions himself, his energy is focused on the production of these works and not really on the preservation of his work. His viewpoint is echoed by all the theatre practitioners mentioned above – an acceptable standpoint; artists should not be responsible for the preservation of their own work. This should ideally be the responsibility of the state (Department of Arts and Culture) if it is serious in preserving and saving our South African cultural heritage for future generations.

How technology can be harnessed to preserve theatrical productions is clearly demonstrated in the ambitious initiative of the Royal National Theatre in London, UK, called National Theatre Live.<sup>23</sup> Certain productions of the Royal National Theatre have since June 2009 been broadcast live via satellite to movie theatres, cinemas and art centres around the world – currently more than 400 venues in 22 countries (South Africa included) –

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22. Even more disturbing is the policy of the Aardklop organisers to “destroy” all play texts after two years – thus, even the little *textual* evidence we have of plays performed at that festival is being destroyed.

23. Information can be found at [ntlive.com](http://ntlive.com).

while more than 1.2 million people per year have seen these productions. According to Becky Schutt in an article in the *Financial Times*, “Case Study: National Theatre Live”, “[d]espite artistic, financial, technical and legal challenges the National recognized that technology could now make live cinema streaming possible ... the National was astute in recognizing that the time was right .... As a pioneer in streaming live theatre, the National won a considerable market and artistic advantage” (2011: 2).<sup>24</sup> Another development is the Routledge Digital Performance Archive which will be officially launched in 2012. Its stated aim on its web site (<http://www.digitaltheatre.com/routledge>) is that it “is a developing resource produced in partnership with Digital Theatre, providing unique access to a range of audio and visual material from past and present practitioners of performance. This innovative collection delivers essential video direct to the classroom, lecture theatre and library”. Although we can probably currently not emulate such an ambitious project as the National Theatre Live in South Africa, we should at least learn from this project and the Routledge Digital Performance Archive that with the technological aids available to us in this day and age we should be able to preserve our theatrical heritage more easily than in the past. It is no longer necessary to depend on literary records only – as was the case 100 years ago. We should be preserving our drama and theatrical productions by means of a visual and an audio medium.

Although a much more detailed proposal in this regard should be envisaged I do want to present the following ideas as a potential departure for such a venture:

- The various arts festivals boards of all the main festivals should assist in identifying which productions should be recorded – the recording could be outsourced to professionals in this field (as in the case of the Routledge Archive).
- Visual and audio records (inter alia recordings, DVDs) should then be made of as many theatrical productions as possible, and a central place found (a “memory site” as Favorini calls it) where these records are archived by people experienced in this field.
- The whole process should ideally be overseen and driven by a panel of drama and theatre specialists.
- One could start with a pilot project, for example the Fugard plays at the newly established ABSA Fugard Festival held in Nieu Bethesda. Funding for the initial project should ideally come from the Department of Arts and Culture and various cultural bodies.
- The issue of copyright (often mentioned as being problematical when this matter is raised) should be addressed: it must be stated clearly that the

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24. Article accessed on 7/9/2011 at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/o/f3261384-cdb7-11e0-bb4f-00144feabdc0-.html>. It is part of a study entitled “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction: The National Theatre Goes to the Movies”.

main intention with these recordings is the preservation of a cultural product for the purposes of possible future research and/or educational purposes.

- Since this issue is being addressed by both the National Theatre and Routledge in the UK, one could consult with them for advice on this matter.

Only an elite group in South Africa currently has access to formal theatre productions in South Africa – the vast majority of people in our country will never experience the pleasure of attending a play in a real theatre. The use of technology could address this issue – if the National Theatre Live initiative brings productions from the National Theatre in London to a worldwide audience, we should be able to show audiences in the *platteland* productions performed at festivals held at, for instance, Grahamstown, Oudshoorn, Potchefstroom, Nelspruit and Nieu Bethesda.

Although we do have a rich South African tradition of drama and theatre – both Western and indigenous – very little of these valuable artifacts are today preserved for future generations. Theatre may be a “memory machine” as Giulio Camillo demonstrated in the 16th century and Marvin Carlson and other theorists explicated in the 21st century, but if no records are kept of memorable drama and theatrical performances in our country we will eventually forget what we have seen and enjoyed in our theatres and at our art festivals.

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