

Herbert I.E. Dhlomo

(1903-1956)

Tim Couzens

University of the Witwatersrand

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~~HERBERT DHLOMO~~  
~~1903 - 1957~~

It may be a mistake to call Herbert Dhlomo the Father of black drama in South Africa, since his efforts in the 1930s and 1940s seem to have had no immediate offspring. Nevertheless he was certainly the major pioneer, the first important black South African playwright in modern times. He was also a poet of considerable significance, as well as an essayist, journalist and short story writer. Dhlomo's life is interesting not only for his individual achievements in writing and politics but also as representative of the fortunes of a particular class during a crucial transitional phase in South African history and the reactions of that class to these events and processes.

Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo was born in 1903 in Siyamu, Edendale (near Pietermaritzburg in Natal) of Christian parents, his mother being fairly well educated. On his father's side his ancestors were related to the royal family of the Dhlomos who hailed from the Makabeleni area, north of Kranskop, and his own father Ezra may have been born and was probably brought up in the house of Bambatha, who led the last Zulu resistance movement in 1906; on his mother's side the family claimed that his great grandfather was 'the first convert' of the Rev. Allison, whose followers, moving from the Orange Free State and Swaziland, founded the Edendale community in 1851. It was to be a distinguished family: Herbert's elder brother, Rolfes, became a prominent novelist and newspaper editor, while his cousin, Reuben Caluza, was one of the best known musicians of his day in the country. Curiously and significantly, R.R.R. Dhlomo (born in 1901) was to make his name writing mainly in Zulu, H.I.E. Dhlomo in English.

In 1912 the family moved permanently to Johannesburg, where his father worked first for a lift company, then in a minor casualty station on the mines, while his mother did washing. Encouraged by his mother his schooling followed a predictable path - firstly, at the American Board Mission school in Doornfontein, then at the Amanzimtoti Training Institute (Adams College) in Natal where he trained as a teacher, teaching under the guidance, amongst others, of Albert Luthuli (later to win the Nobel Prize). On successful completion of his studies Dhlomo's obvious next move was to find himself a

teaching position, which he did at Umzumbe on the Natal South Coast. In 1929, or thereabouts, Dhlomo moved back to Johannesburg and, through his missionary connections, became principal of the American Board school in Doornfontein. He married his Amanzimtoti classmate, Ethel Kunene, in 1931.

His musical talents undoubtedly stimulated by his mother and his literary imagination sparked by his schooling, Dhlomo naturally gravitated towards like-minded groups. His main focal point was the Bantu Men's Social Centre, begun in 1924 by a group of white liberals concerned over the increasing radicalism of black intellectuals after the First World War. It was here that significant elements of the black middle class entertained <sup>themselves</sup> ~~itself~~ with a range of activities from concerts and dances to draughts and chess. Many of the organisations (including the A.N.C.) held meetings in the hall, and a small library was well patronised. It was here in July, 1932, that Dhlomo, having dabbled a bit in newspaper writing, was one of the founder members of the Bantu Dramatic and Operatic Society. In April of the following year he played Young Marlow in the Society's first production, She Stoops to Conquer, and was also in Lady Windermere's Fan in 1935. Whether he was already writing plays or whether this involvement stimulated his enthusiasm is not known. Nor is it known in exactly what order his plays were written.

His first two plays were almost certainly Ntsikana and The Girl Who Killed to Save. The latter was published by Lovedale Press in 1935 and was the only play to be published in his lifetime (other than a marginal printing of Dingana in 1954). Both plays are informed with the belief in progress and its desirability not untypical of the values and beliefs of the 'progressives' of the day. The Cattle Killing of the AmaXhosa is seen, for instance, as a largely beneficial event since it destroys old tribal structures and prepares the hapless people for the modern world. Despite the day-to-day irritations of racial segregation Dhlomo's world and faith seem to have been, up to this point, relatively undisturbed, though there is some anger in a short story he published (in The African Observer) in August, 1935, entitled 'Experiment in Colour', in which he attempted to counter current 'scientific' theories of race.

The first major crisis in his beliefs seems to have come with the publishing of the Hertzog Acts in April, 1935, and their passing through Parliament in 1936. These not only consolidated the provisions of the 1913 Natives' Land Act, hence permanently cementing land segregation, but also put the blacks entitled to vote on a separate voters' role with indirect representation only. At the time the African National Congress under the ineffective leadership of Pixley Seme was so moribund a wholly new organization, the All-African Convention under the leadership of Professor D.D.T. Jabavu, was founded to oppose the legislation. Dhlomo's individual response was to write a play, Cetshwayo, in which he examined some of the origins of segregation in the policies of Shepstone in Natal in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It is possible that he had already written Shaka (lost) and Dingana, the first two plays in his 'Black Bulls' trilogy, so that Cetshwayo might have been merely a logical next step. In any case it gave him a powerful vehicle for an indirect attack on contemporary policies. At the same time, he seems to have wanted to equate Jabavu's resistance to Cetshwayo's earlier resistance to dominance and subservient segregation. It may be argued that Cetshwayo is to the 1936 Act of Prime Minister Hertzog what Solomon Plaatje's novel Mhudi was to the 1913 Natives' Land Act. The meaning of both these works depends on an understanding of both the historical contexts they talk about and the historical contexts they are written in.

Dhlomo's plays are marred by problems of language and structure. But it must be remembered that blacks were not allowed into municipal libraries, nor did they have access to the ordinary theatres. In 1940, for instance, Dhlomo and two other writers, B.W. Vilakazi and Walter Nhlapo, had to get special permission to attend a performance of Pergolesi's operetta, The Music Master. So that his chances of seeing any plays, other than the odd school performance, were virtually nil.

At this time, in February, 1937, Dhlomo left his job as journalist on Bantu World to become Librarian-Organizer of the Carnegie Non-European Library which was centred in Germiston. His duties involved overseeing a number of libraries in the area, including that at the B.M.S.C. and travelling libraries. He also started and produced a few issues of a modest journal called The Reader's Companion.

Plays continued to flow from his pen; <sup>he was:</sup> undiscouraged by his failure to publish. On 2 and 3 May, 1939, with the Bantu Dramatic and Operatic Society, he produced and directed his own play, Moshoeshoe (almost certainly written in 1937) at the B.M.S.C. Somewhat autocratic in his directing style and having to deal with amateur actors, he cannot have been pleased with the lukewarm response the play received. But it was a pioneering effort - a play totally written and performed with local means. It was followed in October by a production of a musical Ruby and Frank which dealt with the delicate issue of relations between 'Africans' and 'Coloureds', and in which he was somewhat critical of the latter.

The next turning-point, perhaps the most important in his life and career, came with a series of events in 1940 and 1941. Dhlomo seems to have been a serious person by nature, his works certainly not revealing any great sense of humour. Influenced, too, by the ideas of the Romantic poets, he adopted such theories as that of the original genius and of the priest-poet as different and special. Through his high-handedness and extreme jealousy his marriage began to run into trouble, as did his performance in his job. With financial difficulties compounding the problem, he began to feel that his worth was not appreciated and his aspirations were being thwarted. Some of his personal problems began to be translated (with some, though not complete, justification) into political terms. The primary cause is not clear - this was something of a chicken-and-egg situation. The more likely explanation is that all these factors coincided and began to coalesce during this period. The upshot was that both his job and his marriage fell apart. This is crucial for a full understanding of much of his later work.

Towards the end of 1940 he began to quarrel with the library committee (which consisted of a group of 'liberals') and this resulted in his summary dismissal at the very end of the year. Indirectly, his marriage troubles were argued out in a mammoth, 278 page, possibly unfinished play in the style of Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, called Men and Women. Part of the problem, in Dhlomo's eyes, was that some of the library committee began to sympathize with his wife, and he resented this interference as unnecessary confusion between his personal life and work situation. Abandoning his wife and children, he

fled to Durban, virtually destitute, perhaps even sleeping on the beach for a while. For a time he worked for the South African Broadcasting Company as a broadcaster (by landline to the townships, reading war news). But he could not shake off the consequences of the Johannesburg debacle and he believed undue influence exerted by his former employers led to his dismissal from his Durban job.

His bitterness produced a series of broadsides against his enemies. As early as June, 1940, he had expressed his dislike for the hypocrisy of wealthy Johannesburg in a poem called "On Munro Ridge". Now his pent-up frustration released itself in a play (sadly incomplete) called The Expert in which he lambasted committees of liberals in general and, certain individuals in particular. A poem entitled "Fired (Lines on an African Intellectual being sacked by white liberals for his independent ideas)" summed up his feelings:

Believing life is more than economical  
And physical; that there exist realms psychical;  
That there will come to pass a time  
When men in places high will hear and heed the golden words:  
'And as ye would...', and feel no crime  
In being human, fair and true; rejoice to see, like birds,  
All human souls soar happily and free;  
Unfettered, but encouraged to speak free;  
And, struggling, fall and rise still facing high,  
Not chained by whims of Power or Wealth (for so  
The human soul was meant to be), or lie  
Down fawning to vain human gods; but know  
There is no power save Beauty, Love and Song,  
Three mighty props God wrought to keep men strong...  
Remembering what such contacts meant to me  
Beneath this roof in days gone past  
(Though now all's lost,  
And mine the cost);  
In memory of things eyes cannot see,  
But conscience knows - the things that last -  
With parting, malice-free, proud greetings,

I offer these imaginative 'nothings'.  
The poor misfortuned who have felt the rod,  
Exalted stand in this; they have felt God!  
Grim hope in lowly truthful hearts like mine doth dwell,  
Sustaining from severest blows. And so....farewell!

The tone of much of his subsequent writings is conditioned by these happenings. It had become more bitter, more radical.

In October, 1941, Dhlomo published his second and only other book, the long poem Valley of a Thousand Hills. In it the following surviving plays were listed (indicating that they were all written before this date): Cetshwayo, Dingana, Moshoeshoe, Ntsikana, Nongqawuse (spelt thus and published under the title of The Girl Who Killed To Save), Men and Women, The Living Dead, Workers Boss Bosses, Ruby, Malaria, The Expert and Bazaar. Two plays listed, Shaka and Mfolozi, are lost. In his own copy and in his own handwriting Dhlomo listed one play, Arrested and Discharged (which survives as The Pass) as well as eight others which have not survived, implying perhaps that he continued to write plays after 1941. It means, too, that he wrote at least 23 plays in all. Prolific indeed!

Because these later plays do not survive it is mainly to his poems (as well as some essays, short stories and journalism) that we must turn for the interpretation of his last years. Some of these poems, such as "Drum of Africa" (1944), "The Harlot" (1945), "Not For Me" (1945), and "Because I'm Black" (1949) are powerful poems often with a tension between the radicalism and anger he is trying to express and the limits of the language at his command. Others like "Sweet Mango Tree" (1942) and "Fuze (For John Langalibalele Dube)" (c. 1946) are nostalgic poems lamenting the "shattered Eden" which is South Africa.

His most important poem, and the work he is best-known for, is Valley of a Thousand Hills. It is a poem which his contemporary, Jordan Ngubane, believed expressed 'the truly national spirit'. It is a Romantic poem, epical in style, which reflects both Dhlomo's individual pain and the misery he saw

around him. Calling on the pantheon of Zulu gods and heroes he tries to integrate the past and the present, and present a vision of hope for the future. Full of exclamation marks, it aims to lift readers off their feet with its breathtaking sweep.

Dhlomo's political expression was not confined to his poetry, however. He became assistant editor on Ilanga Lase Natal and he and his brother (who was editor) wrote a great deal of the whole newspaper between them for a number of years. In the background, he was active politically. In 1944 he was amongst the founders of one of the most important of organisations, the African National Congress Youth League, being on its first Durban committee and, it seems, for a while temporary head of the Youth League in Natal. Again, it may be argued that just as Plaatje's Mhudi (completed in 1920) is the epic expressing the early ideals of the A.N.C., Dhlomo's Valley of a Thousand Hills (1941) is the epic expressing the kind of ideas and ideals leading to the formation of the A.N.C. Youth League.

Then, in May, 1951, Dhlomo and some of his fellow Youth Leaguers pulled off their biggest coup. The Old Guard president of the A.N.C. in Natal, A.W.G. Champion, was replaced by Dhlomo's old teacher, Chief Albert Luthuli. It was an early salvo in the activities that led to Luthuli winning the presidency of the A.N.C. itself and ultimately to the Defiance Campaign in 1952. Dhlomo was largely instrumental in Luthuli's Natal victory.

Previously largely teetotal and a non-smoker, Dhlomo's heavy drinking and smoking from the early 1940s onward no doubt contributed to his heart trouble and death at the comparatively early age of fifty-three in 1956. His name, his reputation, his achievements lapsed into relative obscurity until the unearthing of a hoard of his manuscripts in the early 1970s. A collection of his major completed works was published in 1985 and some of his lesser or uncompleted works are presently housed in the Killie Campbell Library in Durban and in the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown.

There are many aspects of Dhlomo's life and work that still need in-depth study. One of these is the question of the exact relationship, over time, between his African nationalism and his Zulu nationalism - a question which is

very relevant to the present day. Another is the articulation of his ideas about literature and how he implemented them in his own work, particularly the drama. (His play Moshoeshoe would, in particular, repay careful scrutiny in this respect).

Another reason why Dhlomo is a figure so important in the literary history of Africa is that he was one of the very earliest African literary theorists. In the period between 1936 and 1946 he produced a number of articles on drama and poetry which are to African literature what, say, John Dryden's "Essay on Dramatic Poesy" is to English literature. The ideas grouped together do represent something of a unified literary and political theory and are perhaps worth noting. (~~These essays have been collected together in~~ English in Africa, v.4, No 2, September, 1977).

At the outset he suggests that the modern African dramatist (i.e. himself) needed to practice what he called "literary necromancy"; in other words he (or she), in seeking first and fundamental principles, must 'go back to the beginning, to the years of ancient times, to the work and spirit of their forefathers.' The Izibongelo and other 'tribal dramatic compositions' were, he suggested, "an extensive dense forest where we may go and gather sticks to fight our literary and cultural battles, timber to build our dramatic genius, wood to make our poetic fires, leaves to decorate our achievements." Like Solomon Plaatje, he not only believed in the cultural preservation and cultural regeneration of his people, but also that his society ~~was~~ at that precise point, a time of transition, of migration, of expansion, of morality and literacy, like the Greeks and Elizabethans, when "great literature thrives". In the process, he had a vigorous debate with the Zulu poet, Vilakazi, over the most suitable medium for dramatic speech, Vilakazi favouring rhyme, Dhlomo, regarding this as too rigid for drama, opting for such devices as parallelism, Shakespearean flexible verse, and, ultimately, what Dhlomo called 'Rhythm', which he suggested was 'essentially African'.

Dhlomo examined a number of traditional forms: poems about persons, birds, animals and things; nature poems; war songs; hunting songs; prayer offerings; domestic songs; agricultural songs; dance and love songs; gnomic sayings; play songs, nursery rhymes and lullabies. He was interested, too, in folk poetry

and its prosody. And he was interested in how Ingoma, or 'rhythmic, choral-dramatic dances', and festivals (such as first fruit feasts, initiation ceremonies and the funerals of chiefs) and many of the elements, such as mysteries, miracles, moralities, were anticipations of full drama. Tribal drama, he pointed out, was national, communal, ritualistic, with great actors and a participatory audience, with make-up and (natural) scenery, performed often at the 'aromatic hour'. Modern poetry, he believed, could be 'a glorious flower which springs from the rich plant of tribal imagery.'

He is interesting, sometimes strange, too, on the question of language. The number of African languages, he felt, militated against 'the birth of great national African drama' and he threw out the suggestion that 'a universal Bantu literary language' should be evolved. As a practical compromise, in contradistinction to his brother who wrote mainly in Zulu, Herbert Dhlomo chose to write mainly in English, perhaps as the nearest thing to a universal African language. Stranger, perhaps, is his belief that 'the greatest drama of all time is literary' and that the African dramatist 'would be well advised to build a great literary drama first' before attempting to write 'acting plays'. Here speaks, almost certainly, the voice of a playwright largely cut off from seeing live plays.

But Dhlomo did not advocate slavishness to the past, nor some kind of nationalist purity. 'The development of African drama', he wrote, 'cannot purely be from African roots. It must be grafted in Western Drama. It must borrow from, be inspired by, shoot from European dramatic art forms, and be tainted by exotic influences... The African dramatist cannot delve into the past unless he has grasped the Present. African art cannot grow and thrive by going back and digging up the bones of the past without dressing them with modern knowledge and craftsmanship.' In the ultimate, he went even further. 'Great art or thought,' he said in 1939, 'is more than racial or national. It is universal, reflecting the image, the spirit, of the All-Creative Being who knows neither East nor West, Black nor White, Jew nor Gentile, time nor space, life nor death.'

The most important underlying idea is one he adopted and adapted from Sir James Frazer's the Golden Bough (a copy of which we know he had) - the idea that tribal drama was based on Sympathetic Magic. For "tribal man", wrote Dhlomo, "Magic was his science: rhythmic dramatic representation his art. Instead of adapting himself to life, he always attempted to bend life to his desire by imagining and acting what life should be in relation to, and because of his person... The people believed that like always and everywhere produced like. Consequently, imitation, which is a basis of drama, played a major part in certain African dramatic representations." This meant that "tribal man" at times felt he was related to the other forms of creation, 'even to the stars'. Dhlomo did not want to preserve the elements of the Izibongelo exactly as they were but to 'transform them': "They give us contact with the culture, the life, the heart of forefathers. They are a sacred inheritance.... They can only live through us, and we through them. In them the old and the new meet and write and flower forth into a birth miraculous."

These ideas allowed him to connect his literature with his politics (and justify his research and writings). Dhlomo and his contemporaries were deeply concerned about the role and quality of leadership and about the unity of his people. The writer's role was, for him, crucial. By reviving and transforming the old dramatic forms the writer could "reveal the common origin, the spiritual unity, the essential Oneness, the single destiny of all Bantu tribes." This "essential Oneness of the African peoples", he believed, should be "broadcast from the hilltops". His plays, then, were not meant to be mere representations, but, as far as they could, to be magical rituals and imitations.

It is important to realise that Dhlomo was not an isolated figure. He was one of a number of contemporary writers who represented similar aspirations. And he was preceded by a process and a tradition of writing which had begun a hundred years before. His life and career nevertheless contained ominous hints that this was about to come to an end. That he did not father a school of dramatists was due to factors largely beyond his control.

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