

**PLAYING WITH/IN HISTORY:**

An investigation of fragments and methods of their assemblage in the composition of historical dramatic narrative.

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This work has not previously been submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this explication from the works or works of other people has been attributed, cited and referenced.

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16 March  
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## CONTENT

Abstract	p.3
Introduction	p.5
Chapter One: The Framing	p.8
1.1. Framing the enquiry	
1.2. Framing the critic	
1.3. Framing the catalyst	
Chapter Two: Assemblage	p.18
2.1. Fragments	
2.2. Narrative	
2.3. The Repositories	
2.4. Early Repositories in <i>The Hottentot Venus and the wonder of things unknown</i> (2002) and <i>Fourplay</i> (2003)	
2.5. Later Repositories in <i>Lekker Faith</i> (2003)	
Chapter Three: Hinging the Exegesis	p.45
References	p.52
Bibliography	p.56
Appendix 1: <i>The Paris/Cape Town/Joburg Plays</i>	(as attached)

## ABSTRACT

The area of research for this written explication is defining a relationship between fragment and the assemblage of fragment in order to conceive new strategies for developing historical dramatic narrative. There were two significant methods with which the research occurred. One was a critical investigation into the work and writings of visual artists, historians, critics, writers and playwrights who all recognize the area of fragmentation in their specific field. The other was through writing and directing a play with UCT drama students called *Lekker Faith* (2003). This particular play opened at The Arena Theatre, Orange St, Cape Town on the 1 November 2003. The play joins two earlier plays *The Hottentot Venus and the wonder of things unknown* (Little Theatre, Cape Town, 2002) and *Fourplay* (Rehearsal Room, Monument Theatre, Grahamstown, 2003) to form part of an anthology of plays, called *The Paris/Cape Town/Joburg Plays*.

In the first chapter the origin of this enquiry is explained. Incorporated into this explanation is a personal testimony of the event "9-11", an investigation into the Holocaust forgery of Benjamin Wilkormirski and an appraisal of the writings of critic Walter Benjamin, particularly his *Ninth Thesis* which stems from his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940).

In the second chapter two specific key concepts are defined. They are fragment and narrative. The central theoretical focus of the argument is outlined and developed by using the metaphor of the repository. Examples of repositories are identified. Thereafter an explanation is given how the shapes of the repositories become the metaphorical form of the drama; thus shaping the structure of the historical dramatic narrative.

In the third chapter there is a reflection on the production of *Lekker Faith* from the development of the text to its premiere at the ArenaTheatre, Orange St, Cape Town, November 2003. A critical comparison of Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* (New York, 1992) assisted my reflection of the work.

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## INTRODUCTION

Playwright Tony Kushner says in a New York Times interview how 'playwriting is a dialectical exercise. There's no shake-and-bake formula of this much or that much. Writing is a series of mistakes that you correct. It's always a struggle, and the nice thing about theater is that you don't have to do it all by yourself' (Abramovich, 2003:6). When I first chose to do a MA in Theatre and Performance at the University of Cape Town, one of my first intentions was to project a collaborative laboratory like energy into my work. Meaning that for so long I had endured the "lonely life" of a writer who also feared, he/she would never see his/ her work performed thus. When I began my coursework my intentions remained the same but the world had become a different place. I had experienced this significant shift first hand by being in New York City during the cataclysmic event of 9-11.

Temple Hauptfleisch highlights the implications of the playwright in being a witness. He writes:  
'to witness does imply a measure of moral, religious and/or legal responsibility to bear testimony to what has occurred, and to what one has experienced of it. It is an injunction perhaps to 'go forth and bear witness' by giving evidence and expressing your understanding of what is happening based on a certain belief and value system you share with the rest of the community' (1997, p.117).

When the playwright has become traumatized by the event he/she has witnessed the notion of the playwright as a witness is a difficult one. However my own numbness began to thaw once I returned to South Africa and entered the Drama Department at the University of Cape Town in order to

begin my research concerning theatre making. Here I began to ask: what were the strategies that were aiding this thawing process? The most recognizable strategy was being able “to play”. The verb, “to play”, is one of the fundamental elements of theatre making. In his textbook on drama as therapy, Phil Jones suggests that the act of play allows for connections between the unconscious and the conscious thus enabling the articulation of the suppressed content. Jones quotes Johan Huizinga who defines play:

As a free activity, standing consciously outside “ordinary life”, as being “not serious” but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly, play is connected with no material interest and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner (1996, p.169).

I suspect that through the element of play that I was able to re-enter the site of ruin where I became aware of the concept of fragment, and thus it became a “living” artifact in the role of storytelling. As I discovered the concept of fragment I began to wonder about the possibilities of developing new strategies for developing dramatic narrative in the historical aftermath. My concerns about fragment have absorbed two years of research as well as inspired the development of three new plays. In regards to the fundamental theoretical work I want to acknowledge the patience and support and invaluable advice of my supervisor, Associate Professor Mark Fleishman. I am also grateful for the enduring wisdom of his department and particularly his colleagues, Yvonne Banning, Liz Mills and Gay Morris.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Framing

Dramatic replication of the past is fraught with difficulties. Theatre is constituted as a sophisticated system of simulation, of illusion of place and person. Its nature is towards "unauthenticity"; our distance from the stage precludes the need for exact similitude... At least in the auditorium we the spectators collude the deception of theatre. We suspend our belief, we acknowledge the fiction, the illusions and simulations of theatre (Pearson and Shanks, 2001:117).

### 1.1. Framing the enquiry:

In his essay, *The Historical Text As Literary Artifact* (1974), Hayden White argues that historical events are: 'made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play' (2001, p.223).

The historical is not only an interpretation. It is also an interpretation presented as a narrative that has been coded by the storyteller of the history itself. White expresses how historical narrative is 'not only a re-production of the events reported in it, but also a complex of symbols which gives us directions for finding an icon of the structure of those events in our literary tradition' (p.227).

In our present condition, I imagine such icons to be fragments. Fragments sit as synecdochical, representative leftovers in the ruined

structures of history. In the context of this enquiry, understanding how these fragments interact and resonate can be utilized as a strategy for developing new kinds of historical narrative. For example as a writer of dramatic fiction, I have often thought about how history can be a catalyst in engineering dramatic text. In one sense the historical catalyst exists as a fragment within a historical aftermath. But in another sense it might also be how the fragment can stem into a new regenerative, imaginative, playing space. And here an assemblage of fragments collected might be made into a play, in which both the play's reconstructed form and the play's content of reassembled fragment could reflect on the original, historical, aftermath.

Of playwright Suzan Lori Parks who writes: 'A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature. Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me is the perfect place to "make" history' (1995, p.4).

During my research over the last two years, in the Drama Department at the University of Cape Town, I have completed three reproducible play texts: *The Hottentot Venus and the wonder of things unknown* (Little Theatre, Cape Town: 2002), *Fourplay* (Rehearsal Room, Monument Theatre, Grahamstown: 2003) and *Lekker Faith* (Arena Theatre, Orange St, Cape Town: 2003). All three plays sit within one volume of work, which I have called *The Paris/Cape Town/Joburg Plays*. (This anthology forms part of this investigation and therefore in this particular study it exists as an attached yet altogether separate text called appendix 1.)

Although each of the three texts in the anthology attempts to tackle different thematic representations through the telling of stories in dramatic form, they all embrace a common question:

Can fiction be the glue with which we reassemble the fragments of a broken reality? I have continued to tackle this question in the writing, directing and playing of each successive play text. This question subsequently gave rise to another, perhaps more philosophical question, whether it is possible to play within the sites of history. More significantly, is it possible to play with/in history itself? Therefore to contrive Lori-Parks' maxim, theatre is not just the "perfect place to make history" but also the perfect place "to play" with/in history. And thus in the context of fragmentation when one acts upon creating historical narrative one might want "to play" rather than "to make" because the fragments of history already exist.

During my investigation, I have made specific reference to visual artists, playwrights, critics and writers who use fragmentation in their work. They include in this list:

- Benjamin Wilkormirski, fraud.
- Willie Bester, sculptor.
- Tony Cragg, sculptor
- Penny Siopis, painter.
- Salman Rushdie, novelist.
- Peter Hayes, writer, storyteller, performer.
- W. David. Hancock, playwright.
- Kirsten Hastrup, historian

- Charlotte Delbo, Holocaust survivor and poet.
- Tony Kushner, playwright.

Throughout the process of referencing and research to writing to directing, I have asserted a clear trajectory that attempts to understand the relationship between the fragment and the assemblage of the fragment, in the context of historical dramatic narrative. I have also established an intimate interplay between the historical, the dramatic and narrative. The interplay between these concepts is not only fundamental to the relationship between fragment and form but also provides an analytical discourse that assists one in deciding what that form might be. It has been useful to anchor my argument to the work of a central critic, whose own methodology supports an inquiry into history, narrative and the dramatic.

#### 1.2: Framing the critic:

Most of my work would not have been properly realized without a critical understanding of the life and work of the German-Jewish philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin. In his lifetime, he wrote an impressive amount about almost everything, including theatre. In his introduction to his formidable treatise on *German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin forewarns the reader of the difficulties of understanding his fragmentary writing with an encouraging nursery rhyme injunction: 'Hurtle over root and stone, ware the boulder, break no bone' (Scholem, 1976:184). This is Benjamin encouraging the reader not to labour over points incessantly but to see his texts as fragmented sites. The reader is encouraged to exhort random words and phrases; encouraged to skip chapters and to return to them at will.

I have concentrated, in particular, on Benjamin's *Ninth Thesis* from his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1968, p.257, 258). In this fragment, he describes being inspired by Paul Klee's painting called *Angelus Novus*, (1920: Permanent Collection, Israel Museum, Jerusalem) which shows:

An angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (p.257, 258).

Benjamin illuminates this vision of the Angel of History with a rendering of the past as a single ruin made up of many dispersed fragments; 'he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it front of his (the angel's) feet' (ibid). But Benjamin discourages the rewriting of history in the face of the catastrophe; rather he encourages the rediscovery of its fragmented terrain, which is like an act of exploration.

It is what Hannah Arendt would describe as: 'a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and strange' (Arendt, 1968: 51). These pearls and broken bits of coral are the shattered shards that history has dispersed

and left behind in its own ruin. For Benjamin each shard has an element of aura: a resonance of experience, of memory, of story. In order to understand a shard, one needs to engage with its aura, which reflects an experience in time. Brecht summarized Benjamin's proposition on the aura with this diary entry: '[Benjamin] calls the aura, which is connected with dreaming [daydreams]. If you feel the gaze directed at you, even at your back, you return it! The expectation that what you look back at will look back at you creates the aura' (1993, p.10).

Thus returning the gaze of the fragment is about the optic (sight) of the present looking back at the past and vice versa; understanding how to utilize the optic of the past in relation to the present raises the possibility that they, past and present, will 'strike sparks and illuminate each other' (Coetzee, 2001).

### 1.3: Framing the catalyst:

Two separate encounters have contributed early on in this investigation. In order to understand the relationship between fragment and its assemblage in the context of historical narrative context, both are worthy of mentioning.

In 1995, *Fragments*, a childhood memoir written by a Swiss musician known as Benjamin Wilkormirski, also known as Bruno Grosjean, was published. It was an autobiographical tale of surviving the concentration camps. It was hailed as a masterpiece, received major book prizes and Wilkormirski was compared with the likes of Primo Levi and Eli Wiesel.

Three years later, scholars, academics and journalists began to question the book's authenticity. After a thorough investigation by other

living authors of the Holocaust, both the book and its author were declared fake. 'Benjamin Wilkormirski had been accused of mixing fiction in his story and what's more of turning the Shoah itself into fiction' (Maechler, 2000: 8). The relevance of Wilkormirski to my investigation is not what the majority of his critics intended to highlight; that is, to show how Wilkormirski's abuse of history 'may do real damage to survivors by rendering each Holocaust memoir suspect' (p.49). Instead, encountering Wilkormirski has raised questions about how forms of storytelling can be used to create historical meanings that are not necessarily 'commensurate with historical reality' (p.8). Wilkormirski attempted to play with/in history because of the form in which he offered to tell his story. A form that he himself describes at the outset of his memoir as:

A rubble field of isolated images and events. Shards of memory with hard knife-sharp edges, which still cut flesh if touched today. Mostly a chaotic jumble, with very little chronological fit; shards that keep surfacing against the orderly grain of grown-up life and escaping the laws of logic (Wilkormirski, 2000:1).

Wilkormirski's methods of storytelling can be compared to Benjamin's characterizing of his own experience of memory as a 'chaos of memories' that are resistant to logic. (Ostovich, 2003). When memories are recalled, they appear fragmented and only 'isolated words have remained in place as marks of catastrophic encounters' (ibid).

The second encounter happened on a catastrophic day that is now known throughout the world as 9-11. On this particular day, September 11th, 2001, two American, commercial, airliners, hijacked by members of the

fundamentalist organization, al Qaeda, were purposefully crashed into the towers of the World Trade Center in New York, causing the skyscrapers to disintegrate. On this catastrophic day, I was living on a cross street between Twenty-Seventh Street and Sixth Avenue in New York City. I became witness to one of the most important geo-political events of recent times, an event that has shifted our modern history. I became numb. Shock, then fear and nervousness set in; the dismay at seeing a potent symbol of the last remaining super-power crumble made me disengage. I struggled to watch the world I had once known disappear.

The past, alive and rich in the possibility of artifact has always existed as a fragmented site, now collided with the present. Both the present and the past had become a combined site of ruin. I became melancholic. I refused to let go of the event. I silently joined the family of angry men. For days on end, I could do nothing but witness a city coming to terms with its disaster. A thick, grey cloud hung over the cavity that had once been the World Trade Center and it did not disappear. The city was not only shrouded in smoke but also in the black and white posters of missing people and then it turned silent. These posters of the missing became a common language of silent grief, like public icons of mourning. Slowly I became aware of how the events of 9-11 had disrupted both the narratives belonging to the prevailing, hegemonic structures of power and the dissident narratives that had scrutinized the power structures. A collection of photocopied, fragments of paper, depicting the missing, had transcended any attempts at projecting or representing the horror of the event.

Benjamin's symbolic Angel of History had become a potent metaphor for 9-11. His description of history in his *Ninth Thesis* is one of a single catastrophe that is described as "wreckage upon wreckage" piled up like a mound of debris. The angel wants to stay and awaken the dead but is poised to be propelled backwards into the future. 'The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward' (p.258). This vision resonates the event of 9-11, but unlike the allegory of the angel the romanticized skyscrapers have become entrapped within the debris that now also 'grows skyward' (ibid).

Michel de Certeau once recognized by climbing New York's skyscrapers one could become 'like an Icarus flying... whose elevation transfigures the bewitching world by which one was "possessed" into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god' (Certeau, 1984:92). This voyeuristic god was able to negotiate the urban text of the city by being able to see it from above, from the top of the World Trade Center. However this alternative view on narrative has been eclipsed by the collapse of the 'tallest letters in the world' (p.91). Now in the rubble and among the ruins of its towers, the city's inhabitants have become *wanders-manner*, walkers, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of the urban text that they write without being able to read it' (p.93).

By comparing the collapse of the World Trade Center to Benjamin's Angel of History it becomes even more plausible to paint this ruin of history as an act of disruption. Perhaps the only progress in this kind of disruption is negotiating an optic that can visualize possibilities of how this fragmented

ground could become a fertile site for the regeneration of new kinds of narrative.

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## CHAPTER TWO: Assemblage

'Gather up the fragments that remain that nothing be lost' (John 6:13).

### 2.1. Fragments:

Walter Benjamin's timeless Angel of History views the fragments from the havoc of history, hurled in front of its feet, as 'one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage' (Benjamin, 1968:257). It is the angel who would like to 'stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed' (p.257). In essence the smashed remains are fragments. The fragments are the content of aftermath. The ruin, the rubble, the debris, the throw away, the relic, and the vandalized; are all fragments. The fragments are made from the splintered event itself and can be made either voluntarily by the mark of action i.e. shattering, dismemberment or dismantling or involuntarily by the mark of time i.e. erosion. When there is a re-engagement with the fragments, it becomes possible to recollect and thereafter reassemble the fragment. After re-assemblage, the fragments take on a certain reconstructed shape or form. I will begin to concur that the relationship between the fragments and their re-assemblage can result in a method of creating narrative.

### 2.2. Narrative:

Classically, narrative is distinguished by two characteristics: 'the presence of a story and a story-teller' (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966:4). However, more recently narrative has come to mean: the 'inter-subjective model of discourse' whose 'intent is to recreate story' (Kearney, 2002: 5). Stories are

the things we tell, usually about things that have happened or will happen. Narrative does not equal story. But when we know the story or experience it, it is re-told and thus this exchange becomes narrative. When a story is told, we can become its narrators 'without becoming authors' (Ricouer, 2002:437). Narrative mimics the mimetic art of storytelling. It is this mimesis, which is essentially about synthesizing recreation that makes narration not only a fundamental element of storytelling but embodies the act of reassembling as well. By re-assembling one recreates and regenerates something from the original. Narrative becomes the manifestation of the act of assemblage. As narrative embraces the relationship between story and storytelling, so it embraces the relationship between fragment and the assemblage of fragment; thus the latter, with regard to narrative, also becomes an 'inter-subjective model of discourse' (Kearney, 2002:5).

Reassembling recomposes the continuous fractures, gathers the fragments and regulates the multiple threads of story by synthesizing and regulating in order to recreate. With this in mind, narrative becomes like a cluster of elements, stratified with layers of: stories experienced, lived and imagined; new stories ready to be told; stories formed; stories acted upon and stories engaged, related and received. Narrative is about the many. It is the dynamic embodiment of the many voices told and received in a story. Because of the multiplicity in its nature, it does become difficult to understand how narrative can actually determine and solidify the fragments of storytelling.

Author and scholar, Richard Kearney writes: 'In our own postmodern era of fragment and fragmentation... Narrative provides us with one of our

most viable forms of identity - individual and communal' (2002,p.4). Thus it is Kearney who provides the clue that there are cohesive ingredients in narrative, which can aid in re-assemblage, like his own example of identity.

When fragments occur in a reassembled form; both the event prior to fragmentation and the method of how the fragments are reassembled are told. The configurations of these assembled forms allow for the metaphorical shaping of narrative. These forms, in which the reassembled fragments occur, act as repositories for the fragments.

### 2.3. The Repositories:

Repositories might enable dramatic narrative to endorse the fragmentation if the dramatic structure of the narrative mimics the structure of the repository. Thus these dramatic narratives can reflect the intersection between fragment and re-assemblage, and furthermore the dramatic narrative becomes the glue that fixes the now-broken object of reality.

Examples of repositories, which I have researched and thereafter begun to use as references in order to sculpt the dramatic structure in my three play texts include: voodoo altars, landscapes of history, memory, patchwork, theatrical soup, cabinets of curiosities, salvage sculpture, box art, testimony, family trees and trauma. For this particular explication I shall concentrate on the repositories that helped define the construction of both the text and performance of *Lekker Faith* (2003). But I have also included in an abbreviated introduction examples of early repositories that helped to define the first two plays in the anthology; *The Hottentot Venus and the wonder of things unknown* (2002) and *Fourplay* (2003). The earlier plays

helped to influence the progression of the later play and therefore elements from repositories like salvage sculptures and cabinets of curiosities were recomposed again as structural devices that helped to create the text and the play *Lekker Faith* (2003).

2.4. Early repositories used in *The Hottentot Venus and the wonder of things unknown* (2002) and *Fourplay* (2003):

1] - Salvage sculpture:

The salvage work of Cape Town-based artist Willie Bester, highlights how the shard of the aftermath can indeed be an abandoned shoe found on the side of a township road. His work is an example of how the physical fragment can be located and reassembled into the plastic narrative of art.

In a recent interview, published alongside his exhibition in Stellenbosch (2002), Bester remembers being inspired by Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*: 'It made me think of new ways to use found objects. It was then that I decided to go to some of the local scrap yards in search of materials for my sculptures' (p.6). Bester describes his sculpture as 'salvage sculpture' (p.2). Salvage sculpture as the term suggests, involves a saving of discarded objects so as to embody them into another form of representation. When one comes into contact with Bester's collected collages of fragment, embodied as salvage sculptures or three-dimensional paintings, one becomes aware of a material narrative that speaks of the collision into ruin and the embodiment of ruin. The form of his work is a reference to fractured life experiences, which signifies both a personal and political narrative.

Bester translates the reference of the fracture by re-assembling the collected fragments /throw-away/ ruins/relics into a collage. Translation as Walter Benjamin suggests is 'a mode' but 'to comprehend it as a mode one must go back to the original for that contains the law governing the translation: Its translatability' (Benjamin, 1968:70). The scrap of fragment therefore is part of the ruin in the aftermath, as well as being part of the whole before the fracture. Thus the narrative is multi-layered. It is the collage itself that informs an experience of the aftermath, as well as being a translation by the artist of the event itself, as well as being a synecdochical representation of something that was once whole. This translation into collage is not only the personal recollection of the artist, it also is a disclosure of the artist's methods of assemblage; and it is an attempt by the artist to gather up the left-overs from the horror in order to heal. Bester himself says 'My uitgangspunt is dat jy mense nie net kos kan gee nie, jy moet ook aan hulle geeste dink.' (My point of departure is that you cannot just give people food, you must also think of their souls' (Rankin, 1994:93).

Bester's heavy - metal, "Terminator"- like statue of Sara (Saartjie) Bartman, "The Hottentot Venus", stands in a startled, still, glorious pose on the stairs of the Openheimer Library, U.C.T. The statue is a collection of throwaway metal assembled to re-make the body of a dismembered and dissected Khoisan woman. Bester's statue is officially titled: "Sara (Saartjie) Bartman, 2000".

The statue is made up of scrap metal and sits on a trolley with wheels. Around her neck hangs a heavy padlock as well as a suspended slave chain. Her crown is a surround of golden, bronze and silver coins: Europe, America

and the former Republic of South Africa are ensconced in metal, thus indicating her ironic predicament as Queen of the Other capped by western imperialism. Her eyes are big, almost startled, caught in apprehension and she seems paused in movement. There is a legacy of fragments that exist in the aftermath of Sara Bartman's life history: this includes her notorious career as a peepshow exhibit, her fateful dissection and her ultimate burial. It is an extensive aftermath. For in it are the notions of the other, of slavery, of apartheid, colonialism, racism, science and repatriation. It is a history that suggests how the tyranny of racist powers, which can be located in other kinds of historical and political aftermath, fractured her life. Her story is like a jigsaw puzzle of dissident theories and dissertations. 'Dismembered, isolated, decontextualised', says, Yvette Abrahams; who also points out the irony that 'after reams of measurements and autopsy notes we do not know the simplest thing about Sara (Sarah) Bartman' (1995, p.28). Sara Bartman's history is like her dissected body, existing as pieces and not quite whole. Her true story has been lost in what could be described as the 'maze of Western History' (Bergin, 1996:81).

But more recently, Sara Bartman has not also become a metaphor of fracture but of the re-assimilation of fragment. On 9 August 2002, her dismembered body parts (which still remained pickled in glass bottles), her body cast and her skeleton were gathered together by the French and the South African governments and were returned to South Africa to be buried. Prior to this event, there also is Bester's statue whose assembled robot like body parts ironically suggest the impotence of disused man-made metal now made potent again on the body of a woman; whose own body the conveyors

of the metal, being a white, western male society, had originally dissected. Bester's motionless yet startled statue of Sarah Bartman tells a story although the sculpture can't talk back. However Bester manages to inspire the viewer to give his/her own meaning to the assembled form by drawing the viewer intimately into the locale, by making him/her study the detail of the form. The assemblage constitutes a narrative that suggests a strategy of utilizing the suppressed voices that sit as fragments in the continuum of a colonized history. The question that arises from this enquiry is: How do such forms of assemblage operate in the context of dramatic narrative; especially when the aim of the theatrical investigation is to utilize the suppressed fragments of history?

Here I would first like to refer to my early workshop production of *The Hottentot Venus* (Student Festival, Grahamstown, 1993) which was inspired by the life and times of Sara Bartman and was first performed by students from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. In this production, the medium of the carnival became the construct of representation. The carnival with its notions of the grotesque and style of buffoonery seemed like an ideal thematic form for collecting the dismembered fragments of Sara Bartman's life history in order to make a narrative; because the carnival is in itself made up of a variety of disparate activities and objects. However the Bahktinian notion of the carnivalesque, which reflects the standard philosophy of carnival i.e. to attack all rules and hierarchies and to revolt against any narrative that is fixed, finally displaced the historical need to tell Sara Bartman's story in this particular production. Travesty and misrule enhanced the geography and mystery of the form at the expense of

expanding and opening up the fragmentation that punctuates her history. What was realized though was that fiction could enter the gaps and free up dramatic narrative. However the quality of the fiction disappeared into an ambiguous abyss, where there was no repository to hold the assembled fragments together.

In retrospect, steps towards creating dramatic narrative within the fracture of history requires the following: first to locate the fragments; then to find a suitable form that can hold the assembled fragments together and then a narrative will arise at the intersection of fragment and form. This imagined intersection was both historically and geographically set in a Boulevard Theatre in Paris in 1814. The boulevard theatres of 'des petits Comedians in the nineteenth century were multitude of sideshows depicting the so called perverse and the grotesque and performing pantomime, popular theatre and spectacle; all bound with theatrical anarchy' (Bernstein, 1984: 42). Sara Bartman was exhibited in Paris, on a stage like these, on the Boulevard, only months before Sara Bartman died and Baron George Cuvier dissected her famous body (Lindfors, 1999). The place of the "Boulevards" became the fictional catalyst for re-assembling the original text that had been usurped and further fragmented by the antics of the carnival. The Boulevards of Paris became a conceptual vehicle that conjured up a playground of possibilities where fantasy and story telling could become limitless and even possibly reveal how fiction could indeed anchor fact.

I began to re-assemble my own writings about Sara Bartman; then coincidentally her dismembered body parts were returned to South Africa to be buried. I felt it important to re-assemble the fragments of my own text, so

as in away, to put them to rest. This I did in the project that I undertook during my first year of the M.A. Theatre and Performance programme at The University of Cape Town. The project became the play now known as *The Hottentot Venus; and the wonder of things unknown* (Little Theatre, Cape Town. 2002).

2] - *Wunderkamers* or Cabinets of Curiosity:

This re-assembled text of *The Hottentot Venus; and the wonder of things unknown* (2002) took the form of a salvage project, in which the content included a detritus of thrown-away text, disused and thrown-away objects, old costumes and a collage of performance styles. These many fragments were all re-assembled into the form of *wunderkamers*. This is the eighteenth century phenomenon of collecting fragments, which became a repository for the arrangement and structuring of the dramatic narrative. Also known as *wunderkammern* or *cabinets de curiosite*, these cabinets were the 'personal and idiosyncratic collections of private individuals', which predate the establishment of public museums:

[They were] composed of collections of items chosen not because of their historical value as antiquities or their monetary worth but because the collectors found the objects pleasing and demonstrative of the "wonders of the world", whether natural, spiritual, or man-made. The objects in a *wunderkamer* were arranged according to circumference, height, weight, color, luminosity, and transparency (Suderberg, 2000:7).

Different types of objects were displayed in juxtaposition to each other; 'A group of ostrich eggs' were displayed juxtaposed 'with marble acorn garden ornaments' (p.7). Similarly, the different fragments of my text were

juxtaposed with each other by being performed in different places as if they were stored in a framework of different cabinets. Thus the collage of content assembled and re-assembled in this form of display instigated a 'hide and seek engagement' for the audience to investigate the suppressed and silent spaces that propagate Sara Bartman's own life history and its themes(p.8). Like the objects arranged within the cabinets, the collage of dramatic content was arranged to inspire 'evocation, bewilderment and enchantment' (ibid).

The actual physical form of the cabinet also helped to frame the enactment of various dramatic movements and genres within the text, including history, site theatre, heightened realism, fantasy, suspense and mythology. Each movement (or new scene) was labeled with a Brechtian heading. In performance these Brechtian headings took the form of announcements made by the company of student actors. This specific structural device continued when writing the later two plays, in each of them the Brechtian headings suggest a new chapter or revealed a new action as if a new drawer of cabinet is being opened. This first project and play led me to understand how to construct a dramatic narrative using the metaphorical reflection of a specific repository, in this case the *wunderkamer*.

### 3] – More salvage sculpture:

*Fourplay*, which was my second text based project, was the official University of Cape Town entry for the Grahamstown Student Drama Festival, 2003. The play is a dark, sassy, urban comedy exploring themes arising from the aftermath of the massacre at a gay massage parlor in Cape Town called "Sizzlers". I did not necessarily want to tell the story of the massacre but

instead wanted to present the abstraction that can occur in contemporary life under the influence of a typically hedonistic sub-culture.

In shaping the play I was once again inspired by the work of another salvage sculptor. This time it was British artist Tony Cragg: 'So many of [Cragg's] works begin as fragments of objects, both man-made and organic, purchased and discovered' (Schimmel, 1990:15). During rehearsals I worked with the four student actors to find and retrieve physical fragments that had been discarded in their own urban landscapes. What was significant was the physical embodiment of the fragments in both the directing, the design and the development of the play text. With regard to character development I decided that each character would have his/her own colour code and during the course of one day, the actors had to embark on a treasure hunt in the city, searching for and collecting fragments that they associated with their characters and their specific colours. The actors then brought these into rehearsal and these throw-away objects became very useful tools, particularly in improvisation. Each actor also had his/her own character's bag. These became their repositories. The bags were eventually filled with an array of fragments that suitably symbolized things about the actors' specific characters. This exercise of collecting fragments continued well into the last performance of the play. The found fragments not only helped to develop characterization but also enhanced the play's mood and design.

I then drew on two of Cragg's sculptures, *New Stones – Newton's Stones* (1975) and *Spectrum* (1983) as models for a way of placing the found fragments. In these particular pieces, Cragg assembles plastic fragments using a code of four different colours, in the shape of a square. The colour,

coded square became the floor plan of the play design for *Fourplay* (2003) itself. Cragg's assemblage of fragments occurs in simple, recognizable shapes like a square or the stylized body of a bird. As in the play, the scattered fragments on the stage floor made up the simple shape of a square. But lurking beneath the surface of the simplicity were complexities that arose from working with fragments. A number of questions arose. What reality is dominant in a fragmented state? When fragments appear in a shape, is this appearance of wholeness merely a temporary one? Can fragmentation and wholeness alternate as actions in time in a theatrical space?

My own floor plan was a repository of fragments that decisively influenced the movement of performance and shaped the form of the play. The play transformed as the actors picked up its fragments off the floor. The complexity of discarding fragment and assembling fragment was measured in the play through the memory of the central character, Norman Shakespeare, who tries to recollect one specific incident by re-gathering the fragments from its aftermath.

I continued to concentrate on several elements drawn from the repositories of salvage sculptures and cabinets of curiosities in order to create the text of *Lekker Faith* (2003). Particularly: the use of Brechtian headings; the significance of changing a dramatic scene as if it was a book or drawer being opened, filled with collected fragments; and the physical use of found, thrown-away fragments that were an inspiration for both theatrical decor and development of character. I began to question how fragments from history could be arranged on stage. This led me to locate other repositories.

These later repositories have significant influence on both the development of this enquiry as well as on the creation of the text, *Lekker Faith* (2003).

#### 2.5: Later Repositories in *Lekker Faith* (2003):

[Inside is a long traverse dining table.

It has an immeasurable tablecloth that might look like a landscape of history. At the head of the table is Bobbah Meisah, who sits in the debris looking like a mystical but maybe miserable Winnie from Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*. Bobbah reaches into her cumbersome stitched up dress, which must suggest that it stretches on for meters and meters even adjoining the tablecloth. She takes out several crumbs of matzah from a pocket in her dress and scatters them across the dining table. In the distance is the feint chanting of Jewish prayer and the dawn chatter of bird song] (*Lekker Faith*: 2003).

#### 1] - Voodoo Altars:

Poet and academic Ingrid De Kok uses Caribbean poet Derek Walcott's description of the Haitian Voodoo altars as a metaphor for how fragments are assembled from the past:

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of the original shape. It is such love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars (De Kok, 1998:62).

The narratives of Haitian Voodoo altars suggest a bricolage of personal experiences and a clutter of collective histories:

Customized whiskey bottles, satin pomanders, clay pots, dressed in lace, plaster statues of St Anthony and the laughing Buddha, holy cards, political kitsch, Dresden clocks, bottles of Moet-et-Chandon, rosaries, crucifixes, Masonic insignia, eye shadowed kewpie dolls, atomizers of Anais-Anais, wooden phalli, goat skulls, Christmas tree ornaments, Arawak celts (Cosentino, 1995:27).

The altars, in their assembled form are an act of placing of fragments rather than the gluing of fragments together. This suggests an illusory quality, an aesthetic that is 'improvisational and never finished'(p.29). This is because we never see the glue, thus the assemblage does not seem real. Voodoo altars evoke a narrative of an unfinished history, almost 'collapsing into myth' (p.27). The juxtaposition of the placed fragments portrays a contingent history, which has been both frozen and made penetrable by its placing. The placing of the fragments, one by one, next to and on top of each other, expresses not only a personal handling of each fragment but also evokes a personal narrative of an unfinished, illusory, expression of colonized history. De Kok meditates, when considering assemblage on how it is the handling of the fragment itself that precipitates the "gluing together": 'Gluing together may be the key function of art and cultural education in the time of social change, but it involves seeing and feeling the fragmented, mutilating shards, before the white scar can be celebrated' (De Kok, 1998: 62). This "seeing and feeling the fragmented" can also used to describe Penny Siopis's painting: *Piling Wreckage upon Wreckage* (National Gallery, Permanent Collection, Cape Town. 1989). Here a single black woman, stands semi-naked, poised on a large mound of overthrown objects. She

handles the capsized objects herself, in an action of overthrow and calm examination. The objects, indicative of the old white regime, are fragments and although these relics have been capsized, they also seem to cohere together like a woven tapestry. The title of the painting itself refers to Benjamin's *Ninth Thesis of History* and like Benjamin's Angel of History, Siopis's figure seems to be woven in and out of a landscape of history. Thus as there are placed fragments on the Voodoo altar as in both Benjamin and Sipois' landscapes of history, these array of interwoven fragments can be read altogether as shards from the past.

In *Lekker Faith* (2003) the influence of the Voodoo altar occurred in both the construction of the text and the design element. This text was composed as a collection of fragments from my own personal history, on top of which fragments from family folklore were placed one upon another as an expression of a genealogical altar. The design itself needed to reflect:

- 1) the aspects of an altar
- 2) an unfolding landscape that must seem to fold out forever
- 3) have an expression of Jewish tradition particularly those based around family gatherings
- 4) and most particularly it needed to portray the back garden of house in Johannesburg.

Therefore I chose to initiate a design concept that would be traverse in style; whose very structure would be an assortment of tables, of equal height, hinged together, and decorated with relics of a capsized history. The result seemed to portray a landscape of history that would sit at the very heart of the play.

## 2]- Landscapes of history:

These are landscapes which can project history as a place that is not only ruined but can also celebrate an expression of personal histories as places of myth and of memory. I located three sites that occur in history, literature and art, that interweave history with the personal, with memory and with myth into an expression of a physical landscape. They were significant stimuli for my writing and when interwoven together they formed what would be in essence the real fabric of the play.

These three sites are:

- i)- Kirsten Hastrup's and Alessandro Portelli's *Uchronia*.
- ii)- Pierre Nora's *lieux de memoire*.
- iii)- Salman Rushdie's *Indias of the mind*.

i)- *Uchronia*:

'Superman: Damn right. Where Superman is a black woman. Da place of da what ifs...The never- never- land of history, and it's right down that hole'  
(*Lekker Faith*, 2003:163).

Historians like the expert on Italian oral history, Alessandro Portelli and the expert on Viking myth and history, Kirsten Hastrup have both calculated that by recounting one's own version of the past it is possible to create one's own mythology and thus create an alternative space to the linearity of official history. They have called this space *Uchronia*. It means another version of time. *Uchronia* is primarily considered to be a science fictional concept, a space where the possibilities of other versions of history can be told.

*Uchronia* has been defined in science fiction criticism as:

That amazing theme in which the author imagines what would have happened if a certain historical event had not taken place;’ or as the representation of ‘an alternative present, a sort of parallel universe in which different unfolding of a historical event had radically altered the universe as we know it. The word itself is coined after “ Utopia”, replacing the Greek topos (place) with chronos (time): Utopia is a nowhere place, Uchronia a nowhen event (Portelli, 1991:99).

Portelli’s study of the characteristics of Italian oral history exposes personal narrative history as the refusal to identify and be satisfied with existing order. Hastrup suggests that there are spaces or gaps which exist within the Western linear perspective of history and these are made useful when they are expanded through imaginative story telling. She names this interaction between imagination and history as *Uchronia*. Here an alternative to “historical truth“ can be realized even though “historical truth” still permeates. ‘Uchronia is a place nowhere in time,’ says Hastrup, ‘if Utopia is a parallel universe, Uchronia is a separate history, a history so to speak out of time’ (1992, p.113).

*Uchronic* variables were first used in my production *The Hottentot Venus and the wonder of things unknown* (2002) where the setting of most of the play occurred in a fictional place in Paris in the nineteenth century called: “The Boulevard Of Chance”. Here the Boulevard became an *Uchronic* playground of possibilities, where the potential for fantasy was set in one historically imagined place. In *Fourplay* (2003), there was the *Uchronic* character of the nineteenth century French poet, Charles Baudelaire who is Norman Shakespeare’s obsession and his invisible friend.

In *Lekker Faith* (2003), the concept of *Uchronia* became an obvious, “real”, geographical place. The entrance to its geographical location is situated right at the end of the Meisah’s back garden. This science-fictional portal is uncovered when Bobbah Meisah, the Jewish matriarch of the Meisah family, finds a dinosaur’s bone at the edge of the garden. An attempt to dig up the dinosaur’s bone from the veldt indirectly opens up the lid to *Uchronia*’s version Pandora’s box. When I directed the play I chose to use a chorus of phantoms who I imagined came from *Uchronia*. They were not written as characters in the play but they still imbued the play with an evocative atmosphere of the past; and suggested an alternative history in which a Jewish community spoke and sang in a collage of cut cup songs from *Fiddler of the Roof*. This was a directorial vision and not a writer’s one; in fact the only real *Uchronic* character who is written into the play is Superman who emerges from the portal at the edge of the garden as a black woman, because in *Uchronia*, Superman is a black woman.

- ii) *lieux de memoire*:

‘Benjamin: Oh - There were stories: Mixed up stories. How she walked again even after the lightning struck because she visited that Goyisha Gypsy in Rosettenville / how she threw the miracle away / how it only got bad, got worse’ (*Lekker Faith*, 2003: 143 ).

*Lekker Faith* (2003) is flooded with an overabundance of memory arranged in strata. This stems from what I had read about what Pierre Nora had written about “lines of memory” or what he, this French historian, calls *lieux de memoire*.

Nora's *lieux de memoire* is a topographical site where lines of memory run along each other as strata that form one single composite. Here there is play between memory and history. The site is 'mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity, enveloped in a Mobius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile' (Hirsch, 1997:19).

Similarly, the collage of elements within the play liberated a personal history into a symbolic mode of public expression that stopped the personal from forgetting itself. 'Everything is historical, everything is worth remembering, and everything belongs to our memory' (Nora, 2001: 18). When I began to visualize how to direct the play, Nora's lines of memory became a way of directing multiple lines of action in time. The real characters who made up real time i.e. Benjamin Meisah, Molly Meisah and Pumla were all drawn to the energy of the fantastical portal at the edge of garden and walked in horizontal lines across the assembled tables towards it; similarly there were lines of movement from the chorus like phantoms of *Uchronia* who walked on the theatre floor, stirring and simmering their haunting in oppositional lines of movement. The theatrical space, the actual landscape created in design then cemented this communal energy by fusing the different strata into a "Mobius" tapestry of multi-actions; and thus became a living landscape of history.

iii) *Indias of the mind:*

'Benjamin: Instead I saw a dust of light - and sitting up I looked at all the rows upon rows of old books. I grabbed at the first one. Old leather smelling of time itself. Pages perfumed in olives and octopus ink. The pages were empty

until I turned the pages. The Book of The Most. An ancient Kabalistic text suddenly sparkling with color / every country / every size / every story' (*Lekker Faith*, 2003:144).

Rushdie's *Indias of the Mind* refers to the fictions that describe a place that contains the things we have lost; these things include the past, youth and the homeland longings of an exile. By nominating this place, Rushdie is able to re-imagine history from the point of view of the things that are lost and because they are lost, their history does not exist anymore and therefore their history can become their own.

In *Lekker Faith* (2003) there are things that are lost, stories that are incomplete and fragments that are everywhere. This concept somehow recomposes the multiple choices of framing in the play by suggesting that everything that is lost does re-occur because it is stored somewhere else. This can be somewhere magical like in the play's central device of "The Book of the Most", which is not unlike Rushdie's *India's of the Mind*.

Here characters and stories are anchored to place, a place where they can reclaim what they cannot remember by simply making it up.

For if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing we lost, that we will in short create fictions, not actual cities but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (Rushdie, 1991:10). Memory is the motor of this site of the mind; according to Saleem, Rushdie's narrator of his historical, fantastical epic *Midnight's Children* (1995) memory imagines as well as it remembers; 'it selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates,

minimizes, glorifies and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane person ever trusts anyone else's version more than his own' (p.211).

2]- Memory:

' Molly: She made that up to scare my little boy. Always at her feet, always dreaming with his mouth open... My only child with an over-active imagination. Remember how you thought Bobbah turned into a bird and flew away' (*Lekker Faith* , 2003:160).

Memory is pivotal as a tool for locating, retrieving and reassembling and storing fragments in the terrain of telling history. *The Race of the Ark Tattoo* (1997), W. David Hancock's memory play is set in an American flea market and 'objects chosen by the audience trigger elaborate histories from the lives of an adoptive son and his foster father' (Fuchs, 1999: 84). This trigger of recalling the personal anecdote is made both random and fantastical, thus clearly in keeping with Hancock's portrayal of 'the false memories of real things and, true memories of false histories' (p.87).

In Hancock's play there is also the construction of a "Theatre of Memory". It is a place that projects the very real-unreal: firstly as an authentic flea market, which is presented in front of the audience; and at the same time projects the workings of memory as a repository for fragmentary recall. The latter is displayed by the performer himself who has to improvise his recall and lecture on the history of the object when it has been randomly pulled out of the junk by the audience: 'Ghosts don't flirt with words, you know. They make love by exchanging memories' (Hancock , 1999:62).

Memory recollects fragments from the past in order to construct narrative. But it treads an ambiguous line between reconstructing a truth and one that can supersede the truth. The germination of *Lekker Faith* (2003) began with memory. Memories of the stories I had heard as a child. As I began to write them down I experienced a rush, almost like an onslaught of memories, of people and places and smells. And as I began to structure the text I became aware how my own memory was not only being used as a tool to retrieve fragments from my past but could be used as a creative instrument in order to refocus the facts that I did not remember and thus I was able to play with / in history.

In the online epilogue to *The Work of Memory*, Steven T Ostovich describes Walter Benjamin's 'chaos of memory as dangerous memory... There is a resistance to narrative ordering and control associated with [this] memory' (2002). And for Benjamin, 'These memories are disturbing in a manner similar to dreams. Like dreams, these memories involve crossing a threshold and stepping outside the closed world of normalcy.' (ibid).

Likewise characters in *Lekker Faith* like Bobbah Meisah and Benjamin Meisah, are intent on remembering, and do so, thus pronouncing large tracts from the past. But they are also resistant to an order of logic in the telling of their stories. Rather, their long, rambling, almost illogical narratives suggest a fantastical world of nonsense and dreams. It was no coincidence that *Bobbahmeisah* is an expression that means "nonsense" in the Yiddish language.

*Lekker Faith* is a memory play not only because memory can suitably play with/in history, but also it serves as repository for the fragments that it

has retrieved. As I continued my investigation into memory, particularly remembering traumatic incidents from various aftermaths, I was able to conclude it is not only memory that disregards logic when it remembers but that the remembrance of trauma makes it especially so.

#### 4] - Trauma and testimony:

The shock of trauma brings about 'malfunction' (Laub, 1992: 57). Trauma disregards logic. The testimony of trauma in the aftermath will not resemble what occurred before. 'It is a record that has yet to be made' (p.57).

During a performance of Peter Hayes' one man show *The Fence* (The Playroom, Cape Town, 2002), I noticed several techniques used that embraced the collecting and re-assembling of the fragments of an aftermath, which also exposed the testimony of the illogical.

Matthew Shepard was a 21 year old, gay student, who was violently murdered, as a victim of a hate crime in Laramie, a small mid Western town in Wyoming, America in 1998. Hayes' play and performance of *The Fence* (2002), presents itself as a detective hunt with clues, shards and fragments that surround Matthew's death; and these fragments appear in the form of testimonies made by Matthew's parents, Dennis and Judy Shepard, his various friends and his killers, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, alike.

Hayes's testimonies hurtle back, to and fro, not escalating towards a logical conclusion but towards three other apexes: Matthew Shepard's death, the arrest of Shepard's killers and Hayes's own confessional rush: of Hayes himself being gay, white, male in South Africa today and overcoming stereotypes. What frames this assemblage of testimony in the aftermath of Shepard's death is not logic; for this has been discarded in the trauma of the

aftermath, but instead Hayes's own personal testimonies frame the storytelling. It is a kind of stepping out of frame, like an autobiographical device and it helps to frame the fragments of the aftermath of Matthew Shepherd's death. In *The Fence*, (2003) the storyteller uses memory, in terms of the way he re-enacts the testimonies as memories of each character. Hayes also uses it as a personal motor as he reflects upon his own detective hunt in the aftermath of Matthew Shepard. Hayes, by personally re-enacting the testimonies of witnesses, friends and killers, becomes another signifier of the collection of fragment. He is the storyteller who unpacks his collection of characters. Each character has a testimony, and each testimony is imbued with the fragments of traumatic memory.

Unlike Hayes, I was intent in *Lekker Faith* on removing myself from the autobiographical framework. I had already written my semi-autobiographical play, *Southern Born* (Cape Town, Arena Theatre/Artscape, 1999). My own family had said how they have been traumatized in the aftermath of this, my first public outing as a playwright. So when I began to write my second, Jewish, genealogical play I chose to take one step further away from the family who had characterized my own family in *Southern Born* (1999), the Blackmans, and in their place I drew a picture of the Blackman's probable neighbors, the Meisahs. Thus the Meisahs became a distortion of not only my own family but of my fictional family as well. In *Lekker Faith* (2003), the Meisahs were traumatized by a number of nonsensical and incredible events in their own history which began when the matriarch of the family, Bobbah Meisah was "struck by lightning while having a bath". This was the single fragment of truth that I took from my own real life. The genesis of the play was

this one fragment, this one phrase, that I had heard so often repeated as a child by my elders. The sentence: "She was struck by lightning while having a bath" was a fragment from my crippled grandmother's history. She passed away when I was very young and the reasons given for her paralysis became more vague and ambiguous, as I grew older. I have approached this fragment from my own family history in the manner in which a dissident historian might inspect an official fragment from history: as a disputed trope, marked with the unreliability of memory and the distortion of the past. When I began to write the text I set out this original phrase as a beginning trunk on a family tree that would be conjoined to other main branches of other fragments stemming from my family's folklore. This family tree was to be structured like a genealogical voodoo altar and deviating from its branches of fragments were to be smaller, capillary like branches fertilized with my own imagination, that articulated a fictional narrative. Thus the final performed text would become less of a semi-auto-biographical tale and more of a genealogical romp through the landscape of family myth, personal history and Jewish fantasy. However tragically my own "real" life then caught up with me. While completing the text of *Lekker Faith* (2003) I became aware that my own father had less than a year to live. I could not escape the unbearable trauma that surrounds terminal illness. By the time I reached the third act, I had no other choice but to enter into a realm of realism and write about a night nurse called Pumla who sits in a landscape of history, writing to herself about her dying patient, an elderly Jewish man. His son, Benjamin Meisah, who does nothing all day but spin incredible yarns about his grandmother who turns into bird and a knight who dies on a heroic crusade,

spies on her. Thus he spins his yarns while he watches his father's night nurse write the only real truth in my fantastical story:.

'Pumla: When I arrived he was awake. The patient was awake when I arrived and reading but he said had a wonderful day. He drank his orange juice and said he had a wonderful day' (Lekker Faith,2003: 147).

But of course none of this was true. Everything that I was that experiencing as real life trauma I was re-writing in the realm of fiction. Returning to the trauma in order to recall and reassemble can be metaphorically as authentic as the trauma itself, thus as good as truth. Consider the testimonies of the Holocaust. Here Dori Laub refers to one particular survivor's testimony of Auschwitz who recalls how: 'we saw four chimneys going up in flames, exploding. The flames shot into the sky, people were running. It was unbelievable' (1992, p.59). Later historians found this testimony to be inaccurate: 'The number of chimneys was misrepresented' (p.59). Laub concludes that the woman was not entirely testifying the facts but to the reality of the "unimaginable" - to the breakage of framework. That was 'historical truth' (p.60).

The drowning of the 'intellectual defences' is a device of both cause and effect; used by Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo as a way of assembling the fragments of her Holocaust experiences to form part of a larger lyrical narrative. (Langer, 1995:14). Delbo's lyrical narrative makes up her trilogy of Holocaust anthology: *Auschwitz and After*, (*Auschwitz et après*, 1995 ) which is a reflection of the composite of fragment, a myriad of memory and reflection. The text in the anthology is strung together by an assemblage of memory, anecdote, storytelling and poetry. Delbo discards any notion of

logical framing or “intellectual defences” and instead relies on metaphor and fragment of memory itself to form her narrative. Delbo’s writing helped me to understand how the shape of trauma can be the form of the author’s narrative. This understanding allowed me to concur that, ‘When we listen now to a life story, the manner of its telling seems to us as important to what is told’ (Samuel,Thompson, 1990:2).

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### CHAPTER THREE: Hinging the exegesis

Judaism has a distinguishing feature its unreasonable difficulty. It is un-appeasably hard. You must remember. You must remember everything. You must write down what you remember. You must read what you have written every year. Not once a year but a whole week. And even worse you must understand. And even worse you must elaborate on that understanding (Kushner, 96: 125).

My central aim in writing the text of *Lekker Faith* (2003) was to prove that playing with/in history is possible when the re-assembly of fragments is affiliated to the imagination. I continued to tackle this proposition, applying it throughout the development of the play from text into performance. The play's title is an oxymoron and a pun, implying faith and the lack of it. This suggests a condition of the aftermath; wherein faith is constantly being challenged whilst at the same time being re-asserted in an attempt to re-assemble what is fragmented. The play text is a rich composite of the myriad routes that I have traveled throughout the two years of this investigation. It is in part a document that reflects my absorption of the research I have done; it also an assessment of how I was able to play with/in my own family's history, by portraying both memory and myth made by memory. The text of *Lekker Faith* (2003) is in fact an assembled form of the fragments: of theory, of criticism, of visual artists; a collusion of critique and collaboration made possible by Brecht, Benjamin, Rushdie, Nora, Hancock, Cragg, and Bester and others who are all influences now sitting within the topography of the text in assembled layers. My own post-production reflection and assessment of

the play and its process has been facilitated through the assessment of another playwright's work. After an assessment of my own post production reflection of *Lekker Faith* (2003) I have found relief and significance in drawing upon several similarities in our common understanding of the relationship between history and the dramatic playing of history.

Tony Kushner, the Pulitzer award-winning playwright, writes on themes that mostly encompass a large overview of American history, homosexuality and Judaism. In his play, *Angels in America* (1992) the imaginative construct of a writer is utilized in order to both unsettle and re-enter the terrain of history. Here history is treated as a springboard for the dramatic. The most obvious example of this is through the fictionalized characterization of Roy Cohn. Cohn (1927-1986) served as counsel to Joseph McCarthy during the infamous McCarthy witch hunts of American communists during the 1950s. He also served as an assistant to the United States Attorney General and was an important power broker of conservative Republican America (queer theory: 2003).

But in Kushner's play, Cohn's place in history is reworked fictionally. Kushner himself explains that Cohn is to be a 'work of dramatic fiction; his words are my invention and liberties taken'(Kushner, 1992: 5). Kushner has reworked Cohn's history in order to tell new truths in the spaces that Cohn himself had silenced, in particular Cohn's aversion of his own suppressed homosexuality, which would remain a secret until after his eventual death from HIV /AIDS in 1986. Kushner injects Cohn's eventual death scene in the play with the entrance of the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, who in a remarkable fusion of fantasy and history arrives as a form of poetic justice. Cohn played

an instrumental role in convicting and executing both Ethel Rosenberg and her husband Julius, as spies for Communist Russia. When Cohn tells Rosenberg how immortal he is...saying, 'I have forced my way into history'; it is Rosenberg who wryly responds how 'history is about to crack wide open. Millennium approaches' (p.92). It is not really retribution that cracks open history, although Kushner hints at it certainly helping with the fission. The play offers no driving reason for history's cracks, rather the fractures exist in Kushner's play everywhere; most symbolically splintered as a luminous place whereby both real and non-real characters can travel through time, back and forth, from places that are real to places that are not. It is the character of Harper, who does this first in the play's world. She is a lonely, Mormon, wife who speaks to an imaginary travel agent called Mr. Lie, with whom she travels to imaginary lands in a valium-induced ecstasy. It is Harper who realizes that it is the imaginative will, which enables the act of assembling broken history; she does so by asking and then answering herself: 'Imagination cannot create anything new, can it? It can only recycle bits and pieces from the world and re-assembles them into visions' (p.32).

Kushner's moments of written magic and the magic of theatrically representing the visions of magic help to both mend and tread the fragmented terrain of history. In *Lekker Faith* (2003) there is a nonsensical repetitive rhyme, which describes the genealogy of the nonsensical Jewish family. It is recited at the beginning and between scenes. It helps the play transcend time and place and interweave the fragments of the writing together:

And Yittie Yenta mothered Sarah and Sarah mothered Edith and Faith and Israel who died at birth and Edith married Meyer. And Edith and Meyer went to live in Chicago and had a daughter Polly and Faith married Sam Meisah and Sam Meisah had two sisters Esther and Aviva and Faith and Sam Meisah had one son and one girl, Miriam and Joe (*Lekker Faith*, 2003:126).

In directing the play I chose to use a chorus of phantoms, they would recite this refrain while scenes in the play changed; thus helping to thread the larger fragments in the play together. This choral group were a like a bricolage of nostalgia, ghosts from the pasts, representing both memory and the fantastical.

*Lekker Faith* (2003) is a memory play, located in a terrain of fantastical history, whereas *Angels of America* (1992) is a history play, located in a terrain of fantasy. Kushner has in his play created a vast fantastical landscape wherein history is both revealed and re-revealed. And in the end it is to the fantastical that the play surrenders. In the very last moment of the play, Steven Spielberg, Walter Benjamin and the playwright intersect through the visions of Prior Walter (who like Harper is a character who is able to travel through the real and the non real.) In his final vision, whilst dying from AIDS, Prior succumbs to salvation when he sees an angel descending and he says: *Very Steven Spielberg*' (p.92). This angel has been signaling its descent through the fractures of the dramatic narrative. Both its warning and arrival hint at Benjamin's angel, inspired by Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, (1920) suspended in the apocalyptic landscape of history. Kushner never lets on nor says that it is Benjamin's angel rather its hovering presence in the text is ambiguous. There are no angels in *Lekker Faith*. (2003) The play has

merely been inspired by the allegorical landscape belonging to Benjamin's Angel of History. The closest thing the play has to angels are Superman and Rabbi Yokul Meisah. Both these characters are imaginary, ghosts, reworked *Uchronic* icons that only Benjamin Meisah can see. As in Kushner's play, they have a presence that suggests the transcendence of reality, a position that helps to translate the play as an expression of a historical aftermath that is illuminated by fiction.

Benjamin: Last night I flew there with Superman. I flew there on his big arms. He took me to the New York Public Library. Oh you should see the books, mother. Books and rooms filled with gold ceilings and blue clouds and I sat at seat seventy one - e and I wrote. Guess who sat next to me, Rabbi Yokul Meisah himself! He wanted to show me Ground Zero but Supey wouldn't let him. Said I would fall into the zero and become nothing (*Lekker Faith*, 2003:154,155).

At the end of play, Benjamin falls into the hole at the edge of the garden. And as he falls he shouts out: 'Rabbi Yokul Meisah!' (p.171). Suggesting, perhaps, that Rabbi Yokul Meisah is there to greet Benjamin, at the gates of *Uchronia*. When I directed the play, I chose to make this visually clear. I had one of the chorus-phantoms from *Uchronia* play the rabbi who emerges from the portal to greet Benjamin Meisah before they disappear down the hole together. This is a direct allusion to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, (1865) in which Alice, chasing after the White Rabbit, falls down a hole into Wonderland. I am therefore suggesting that Benjamin does arrive in *Uchronia*. There he becomes Ecclesiastes Junk, who holds up a sign of the Hebrew letter, Aleph. He is the first character the

audience meets outside the theatre and it is Ecclesiastes whom reveals to them "The Book of the Most".

'Ecclesiastes: Welcome to the tomes and texts department. Please no sneezing you might disturb the dust. Here is one of our more of our prized exhibits. Stored. Secret. Please be careful. This is - The Book of the Most' (p.144). This book that Ecclesiastes reveals is the book in which all the play's history is written. It is also the book that the audience enter in and through. Thus I have framed the play in a loop of time, when Benjamin Meisah arrives in *Uchronia*, he enters the play's alternative history and returns with it as narrative; for it to become the play's own history.

Kushner's play begins with a rabbi who considers several binary contemplations of reality. This is Rabbi Chemelwitz who delivers a funeral oratory. In it he announces a debate between truth and non-truth; suggesting how this philosophical contemplation can occur when one's most personal history, at the time of death, is offered up for inspection. This rabbi says at the funeral of Sara Ironson, that she was 'not a person but a whole kind of person... growing up in a melting pot where nothing melted and he [the rabbi] does not know her and yet he knows her' (1992, p.10).

The rabbi's rhythmic meditation is like a seasoned yet clichéd sing song atypical of characteristic Jewish speech. Kushner fills these stereotypical characteristics with unease by allowing the unconscious to unfold; but through a deliberate construction of his terrain, he explains in his stage-notes how the actor playing Rabbi Chemelwitz must also play Hannah, the Mormon matriarch (p.4). Thus Kushner delivers tradition and stereotype on the one hand, then turns it on its head with the other. Kushner it seems

has applied a version of Hayden White's theory of "constructive imagination" to his Judaism. White who says that "constructive imagination" functions 'when it tells us that even though we cannot perceive both sides of a tabletop simultaneously, we can be certain it has two sides if it has one, because the very concept of one side entails at least one other' (2001, p.223). Thus by requesting that a woman portrays Rabbi Chemelwitz, an orthodox rabbi, Kushner might want us to question the apparent fundamental truths about his own cultural identity and history. He offers us this meditation in a landscape where cracks appear, angels descend, and characters travel across time and place and Hebrew letters suddenly spring forth with fire and glory: 'The book opens; there is a large Aleph inscribed on its pages, which bursts into flames, immediately the book slams shut and disappears instantly under the floor as the lights become normal again' (Kushner, 1992: p.99).

All these references to *Angels in America* (1992) matter because they have inspired me to make a careful study of my own work, with regards to *Lekker Faith* (2003) as well as my own cultural identity and history. And through this I have realized that *Lekker Faith* (2003) is a philosophical conjecture about the possibilities of playing within history; but it is also about a theatrical landscape influenced by the apocalyptic visions of Walter Benjamin and his Angel of History. And it is about language and storytelling devices that reveal concatenations of truths and non-truths; it is about the universal myths that are inscribed in personal histories; it is about displaying the magic of words; it is about fragments and how when re-assembled they became historical narratives, that can be illuminated by an interplay between fact and fiction.

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