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1. “I’m Just a Vessel”: Sex and the Sacred in South African Cape Flats Theatre

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Abstract

This chapter explores the relationship between religion and sexuality in Cape Town through the theatre productions of Marc Lottering. Lottering, who identifies as gay, is well known for his stand-up comedy routines and character skits and most recently his musicals, based on the development of one his most popular characters, Aunty Merle. In this chapter I use a sacred-prismatic lens to analyse the productions, “Aunty Merle the Musical” (2019) and its sequels, “Aunty Merle, It’s a Girl” (2019) and “Aunty Merle, Things Get Real” (2022). Aunty Merle’s popular catchphrase, “I’m just a vessel”, is often used by Lottering for comedic effect to reference the God-inspired wisdom the character imparts. I explore how Lottering and Aunty Merle become a vessel for (re)constructing the narrative of queerness in Cape Town, as Lottering uses his coloured, Pentecostal upbringing as well as his gay sexuality as mechanisms to inspire the characters in his plays and to address issues of race, class, sexuality and religion.

Introduction

Aunty Merle appears on stage wearing her high heels, stockings and a cardigan thrown intentionally over her shoulders. She is the most familiar alter ego and female persona of South African comedian, Marc Lottering, whose signature silver-streaked afro can be seen peeking out from under Aunty Merle’s colourful *doek* (headscarf). Lottering emerged as a stand-up comedian in 1997, with his first show titled *After the Beep* which he performed for a small audience in Cape Town, South Africa, and which featured early versions of skit characters that have become familiar favourites in his routines. These characters are all inspired by his upbringing in coloured communities on the Cape Flats – low-lying areas on the outskirts of Cape Town occupied predominantly by coloured people who were forcefully removed from city and town centres under the apartheid government's segregationist policies. ‘Coloured’ is the term used in South Africa to refer to people who are broadly mixed race. It is a cultural group formed of generations of forceful and consensual relations amongst indigenous people, white colonisers, and slaves brought to the Cape from places like Madagascar, Indonesia, and Malaysia, and which have formed a culture made up of its mixed history and cemented in some

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ways as a distinctive racial category as a classification under apartheid. Lottering's other characters include Colleen, the frustrated 'permanent casual' cashier who has been working at the same till for the last 6 years; Pastor Brandon, a Pentecostal pastor obsessed with money; and Smiley (or more accurately pronounced Shmiley), the *gaatjie*[2] (taxi guard) who calls for passengers and collects the taxi fare. Lottering's most well-known character however is undoubtedly Aunty Merle, inspired by his mother and aunts (Haupt 1998). Her popularity has grown in recent years because, unlike Lottering's other characters who have only featured in short skits in the comedian's one-man comedy shows, he has fleshed out the world and character of Aunty Merle in three made for theatre musicals namely, *Aunty Merle The Musical* (2018), *Aunty Merle It's a Girl* (2019), and *Aunty Merle: Things Get Real* (2022). It is these musicals which are the focus of this chapter in which I explore the mediums of musical theatre and comedy as vehicles for creative (re)presentations of colouredness and queerness in Cape Town.

I start by providing an overview of what we might consider Cape Flats theatre and discuss the ways that commentators have either dismissed it for its nostalgic sentiment and stereotypical reflection of colouredness or taken it more seriously as a site for identity meaning making. I locate this debate in relation to broader understandings of theatre as social commentary and political satire, specifically in South Africa. To help me analyse the Aunty Merle musicals, I go on to explore a theoretical amalgamation of a 'sacred' and a 'prismatic' lens, which borrows from and connects the work of religious and queer performance scholars. Using this lens I conceptualise the musicals as a sacred site where religious meaning making around gender and sexuality can be reflected but also refracted, rejected, resisted, defied and changed. I then explore examples of this in the plot, music and characters of the Aunty Merle musicals. In this chapter I demonstrate how Lottering turns the theatre into a space of charismatic worship and preaching by using forms of comedy, drag, and music. I conclude by suggesting that by reading the Aunty Merle musicals, and perhaps Cape Flats theatre and performance art more generally, as potential sacred site, I go beyond seeing it simply as a space of sentiment, stereotype or even identity making. Instead, I propose that these sites may be seen as alternative sacred spaces for religious meaning making, worship, lamentation, and transformation.

Cape Flats Theatre

"Cape Flats theatre" (Jaffer 2015) is a unique contribution to South African theatre, produced by coloured artists and produced primarily for coloured audiences from Cape Town where on last record in 2011, coloured people made up 42% of the city's population (StatsSA 2011). 'Coloured' is a uniquely slippery racial term which always demands clarification in its use.

[2] Italicised words in this chapter are generally Afrikaans or Afrikaaps or Kaaps words.

Apart from its historical emergence as a race category which I briefly described in the introduction, it is an identification that is deeply contested, especially since the 1980s with the rise of black consciousness and calls for black unity against white oppression. Therefore, some continue to reject coloured as a self-identifying term, characterising it only as a divisive apartheid-imposed race category. However, scholars like Zimitri Erasmus have also revealed that coloured was already in use by slaves in the late 19th century as a self-identifying category and argue that like all race categories, "coloured identities are not simply Apartheid [sic] labels imposed by whites. They are made and re-made by coloured people themselves in their attempts to give meaning to their everyday lives" (Erasmus 2001, 16). One of the many ways that colouredness is made and re-made is through creative cultural forms in music (Holtzman 2017), language (Samy Alim et al. 2021), and theatre (Jaffer 2015). Coloured people are of course a multiplicity and communities can be found in various parts of South Africa where language, music, art and food which people relate to cultural expressions of colouredness would differ from what might be associated with Cape Town colouredness. To be cognisant of these multiplicities and distinctions I therefore refer to Cape Flats theatre rather than more generally as coloured theatre in this chapter.

The most familiar examples of Cape Flats theatre have been those written and produced by Taliep Petersen and David Kramer such as *District Six the Musical* (1987), *Kat and the Kings* (1996), and *Ghoema* (2006). These plays were popular with local audiences and also enjoyed successful runs internationally. These productions all largely centred around District Six, a significant site of forced removals in Cape Town which displaced coloured people from the inner-city neighbourhood to the low lying surrounding areas of the city known as the Cape Flats. These plays have never really been considered protest theatre in the ways that for example, *Sarafina!*, or *You Strike a Woman, You Strike a Rock / Wathint' Abafazi, Wathint' Imbokotho: A Play* have been. These protest plays were significant during apartheid when surveillance and censorship of print and visual media was characteristic of the authoritarian Afrikaner nationalist government (see Wakashe 1986; Peterson 1990; Davis and Fuchs 1996). The productions by Petersen and Kramer, as well as Lottering's debut, came at a time when this strict regulation was being replaced by a democratic system accompanied by its veneration (at least on the surface) of free speech, diversity, and extensive human rights protections (Seirlis 2011). The comedy, nostalgia, and sentimentality of this Cape Flats theatre has been primarily seen as escapist and critiqued for uncritically perpetuating racial stereotypes about coloured people in service of creating an ethnic/mythical homeland (District Six).[3] Mike van Graan (2006, 279) for example characterises it as a "theatre of nostalgia: good as history

[3] See for example Zoe Wicomb's critique of District Six the Musical as engaged with by Jaffer 1998.

lessons, gentle reminders of what things used to be like, but lacking the edge that the immediacy of the apartheid environment would have provoked."

Kay Jaffer (2015) however, provides a more sympathetic and nuanced analysis and sees musicals like *District Six* as examples of attempts "to subvert some of the 'stereotypes' of apartheid labels…[and to] redefine notions of cultural [coloured] identity in South Africa – not a negative rejection of identity with the black majority, but a positive extension of what it means to be a new South African; as new kinds of subjects, with new places from which to speak." Lottering's musicals could be read, I argue, in this more sympathetic light. The Aunty Merle musicals hark back in many ways to the District Six centred Cape Flats theatre. It makes use of a similar mixture of music, comedy, and sentiment to create stories filled with characters and contexts that seem familiar to coloured people in Cape Town. In numerous publicity interviews Lottering has maintained unapologetically that his material is inspired by his upbringing and aimed at coloured audiences – an "extended tribute to the Cape Flats" as one journalist describes it (Bowler 2019). The work of openly gay coloured comedians, such as Lottering, within the context of Cape Flats theatre is significant as an extension of the continued rainbow nation-building which has been placed at the forefront of the South African post-apartheid agenda.

After the official end to the apartheid regime and the 1994 democratic elections, South Africa was described as a "rainbow nation", by the late Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It is a symbolic identity which referenced the hope that 'non-racial' nation building would take place under democratic rule. The rainbow references both the peaceful embrace of racial diversity in the country as well as, in some instances, the celebration of sexual diversity and protections around these freedoms in a post-apartheid South Africa. Van Graan (2006) argues that contemporary post-apartheid South Africa provides fertile soil for developing more complex theatre stories and characters within this rainbow project. This is partly because apartheid is no longer the ubiquitous monster framing theatre productions and antagonists and protagonists can no longer be easily painted in broad white and black strokes. Within this context comedians have thrived on their relatively newfound freedom allowing them to critique politicians and the unique and problematic dynamics of race, gender and class in South Africa (Seirlis 2011). Increasingly, issues of gender and sexuality – and its intersections with race – have appeared as significant issues for artists and scholars of theatre alike (Sizemore-Barber 2020). While these intersections are not new, the entanglements between queer rights and race have become increasingly urgent matters to address as displays of queer rights such as Pride marches in South Africa continue to be challenged for its exclusion of black bodies (see Sizemore-Barber 2020, 2; Camminga and Matebeni 2020). Yet, apart from a handful of commentaries on drag in Cape Town (Prince 2020) and Miss Gay Western Cape (Matthyse 2020), a broader analysis of Cape Flats theatre and sexuality and its ability to create a multiplicity of characters, stories and meanings has not yet been explored in scholarship. I offer this chapter on Lottering's works as an initial contribution to such a project.

A Sacred-Prismatic Lens

In analysing Lottering's work, I want to further Jaffer's position which argues for the potential of Cape Flats theatre as a site for redefining notions of cultural [coloured] identity in South Africa. In my analysis of Aunty Merle as Cape Flats theatre, I also look at its potential for redefining coloured non normative gender and queer identities. I do so by applying a sacred-prismatic lens which amalgamates the sacred lens of David Chidester (2012) as he foregrounds the 'wild' (dynamic, hybrid and unruly) manifestation of religion in post-apartheid South Africa and the prismatic lens April Sizemore-Barber (2020) uses to explore post-apartheid performance art.

The lens objects to claims that plays such as Lottering's are simply flat representations of coloured stereotypes or that it engenders a particular ethnonationalist colouredness which reinforces it as a category completely separable and antagonistic to blackness (see Erasmus and Pieterse 1999, 175-176; Jodamus 2002, 608). Indeed, the potential of these messages are there, and some audiences interested in promoting coloured nationalism may be tempted to claim it as such. However, I argue, that the Aunty Merle musicals can also be read as creative sites for queer religious and cultural meaning making.

Considering the 'sacred', according to Chidester (2012, 3), it "[focuses] not on traditional continuity but on wild, surprising creativity." Chidester (2012, ix) treats religion as "an open set of resources and strategies for negotiating a human identity, which is poised between the more than human and the less than human, in the struggles to work out the terms and conditions for living in a human place oriented in sacred space and time". In many ways, Cape Flats theatre has functioned in this way, moving religion from the space of the churches and the mosques to the stage. The lens of the sacred I find is useful in looking at performance art and specifically the theatre as a space of ritual, religious meaning making, lamentation, forgiveness and celebration. It is not new to think of theatre and performance in ritualistic or sacred ways of course, especially in relation to understanding protest theatre during apartheid South Africa. Van Graan (2006, 278-279) proposes understanding protest theatre through a lens of religion by comparing it to church in South Africa:

> For the mainly white, liberal audiences of the 1970s and 1980s, going to the Space Theatre, the Market Theatre and the Baxter Theatre[4] was like going to church. Watching protest theatre was like going to confession for their collective sin as beneficiaries of apartheid, and while it was painful to watch, the actors were essentially performing rituals

[4] Theatres in Johannesburg and Cape Town which operated as fringe, anti-racist or at the very least non-racist, theatres during apartheid.

> that were uplifting for the soul of the audience. They then left the theatre cleansed for having been spat at, and if they sat close enough, being spat on. “Viva! Viva! Go and sin no more.

While van Graan uses religious simile to argue that protest theatre served as an ‘opium for the masses’ for mainly white audiences during apartheid, a similar lens can be used to analyse Cape Flats theatre but in a more productive sense. While a “theatre of nostalgia” which characterises the Cape Flats theatre of Petersen and Kramer, as well as Lottering’s musicals, is dismissed by van Graan and others such as Zoë Wicomb (Jaffer 2015), they could also be read as a productive site for ritual and myth making. Through the lens of the sacred, “District Six, [is] celebrated in art and literature, in music and drama, in myth and memory as a site of racial and religious harmony, a sacred space that stood as a counter-site to the apartheid myth of separation”(Chidester 2000, 15). Cape Flats theatre thus becomes a central part of memoralising this sacred wound which still stands gaping open today. We can therefore think of Cape Flats theatre in particular as a sacred place, as it provides a vessel of resources and strategies through which cultural and religious negotiation, struggle and meaning making is held, created, and reimagined – a queer sacred space if you will.

This queerness suggest the prismatic part of the lens, one borrowed from Sizemore-Barber’s analysis of post-apartheid performance art. She writes, “the prism provides an animated, multidimensional way to think through the embodied, deconstructive work performances do. Where a prism deconstructs light into its many-hued parts, creating a fattened image of a rainbow (nation), a prismatic performance reflects and refracts the emotional investments projected onto it by varied audiences...”(Sizemore-Barber 2020, 8). In this sense Lottering’s plays are not simply read in my analysis as representations or even critiques of colouredness, queerness, and religion, but they are read through their potential to refract and reimagine these within the context of Cape Flats theatre.

It is perhaps because of the ability of performance to refract multiple and sometimes contradictory ideas with the audience that Lottering has not been accused of blasphemy or of being un-Christian, un-African or even un-Coloured. This is despite the obvious invocation of *Pinkster* (Pentecostal) Christianity and forms of Muslim aesthetics reminiscent of those on the Cape Flats which he refracts onto audiences from these same backgrounds. This perhaps again also speaks to the productiveness of the theatre of nostalgia. These less overtly political and more seemingly frivolous forms of theatre entertainment do not seem to threaten and are perhaps just obtuse enough to be dismissed as light-hearted entertainment. No doubt, Lottering’s profile as a beloved and successful artist who represents the Cape Flats, perhaps supersedes any objections conservative audiences might hold against him. If blasphemy is about taking offence (Meyer, Kruse, and Korte 2018) – then perhaps, as I explore in this chapter, it is Lottering’s humour and representation of nostalgic Cape Flats theatre which prevents the offence from being taken. The accusations of blasphemy may also not be as common in this context because the relationship between the sacred and profane is not

understood by his audiences to be as dichotomous as it is in modern North American and Western European contexts. In fact, in many ways Lottering provides a critique of this binary by weaving religious themes, language and music onto the stage, again invoking some of the feelings that his Pinkster and broader coloured audiences may find familiar and comforting. This also affirms the Pinkster belief, so evident in post-apartheid anti-queer rhetoric, that religion should in fact inform everyday life and provide public moral guidance. In these ways Lottering perhaps sidesteps accusations of blasphemy, while using the stage as a productive site from which to (re)construct ideas about sexuality, in ways conventional religious platforms are unable to do.

The Aunty Merle Musicals

Unlike earlier Cape Flats theatre musicals which focused mostly on race and apartheid segregation laws, Lottering's plays feature more contemporary explorations of queer sexuality, crime, and financial pressures impacted by Covid and a failing post-apartheid government which feature alongside the inescapable and enduring nature of racial dynamics to shape coloured experiences.

In *Aunty Merle The Musical* the main storyline revolves around Aunty Merle's daughter Abigail who becomes engaged to be married to Alan White whose surname directly reflects his race and provides a vehicle through which to generate easy laughs as Aunty Merle welcomes him as the first 'White' in the family. Denver, Abigail's ex-boyfriend, a young coloured smooth talker, serves as the main antagonist, and tries to blackmail Abigail threatening to tell her family about an abortion she had when she was younger if she marries Alan. Sub-plots feature tension between Lydia (Merle's maid) and her daughter Nambitha who returns from the United Kingdom, angry that her mother continues to struggle as a maid in a post-apartheid South Africa. Towards the conclusion of the play, Carl, Merle's son, comes out as gay and is quickly (within eight short lines of dialogue) accepted by Merle and her husband, Dennis. In the sequel, *Aunty Merle It's a Girl*, the play revolves largely around Carl and Siya's adoption of a baby girl. In a series of mistaken assumptions throughout the play Aunty Merle believes that it is Abigail and Alan (now married) who will be the ones announcing a new arrival in the family. The antagonist comes again in a character almost identical to Denver, this time named Glen who is in fact Siya's mother's (Mandisa Gumede) young lover. Glen is clearly opposed to Carl and Siya's relationship and tries to interfere by revealing Carl's history of petty theft crime to the adoption agency. As a sub-plot, we see Alan's parents (Lydia and David), struggling through a separation while Merle and her husband Dennis act as forms of support and wisdom, which eventually leads to their reunion. The final play, *Aunty Merle, Things Get Real,* centres on Dennis and Merle's relationship, as Dennis reveals that his plumbing business is in financial ruin as a result of the pressures of the Covid pandemic. The only way out is to sell their house in Belgravia Road in a Cape Flats suburb of Athlone, an address that has become synonymous with Aunty Merle over the course of Lottering's career. As a sub-plot, Soraya (Merle's neighbour who features prominently as a humorous side character in all three

musicals) is trying to help her nephew Zane who is dealing with the aftermath of his mother's drug addiction and who resorts to stealing to clear her debt with dangerous loan sharks.

Figure 1.1: Lottering performing as Aunty Merle (Picture: MARK WESSELS/Baxter Theatre Centre).

The ways in which the musicals address issues surrounding race, gender, sexuality, economics, drugs and crime could, perhaps rightly, be critiqued for providing superficial quick fixes to social issues which are in fact far more complex in reality. For example, Nambitha's anger at the injustice of her mother continuing to work for a wealthier coloured family in the failed dream of a new South Africa is concluded in the musical with Nambitha apologising for her outbursts of anger claiming, "I know! I'm such a Drama Queen!" The only questions Dennis and Merle ask of Carl before accepting his sexuality is, "And until when will this be my boy?" (Dennis) and "My Son are you sure? You [sic] so young…", before they embrace and ask about prospective boyfriends. Meanwhile the financial difficulties Dennis and Merle face in the third play are easily solved when the potential new buyers of their home, Benny and Ayanda, realise Dennis had helped Benny when he was in university by giving him his car and simply return their home to them. However, Lottering and the production team seem to acknowledge this as part of the nature of the musical. For example, Aunty Merle exclaims in the first play, "Ag you know, musicals. Quick resolutions" and, after the realtor who has a fling with Zane in the third musical mentions she is non-binary, Zane exclaims, almost to the audience, "Yoh. This play has everything." These knowing winks acknowledge the frivolity and sentimental nature of the plays and seem to remind audiences of the limits of comedy theatre and the genre around which popular Cape Flats theatre has developed. Yet, instead of dismissing it as a form of theatre that is reliant on stereotypes and oversimplification, we might also see these musicals as sites of (re)imagining and (re)scripting (refracting) as I do in this chapter.

Colouring the Pink Capital

Coloured expressions of Pentecostalism in Cape Town, also referred to in Afrikaans as *'Pinkster*', has recently been conceptualised as an indigenous form of religious expression with a valid place within South African black theology and African Pentecostalism (Jodamus 2022).

Lottering himself comes from a Pinkster background with his father having been a pastor on the Cape Flats. The influence of his Pinkster upbringing is evident in the musical style, language, and storylines he explores in his plays. Yet, Pinkster is also a form of religious expression characterised by a restrictive and repressive approach to sexuality (Nadar and Jodamus 2019). Pinkster Christianity, largely associated with the Cape Flats, has been shown to carry with it a "'moral nostalgia' for apartheid" (Hackman 2015, 108), which, while rejecting its political marginalisation of people who were not white, longs for the Christian conservative approach to same-sex and inter-racial sexual relationships. This nostalgia is motivated by the moral panic around "the sudden proliferation of queer bodies on stage, on television, online, and in the streets [which] signaled a departure from apartheid's culture of suppression and sexual puritanism" (Sizemore-Barber 2020, 12).

The Aunty Merle musicals reflect and refract the juxtaposing narratives of Cape Town as the "gay capital of Africa" (Camminga and Matebeni 2020) and the persistent narrative that associates queer sexuality with whiteness. In Cape Town queer visibility is notable in its unofficial title as 'pink'/'gay' capital of Africa (Camminga and Matebeni 2020). Situated in South Africa, the only country on the continent to legalise same-sex marriage and the first in the world to constitutionally prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, the city has marketed itself as particularly queer friendly. The panic around queer visibility in Cape Town was evident most recently in October 2022 when a rainbow pedestrian crossing and a pink stripe indicating a "Pink Route" was unveiled in the upmarket Greenpoint district of the city where most queer friendly bars and clubs are situated. This was met with strong opposition particularly from the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), a political party with a reputation for promoting anti-queer rhetoric under the guise of maintaining Christian morals. Motivating anxieties around queer visibility is the idea that the move to a secular democratic regime seeks to endanger traditional Christian and African morals around gender and sexuality. In this example, not only does the chosen location of the rainbow crossing illustrate the limits to which the rainbow welcome carpet extends in the city, the push back from religious groups who make claims to a particular African/black/coloured heterosexuality, also demonstrates the continued existence of queerphobic narratives invoking religion and culture in the pink capital.

In *Aunty Merle It's a Girl*, Lottering uses the character of Glen to reflect these same tensions in Cape Town.

> **GLEN**
> I mean, how do you feel about Siya and Carl? This whole gay set-up. It's getting rather cosy. I'm just wondering if Siya's not maybe…under some Cape Town influence.
> **MANDISA**
> Cape Town influence???
> **GLEN**
> Ag you know, Cape Town can get tricky sometimes. One of the reasons I fled. The Mother City has been known to pull the wool over a normal man's eyes. Pink wool.

Lottering not only refracts existing narratives around race and queerness in Cape Town, but also around Christianity and queer sexuality. In the next extract from the same play, Soraya, Aunty Merle's neighbour, is telling Merle about one of the neighbours, Mrs Kannemeyer, who spoke to Soraya in the butcher's about Siya and Carl living together.

> **SORAYA**
> She said that she could not believe that a church going lady like you would condone all of these things. She said that she was surprised that a lady of *your* stature could not keep her house in order.
> **MERLE**
> And what did *you* say?
> **SORAYA**
> I had a good mind to put her in her place but I was too distracted by all that meat in her trolley.
> **MERLE**
> Mutton dressed up as lamb, no doubt. You know what Soraya, I can't pay any attention to people who are trapped in a world of talking about other people. I find that *THAT* just holds one back.
> **SORAYA**
> That's exactly what I was going to tell her!
> **MERLE**
> But you didn't! My life is constantly on the move. My family now stretches from Athlone to Bantry Bay to Joburg. I don't have time for local gossip girls. I'm a woman of the world. Very Cosmopolitammm [sic].

In this interaction Lottering reflects the narrative of queer being un-Christian but also counters it by attaching Aunty Merle's embrace of Carl and Siya's relationship as something which is uniquely not Cape Townian, but rather a more cosmopolitan attitude. This complicates the narrative of a pink capital by reflecting the multiplicity of narratives in Cape Town, and in particular, the situatedness of the religious anti-gay discourses within coloured expressions of Christianity.

"Preaching a different kind of gospel"

"I'm just a vessel" is one of Lottering's most common adages which he uses both when he plays the character of Aunty Merle and in his stand-up routines where he performs as himself and on social media posts. It denotes religious symbolism in which religious leaders are understood to be uniquely open recipients and carriers of God's messages who then can relay this to God's people. Thus, in using the phrase, "I'm Just a Vessel", Lottering positions Aunty Merle and himself as a prophet in some ways, who can filter God-inspired wisdom and direction. For example, in *Aunty Merle The Musical*, Merle helps solve a situation between Lydia, her domestic worker, and Fezile, Lydia's husband, after he was caught cheating. She explains her intervention to her neighbour, Soraya by saying "God works in mysterious ways.

He can use anyone to fix a situation. Sometimes a person must just be a vessel", before explaining that her intervention involved bribing Fezile by writing off a loan her husband, Dennis, had previously made to him. In *Aunty Merle, It's a Girl*, Merle is trying to correct a situation where her son, Carl and his partner, Siya may not be able to adopt because Carl had stolen a *frikkadel* (a Cape Malay meatball) when he was younger. Aunty Merle tries to manipulate, guilt, and sweet talk the social worker into overlooking this incident so that her son can adopt, or perhaps more importantly for Merle so that she could be a grandmother.

> **MERLE**
> Gosh what a tiny world! Your parents are Abe and Lenore Lategan. Now you know when they got married that time, they didn't have a cent to their names. So they lived with my eldest sister Marlene. In Marlene's separate entrance. In Diep River[5]. Rent free! For a whole year! My sister Marlene let your parents live rent free!
>
> Marlene always used to chat about your mommy Lenore. Beautiful woman. Cheekbones like a model. Just like you. But she had bunions. But not shy for a sandal! Marlene said that it was because of her cheekbones, that nobody ever really looked at her bunions. Everyone used to just look up, look up!
>
> Now I can feel that you're insisting that you want to make a call or two to make this *frikkadel* piece of paper go away. Only if you now really feel prompted to do so. I mean who am I to get in the way of the Lord's work. I'm just a vessel.

The invocation of religious inspired wisdom in these instances seems to position Aunty Merle as a religious authority figure whose messages of reconciliation, justice, and forgiveness seem to be communicated to the audience. It is a position Lottering himself has acknowledged that he takes on as a comedian.

> Dali Tambo[6] said when you break down preaching the gospel, what it actually means is bringing people good news, that's the traditional meaning of it. And he said 'I think that's what you do, you bring the good news, so you're preaching a different kind of gospel' (Bowler 2019).

Jesse Weaver Shipley (2015) explains that it is no coincidence that comedy entertainers lend themselves to 'pastor' figures. She posits that, "both are performers who provoke public moral discourse by telling persuasive stories" (Shipley 2015, 177). This is especially true of charismatic pastors common in the Pinkster traditions that Lottering draws from as both use what Shipley calls "trickster storytelling", where "fake miracles" and convincing performances lead to resolution, forgiveness, and the promise of a better life (Shipley 2015, 176). Through

[5] A suburb in the Cape Flats.

[6] A popular South African presenter and actor.

his performance and invoking the character of the Pinkster pastor, Lottering creates an alternative character to a pastor in a church, but who can hold authority and share good news.

The good news of a better life according to Aunty Merle, is one which is decidedly queer as is evident in another extract in *Aunty Merle It's a Girl*, where we see a version of coloured Pentecostal or Pinkster worship service where Merle is sharing her dream with the congregation. So far in the play, the audience has been lulled into the heteronormative assumption that Merle's daughter Abigail and her husband Alan, would be the ones to announce a pregnancy. When Abigail and Alan mention they have an announcement Aunty Merle makes up her mind that it is a pregnancy announcement.

> **MERLE** LOTS OF AMEN-HALLELUJAH'S DURING THIS SPEECH
> Oh yes, last night I had a dream. I dreamt I was sitting in my back garden. Because you all know that I have a front garden and a back garden. And while I'm sitting in my back garden sipping on a fruit cocktail juice. And as I was sitting in my garden (because you all know I have patio furniture), two budgies flew into the garden. Pink budgies. And one came to sit on this shoulder. And the other one came to sit on this shoulder. The one smiled when he saw my fruit cocktail juice, the other didn't. Diabetic.
> Then the one budgie gently hopped closer to my ear and whispered "love is love". Then the other budgie gently hopped closer to my other ear and whispered (Merle delivers this in a hoarse voice) "love is love".
> **PASTOR**
> Somebody get Aunty Merle some water!
> **MERLE**
> No no no Pastor! That's the way the budgie spoke! <u>BEAT</u> Bird Flu.
> **CONGREGATION**
> AG Shame!!! / right / Oh no etc
> CONGREGATION JUST STARING AT HER
> **MERLE**
> That's it! That was my dream. Does anybody have a word for me?
> PAUSE. EVERYONE LOOKING AROUND - AT EACH OTHER. THEN SOMEONE SHOUTS.
> **CONGREGANT 3**
> Pink! It's a Girl!!
> **MERLE**
> Hey?
> **PASTOR**
> Pink Budgies! *Aunty Merle It's a Girl*!!!

Once again, Aunty Merle, reminds us that she can be read as a pastor and a prophet, in part by mimicking Baptist minister and civil rights activist, Martin Luther King's "I had a dream" speech in her opening line. Further, she invokes Pinkster forms of religiosity by performing

and refracting dream interpretation and visions, common in African Pentecostalism (Droll 2018). While Merle's and the congregation's initial interpretation assumes that Aunty Merle's daughter is pregnant with a girl, over the course of the musical, it is revealed that her daughter and husband cannot conceive and towards the resolution of the play we learn that her gay son, Carl and his partner Siya are the budgies and are adopting a baby girl. By revealing this message in a Pinkster setting on stage, Aunty Merle and Lottering invite the audience to consider a God that affirms a gay relationship shown ultimately in blessing this queer, black and coloured couple with a baby girl. This message also perhaps invites audiences to confess their homophobia through laughter, and imagine a more affirming queer future. This message is one which would not likely be preached from a Pinkster pulpit on an ordinary Sunday on the Cape Flats, yet seemingly finds a home and a responsive audience in the sacred space of Cape Flats theatre.

The lack of outrage from his audiences which no doubt contains those who hold more conservative views is perhaps because of Aunty Merle and Lottering's position as comedic figures. Comedians are judged on their ability to mimic and to fail at mimicking, in other words, the more successful a comedian is at being a legitimate fake (Shipley 2015, 192), the more able they are to mock normative versions of pastoral authority and simultaneously assert queerer forms of religious meaning making. Aunty Merle then becomes a trustworthy religious authority figure because she is seen as authentic in her parody and sincere in her failure.

Dragging religion into it

Along with comedy, another genre Lottering draws on that carries a sense of place and a particular authority in Cape Flats communities, is that of drag. Lindy-Lee Prince (2020, 59) posits that with its ties to the Cape Minstrel Carnival and drag pageants, Cape Town and in particular, its coloured communities could be considered South Africa's unofficial home of drag. This history informs the type of drag – *moffie*-drag – which is common in Cape Town, and which informs Lottering's performance of Aunty Merle. *Moffie* is Afrikaans slang for a gay man, somewhat pejorative and often referring to effeminate men. It connotes queer failure (Halberstam 2011) in many senses and Lottering himself has spoken about the fear of the stigma of that word being attached to him.[7] As Glenn Holtzman (2017, 150) writes, "[the *moffie*] may be ridiculed or teased by his family and friends who will say to him "stop acting like a *moffie*". However, while it is also used by white Afrikaans speaking people in equally derogatory ways[8], the coloured moffie is also a uniquely coloured character associated with the gay hairdresser, the drag queen, and queer pageant girls.

[7] See his video interview, https://www.facebook.com/MoffieFilm/videos/250428412614741/.

[8] As explored in the film Moffie (2019) by Oliver Hermanus.

Moffie has been reclaimed, to some degree, in the context of Cape Flats colouredness in more affirming ways from as early as the 1950s and 1960s. Allanise Cloete (2018) shows evidence of this in popular magazines such as the Drum magazine in 1976 where the journalist Jackie Heyns writes, "Cape Town's moffies are a breed apart. Humble gentle and highly talented they have little of the cattishness associated with jealous women, or the aggressive tendencies of men. They are an effeminate male glamour - who lives in a world of their own." Heyns goes on, "Moffies have come to be accepted however unusual, as a part of the Cape society, and that they are very seldom, if ever, are seen as objects for snide humour." While this essentialist characterisation by Heyns certainly draws on sexist stereotypes, it demonstrate the multiplicity of meaning that the term '*moffie'* carries. Infamous coloured *moffie's* such as Kewpie, a gender-fluid drag queen and hairdresser, have also more recently become celebrated as part of the unique queer history of District Six.[9] The *moffie* is a recognisable coloured character on the Cape Flats, with a highly visible form of gender expression accompanied by a distinct look and language called *moffietaal* (or gay language) called Gayle. The *moffie* has also been celebrated in Cape Flats theatre, performed by straight and gay men. Often these persona's on stage performed

> femininity that seems unobtainable in the poorer 'coloured' townships of Cape Town. Female movie star names were adopted like Yvonne De Carlo, Doris Day, Rita Hayworth, Kay Kendall etc. With this came the "glamour", "glitter", "whirling skirts", "flamboyancy", "manicured and painted fingernails", "spectacular female finery" associated with the glamour of that era (Cloete 2018, 68).

Much like the taxi guard, the cashier and the pastor that inform Lottering's other characters, these more affirming and celebratory ideas of the *moffie* seem to inform the character of Aunty Merle. In the play, the characters often gather at the Dora Bar, with Dora being the Gayle word for drinking alcohol. Aunty Merle herself reminds us of earlier *moffie* characters, with her glamourous outfits and her (albeit often failed attempt) at maintaining a refined, upper class, appearance. Lottering uses this enactment of the *moffie* in Aunty Merle in ways audiences are familiar with and in ways which seem almost essentialist in their presence on the Cape Flats. The reclaiming of *moffie* is something which is echoed behind the wings of the Aunty Merle musicals as much as it is on stage. In the same interview where Lottering speaks about the stigma of the term *moffie*, he also explains how the company of actors in the Aunty Merle musicals have reclaimed it and use *moffie* as a general term to refer to each other off stage in ways which seem to create a sense of belonging and camaraderie amongst the cast. Invoking José Muñoz's (1999) concept of disidentification, I suggest that *moffie* drag allows, "the

[9] Immortalised in an exhibition "Kewpie: Daughter of District Six" which is housed at the District Six Museum in Cape Town: https://www.districtsix.co.za/project/kewpie-daughter-of-district-six/.

minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency." Lottering's performance, on the back of a history of *moffie* characters in Cape Flats theatre and everyday life including in most of Petersen and Kramer's musicals, allows the *moffie* to have a place in Cape Town's queer history and contemporary life. Further, as Lottering situates Aunty Merle as the saviour of marriages, protector of gay adoptions, and a personification of forgiveness, faith and hope, Aunty Merle uncovers the *moffie's* "utopian potentialities of failure as a mode of resistance, intervention, speculation, and queer world making" (Takemoto 2016, 86). This subject position, along with Aunty Merle's performance of Pinkster femininity, positions Aunty Merle as a refraction of queer coloured Christianity in Cape Town. The musicals position the *moffie* as a queer character of colour who can occupy a sacred space and play a role in creating a multiplicity of meanings around gender, race, sexuality and religion which stands in relation to both the narrative of Cape Town as a mainly whites only queer city, and of coloured expressions of religion as only an antithesis to queerness.

Langarm Worship

Another way in which the Aunty Merle musicals transforms the stage into both a site of Pinkster church or coloured Christianity and of cultural significance is through the music which guides the story. One of the music styles popularised and attached to Cape coloured communities is a mix between Ghoema (named after the type of drum used) and *langarm* (a form of dance band music). This is the music of the so-called Christmas or dance bands and *Nagtroepe* (directly translated to night troupes), more commonly known as Cape Malay choirs/*Kaapse Klopse* or Cape Minstrels who compete in new year's carnival in colourful performances of singing and dancing. Along with *moffies* who often lead these minstrel troupes as the drum majors (Holtzman 2017, 150-151), emerging from that competition are two popular types of song, the *minnaar* lied (love song) and the *moppie* (the comedy song). Both of these styles of song have a history of telling stories, and in the case of the *moppie*, often with sexual innuendo. This type of music has created a backdrop, record, and memory of the collective struggles of slavery and the history of people who call themselves coloured in Cape Town, which are invoked in various Cape Flats theatre performances, most notably in the District Six centred musicals of Petersen and Kramer. The songs written for these theatre plays such as *Heart of District Six*, *Fairyland* and *It's New Year*, have become in and of themselves bastions of 'colouredness' and carriers of the 'mythical ethnic homeland' of District Six and Cape Town. In the Aunty Merle musicals, *minnaars* (love songs) and what I would consider the *moppies* in the show push the narrative forward while contributing to the overall joviality reminiscent of Cape Flats theatre. The song, *The way to his heart is through your tart* could, for example, be classified as a *moppie* in *Aunty Merle The Musical,* its humour evident in its lyrics,

> THE WAY TO HIS HEART
> IS THROUGH YOUR TART
> IT'S THE ONE PIECE OF GOOD ADVICE
> I'VE GOT

PRE-HEAT YOUR OVEN
MAKE SURE IT'S HOT
WITH YOUR *LEKKER*[10] PASTRY
HIS PULSE WILL TROT
THE WAY TO HIS HEART
IS THROUGH YOUR TART.

By using this type of music in Aunty Merle, Lottering reinscribes the *moppie* and the queer characters who often sing these songs, as significant parts of colouredness in Cape Town. Not only do the *minnaars* and *moppies* invoke a sense of cultural nostalgia, but it is also reminiscent of the rhythms and structure of music in Pinkster worship, such as the worship songs of joy emphasised by exaggerated movements and jubilant dancing (*jubbelenjuig*) (Jodamus 2022, 604). It is not surprising that these musical genres mimic each other, as Sarojini Nadar and Johnathan Jodamus (2019) explore in the links between US RnB and Pentecostal hymns. What is perhaps surprising, is the joy evoked by these types of songs, emerging from histories of struggle and oppression. Johnathan Jodamus (2022, 605) writes about the absurdity of joy in this context: "Given the many social ills on the Cape Flats, with gangsterism and drug addiction common problems plaguing the community, it was almost absurd to see a bunch of people in such joyous celebration (the absurdity of joy). What did they have to be joyful about?". It is the joy in the face of oppression that has also led Cape Flats theatre to be dismissed as contributing anything meaningful or brave in light of apartheid and post-apartheid social challenges. It is also this joy, which associated with harmful stereotypes of coloured minstrels as nothing more than the jesters of the South African court. Yet, through the lens of the sacred, this "jubbelenjuig and the 'joy of the Lord' seem[s] to erase the range of social ills that defined [coloured] daily existence –murder, rape, substance abuse, and, most common, gangsterism." (Jodamus 2022, 606). To claim this joy for queer coloured people in Cape Town, seems to invoke and perhaps inspire a similar resistance to queerphobia. To speak more theoretically, in a world where, as Sara Ahmed (2023) posits, "black people and people of colour [and I would add queer people of colour], can killjoy just by entering the room because our bodies are reminders of histories that get in the way of the occupation of space…Reclaiming the feminist killjoy is a queer project. A killjoy party, a queer party, is a protest."

Conclusion: Sex and the Sacred in the Aunty Merle Musicals

I have analysed Lottering's performances of Aunty Merle in the plays spanning 2018 to 2022 within the context of negotiating religion, sexuality and race in post-apartheid South Africa. In particular, I sought to explore the ways in which Lottering reclaims queerness as an integral

[10] Afrikaans for 'nice' or 'good'.

part of cultural and religious ways of being coloured in Cape Town. He does so in a context of Pinkster Pentecostalism, a brand of Christianity which is particularly anti-queer in Cape Town and South Africa more broadly. Even in this context as he mimics and remakes a queer form of being Pinkster on stage, Lottering has not outrightly been branded as blasphemous by the groups he portrays. One explanation for this is that the sacred and profane seem to collapse on stage in ways that invoke the history of a theatre of nostalgia attached to coloured performance. These musicals become sites of creating and performing rituals, uplifting the soul, finding and creating collective belonging, and (potentially) a site for confession. It does this, I argue, not only by invoking sentimentality and creating a shared "ethnic homeland" in District Six (as in Petersen and Kramer's work) and more broadly of Cape Town and the Cape Flats (in plays such as Lottering's), but also through its "refraction" of the music, preaching, discourse and narratives that mimic but also critique familiar forms of religious practice on the Cape Flats. As Sizemore-Barber (2020, 25) writes in her analysis of performance and queer South Africa, "if the stage is a mirror, it is a funhouse mirror, magnifying, distorting, and ultimately sending out an image in which the shock of recognition is promoted by an alienation effect". In Lottering's comedic performance which blends *moffie*-drag with Pinkster worship, he critiques ideas of secular queer whiteness and then positions queerness as firmly within the realm of South African Christian possibilities.

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