

Black Hamlet, The Play

Black Hamlet, The Play:

By John Bright and Wulf Sachs

Edited and Introduced by

Laurence Wright

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To Imogen
with much appreciation

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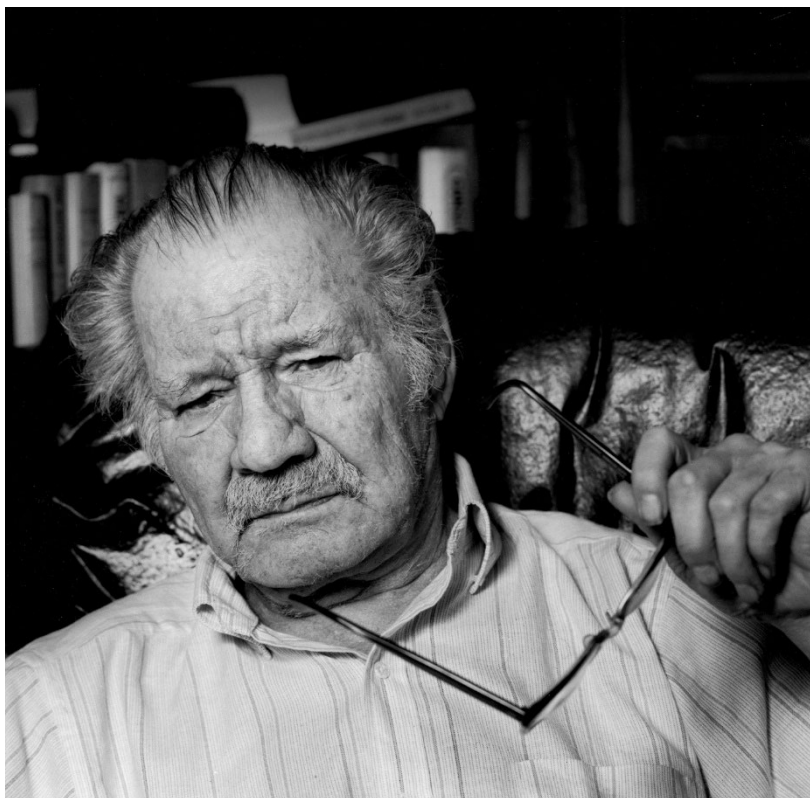


Fig. 1 John Bright (1908-1989) by Robert Landau
Courtesy of Robert Landau Photography

INTRODUCTION: A SCRIPT IN SEARCH OF A STAGE

There can be few texts in English more indelibly southern African than Wulf Sachs's *Black Hamlet* (1937), set grittily in Doornfontein's Rooiyard,¹ a slumyard at the heart of industrial Johannesburg's social malaise of the 1930s. The backstory is rooted in rural Manyikaland in "Southern Rhodesia" (now Zimbabwe). This introduction unravels how and why the controversial South African work came to be recrafted as a stage play destined for Broadway, and how it was that, through a mixture of political and theatrical circumstance and sheer bad luck, the Americanised re-creation never made it to the boards. To appreciate the 'new' play's ground-breaking transnational character we need to understand as much about its American origins as possible, how its translation from South Africa to Broadway came to be conceived and (almost) implemented, and why this lost theatrical version of *Black Hamlet* came to light only in the twenty-first century.²

The Discovery

You know the feeling. Google has delivered its all in the first twenty search pages but something makes you keep going, hitting the Enter key beyond rhyme or reason. I was working on Wulf Sachs, the pioneering South African psychoanalyst, hoping to find a stash of correspondence, lecture notes, obscure articles—anything that would amplify the relatively thin background material available on the author of *Black Hamlet* (1937). It had always seemed to me extraordinary that one of the liveliest minds in South Africa of the 30s and 40s should have departed leaving scarcely a "a wrack behind". I was about to give up and cease badgering the Google-sphere—this was somewhere between seventy and eighty pages into the search—when my eye fell on an entry in the tiniest of fonts:

¹ "Red Yard" in Afrikaans. In the play the slumyard is renamed Swartyard (i.e. Black Yard).

² This introduction has been substantially revised from articles published in *The English Academy Review* and *English Studies in Africa*.

“Black Hamlet, a play in three acts. Based on a work by Wulf Sachs. © John Bright, Wulf Sachs; 1c. 6 May [19]49; DU19922.”

The work was listed in the periodicals section of the Library of Congress *Catalogue of Copyright Entries*, Third Series, Volume 3, Part 2, Number 1 (January-June 1949). On contacting the Library, I was told the material had never been looked at. The manuscript was held in a cache of preservation boxes in a warehouse somewhere off-site. Days later the manuscript had been retrieved, and the Library was encouraging me to purchase scans promptly because staff could scarcely move for the stash of cartons cluttering their workspace.

This is how a fourth version of the story of the charismatic Manyikan *nganga*, “John Chavafambira”, came to light.³ Chavafambira had been introduced to Wulf Sachs in the early 1930s by the young anthropologist Ellen Hellman during fieldwork for her ground-breaking master’s study of the Johannesburg “ghetto” known as Rooiyard, a dissertation only published in 1948. Sachs went on to mine the complex relationship he developed with Chavafambira to produce, first, his ethnographic novel, *African Tragedy*, the manuscript of which languished in the archive of Wits University in Johannesburg until its publication as a companion to the present volume. This was followed by *Black Hamlet* (1937), still heavily novelised but a more fully psychoanalytical account of Chavafambira’s story seen through the eyes of early Freudianism. The focus is on the Oedipus Complex, typified by Shakespeare’s character Hamlet as analysed by Ernest Jones (1910). The revised treatment was intended as triumphant vindication of the universality of human psychology as interpreted by Freudian psychoanalysis. Ten years later Sachs updated the Chavafambira story with *Black Anger* (1947), this time tilting the account more strongly towards its social and political dimensions, with less emphasis on psychology and more on Chavafambira’s tentative recovery of political agency. *Black Anger* demonstrates an eager synergy with the contemporary American civil rights movement: “[Chavafambira] was looking beyond to a new vision—a bond with his people in America” (1947, 324). Since in none of the versions can we meet the *nganga* face-to-face, free of Sachs’s mediation, issues of belief (the reader’s) and credibility (the author’s) are inescapable. Instead of baldly supplanting each other, the three prose versions (if one reads all three) offer layered supplements which blur

³ In Sachs’s first telling of this story, *African Tragedy*, the name is “Chawafambira”, a more usual spelling in *chiShona*.

and qualify each other with alarming inconsistency. The real “Chavafambira” must remain a mystery.⁴

There is now a fourth iteration, this playscript, written not by Wulf Sachs but crafted in consultation with him by the experienced Hollywood screenwriter, John Bright—a man whose political sympathies made him an ideal conduit to realise Sachs’s theatrical ambitions for his text. Bright was a tough Hollywood renegade who resisted where he could the supine commercial ethos of routine entertainment, in which he had nevertheless been successful, in favour of using film to challenge accepted American political and social norms. He made his name scripting (with fellow journalist Kubec Glasmon) the successful gangster movies which established James Cagney’s reputation, most famously *Public Enemy* (1931), but also *Smart Money* (1931), *Blonde Crazy* (1931), *Taxi!* (1932), *The Crowd Roars* (1932), and several others. In his youth he had hovered on the fringes of Chicago gangland and his reputation in Hollywood was that of a roistering “bad boy”. The incident most often cited to authenticate his underworld credentials took place in one of Al Capone’s Chicago nightclubs (the Commonwealth Hotel):

“I was present [when Capone] ordered the death of two Sicilians who were getting too big for their britches. They were illiterate Mafiosi... They were beaten to death with baseball bats. Caved in their skulls. I was present at that time”. (Server 70)

But Bright was also thoughtful, very well read, and a political contrarian. To the consternation of producers he would slide political perspectives into films otherwise designed as mere box office fodder. This subversive scriptwriting reflected his work as a political organiser and activist. As one of the ten founders of the American Screen Writers Guild in 1933, Bright, like many of those involved, was deemed a radical. He joined the American Communist Party in 1936 and retained his membership until he signed up for military service in WW2. After the War serious misgivings about the Party, about Stalin and the Soviet Union, meant that he never re-joined, although he remained sympathetic to communist ideals. Patrick McGilligan writes:

John was a Party dependable, active in the Motion Picture Democratic Committee, the League of American Writers, the Hollywood Independent Committee of the Arts, Sciences and Professions, the Citizen’s Committee

⁴ This crucial issue is signposted in earlier Sachs scholarship, for example Crewe (2001) and Dubow (1993 and 1996). Matters are now complicated by an additional interpretive layer afforded by the Bright/Sachs playscript. Complex relations between these four versions will remain a ground bass of future Sachs scholarship.

for the Defense of Mexican-American Youth—later the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee—and many more. (xiii)

How the working relationship between Sachs and Bright came about is thus far lost to history—I offer tentative speculations later—but the ideological synergy is evident. From the evidence of the script we now have, their shared ambition is clearly to establish Chavafambira's story (a theatrical version of it) as an historical and geographical outlier to the American civil rights struggle, one which would underline the plight of American blacks by dramatising an even more catastrophic betrayal of justice in their ancestral "homeland". This was not a new motivation for Sachs. The subtitle of *Black Hamlet* first published in 1937 reads "The Mind of an African Negro revealed by psychoanalysis", putting the transatlantic bearing in place early on. The play's manuscript assigns authorial responsibility with deceptive clarity:

The background, the psychological and the anthropological material of the play are drawn from a case study, "Black Hamlet", by Wulf Sachs, M.D., of Johannesburg...For the character delineations, the situations, the dialogue and the play as a whole, the dramatist assumes full responsibility. (ms trans. 3)

The statement suggests that to produce his play John Bright worked exclusively from the text of *Black Hamlet* (1937). However, an examination of correspondence in the papers of the theatrical agent who handled the property, Leah Salisbury, indicates that the reality was more complex. Delivering the finished text to Salisbury, Bright sounds a note of triumph:

Here's BLACK HAMLET—after almost two years of work, several complete re-writes, and long consultations with Dr. Sachs via the mail, and numerous testings on groups of people here [Bright lived and worked in Los Angeles].

The consensus seems to be I have created a play of major importance. And with a confidence perilously close to arrogance I agree.

(Bright to Salisbury, 18 Feb. 1949)

Bright and Salisbury by this stage knew each other well, if mainly by correspondence. Qualifying his initial gushing enthusiasm, two days later Bright shared with Salisbury several less-than-flattering responses which an earlier draft of the play had elicited from Broadway notables to whom he had sent the script:

Oscar Serlin: "vivid and distinguished writing, but too specialized, intellectual and esoteric".

Herman Shumlin: “very interesting, but I’m afraid not material for the theatre”.

John Gassner: liked it enormously, but his partners felt it wasn’t commercial. (He was prolix, of course) [Bright’s holograph note]

Mark Marvin: “magnificent!” (The one producer with no money.) [Bright]
(Bright to Salisbury, 20 February 1949)

The Struggle from Page to Stage

Making it to Broadway was going to prove a challenge. The script elicited no immediate uptake (especially no moneyed uptake) but having read the revised draft Leah Salisbury remained encouraging. She was mildly distressed that the Broadway producer Herman Shumlin had already seen it, implying she would have to work hard to get him to read it again. Overall, she liked the script and saw its relevance to America, even if she felt some of the courtroom verbosity towards the end needed to be cut or broken up:

It is a fascinating idea and a very touching one about these poor natives and the confusions of their superstitions upon which is superimposed Christianity, English legalities and psychiatry. A terribly important thing is going on down in South Africa which concerns all the rest of us in the world and you have managed to get over the feeling of the conflicts...

The play is interesting, quite often moving and a very sincere indictment of the grinding imperialistic policy of the white man in South Africa. With inspired producing, direction and casting, it should be worth seeing. This script increases my interest in your work and I hope more than ever that we will be able to sit down soon and talk. It encourages me enormously that you are interested in this kind of subject matter.

(Salisbury to Bright, 1 March 1949)

It is an agent’s perennial task to keep writers’ hopes and spirits up, and it would seem that, at least from Salisbury’s perspective, prospects were relatively promising. *Black Hamlet* had fallen on receptive ears.

Here I must say something about Leah Salisbury (Leah Javne Salisbury, 1893-1975). She was a top-flight New York literary and theatrical agent who numbered among her clients Christopher Fry, Eugène Ionesco, Dorothy Parker, S.J. Perelman, Jan de Hartog and several other stars. The letterhead of “Leah Salisbury, Inc.” describes her as a “Play Broker and Writers Representative”. She became a literary agent in 1927 following a brief career on the stage (Obituary). The little available to be learned of the *Black Hamlet* script’s genesis and production travails comes from examining the John Bright correspondence in the Leah Salisbury papers held in Columbia University’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Salisbury became a mentor to Bright in the late 40s during his mid-career efforts to make it as a Broadway playwright. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) imbroglio, where private citizens and public employees suspected of communist or fascist sympathies were publicly investigated, was coming to the boil during the early years of the Cold War, putting pressure on many of Bright's left-wing Hollywood associates. Bright tried to put distance between himself and the production-line world of made-for-money filmmaking by trying his hand at serious live theatre. This meant New York and Broadway. How much of this impulse was attributable to his desire to evade industry persecution due to his communist sympathies and how much to pure artistic ambition is difficult to judge. The depth of Bright's disdain for the commercial screenwriting routine in which he felt trapped may be gauged from the epigraph to his acerbic memoir, *Worms in the Winecup* (2001): "For Darryl F. Zanuck, who taught me a great deal about screenwriting—and also gave me an enduring contempt for all that is typical of Hollywood..." (vii). To break into the drastically different world of Broadway theatre he signed with Leah Salisbury, who knew the quality of his writing and encouraged the new venture: "I am glad you are coming back to the theatre, and I hope we may work together not only on this play but on many others of yours" (Salisbury to Bright, 24 September 1948).

"Coming back to the theatre" was a reference to *Brooklyn, USA*, a three-act play about Murder Inc., the vicious enforcement arm of "the Mob", the notorious gangster outfit which at the time ran gambling, loansharking and narcotics operations, as well as the unions, right across America. The play, which Bright had written with Asa Bordages earlier in the decade, ran for a respectable 57 performances (Dec 1941 to Feb 1942), despite its premiere being disrupted by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. Bright was a hard worker. Before *Black Hamlet* he had offered at least four other playscripts for Salisbury's consideration: *The Lowly Spinach*, *The Case of Evelyn*, *The Glass House* (a script about an executioner) and *City of Angels* (about the plight of Mexicans in Los Angeles).

Salisbury promoted the play vigorously. Under her aegis, copies of the *Black Hamlet* script were duly despatched to an illustrious list of possible producers, among them Herman Schumlin, Oscar Homolka, T. Helbun of the Theatre Guild, Lee Sabinson, Mark Marvin, Dave Freeman, Clifford Freeman, Clifford Hayman, Margo Jones, Marshal Edson, John Hammond, Shepard Traube and Frederick O'Neil (Undated "Report" in the Salisbury papers). Salisbury had conscientiously backed the script with her reputation and professionalism and sent it to some of the most reputable names in the business. In the same report she lists producers to whom other

Bright playscripts such as *City of Angels*, *The Lowly Spinach* and *The Public Servant* had been sent. Aside from the Theatre Guild, there are no overlaps. *Black Hamlet*'s release had been targeted intelligently.

Post-War Broadway

Given Leah Salisbury's professional diligence, there must today be more than a few *Black Hamlet* playscripts languishing unregarded in the files of erstwhile theatrical agents and impresarios in the United States and Britain. They cannot all have been ditched, but none has made it into a publicly accessible archive. None has come to light in Wulf Sachs scholarship. In the end, Salisbury had circulated the playscript to more than 200 producers and impresarios on both sides of the Atlantic, including such well-known figures as Orson Welles, Irene Selznick, Richard Rogers, Otto Preminger, John Gassner (the renowned theatre critic and drama professor), John Gielgud, José Ferrar, Stephan and Paul Ames, Norman Bel Geddes (the theatrical designer) and a host of other prominent theatre and film devotees (list in the Leah Salisbury papers). Each had a known appetite for supporting unusual projects.

But nothing happened, and Bright was naturally frustrated. Salisbury had to carefully explain that in the period since his earlier success with *Brooklyn, USA*, Broadway had entered new and difficult financial terrain. The aftermath of the Depression, followed by the uncertainties of WW2, had taken their toll. The moment was not propitious for launching Bright's plays. She writes:

These are all pretty good plays—ten years ago when production costs were comparatively low any one of these plays would have been bought and produced; the financial risks would have been relatively small, if they were only moderate successes, say doing ten or twelve thousand a week, the producer could have recouped his investment of approximately fifteen or twenty thousand dollars, in from eight to twelve weeks, and from that time on a moderate profit, stock rights, movie rights, amateur rights, would have made it an easy risk. Now everything is different. The fifteen thousand dollar cost has risen to seventy-five thousand—and the grosses from the first week have to be of hit proportions or the play has practically no chance to pay off the investment and every chance to go into the red further beginning with the first week. (Salisbury to Bright, 8 February 1950)

In these circumstances, turning a skilled Hollywood screenwriter into a successful Broadway playwright would prove difficult. Nonetheless, Salisbury

was convinced of Bright's professionalism and merits as a dramatist and urged him on to renewed effort and larger ambitions. She reiterated:

...these are pretty good plays but they are not as good as you can write. You know a great deal about play writing and you can write a smash hit—and I am surer of it than you are yourself. I feel certain and have from the beginning of reading the scripts you sent me that if you would study Broadway just as much as you have motion picture taste, you could be one of our most successful dramatists. (Salisbury to Bright, 8 February 1950)

To achieve the success for which Bright hankered, Salisbury diagnosed the need for a more rigorous, specifically theatrical apprenticeship. She urged him to immerse himself in Broadway theatre:

I have been hoping that you would come to New York or that I would be in California because much is to be gained by our sitting down together and exchanging ideas. One cannot teach a writer how to be a playwright. You have to find out for yourself—studying, seeing good plays, studying the published play and the instinct for the medium. You I am certain have what it takes—I think that talk between us would succeed in directing your natural play writing talent toward subjects and treatment that would have a better chance on Broadway... (Salisbury to Bright, 8 February 1950)

Bright's residence in far-away Los Angeles—he was then living at 145 North Swall Drive, LA 48—proved a hindrance to Salisbury's conscientious mentoring:

You go on working in pictures, having a wonderful life—and that's good too—but it isn't necessarily the tutelage which develops the other talent you have for writing plays. You don't come here often enough—you should come back every six months and see everything good that is in the theatre, and you should get every success that is published and with humility in your heart try to understand why. You don't have to agree with it, you can have your own private opinion of the taste of audiences, but you must understand why. (Salisbury to Bright, 8 February 1950)

Clearly, Bright was after significant theatrical achievement and he was not one to compromise, but Salisbury felt he still had much to learn. He wanted genuine dramatic creation not pot-boiling success, even if that meant straying beyond the accepted theatrical horizons of the time. He yearned for the unusual, the authentic, something that would speak to America in fresh ways. Wulf Sachs's *Black Hamlet* was certainly not a typical source for Broadway fare. It would be fascinating to learn how Bright came to settle on Sachs's book as material for a play. Indeed, it would be important to know who first suggested putting *Black Hamlet* onto the stage, if it was

someone other than Sachs. What we do know is that Salisbury was not the first literary agent involved, and Sachs's initial choice suggests much about the political affinities he sought for his play.

A Problematic First Contract

He first approached Max Lieber (1897-1993), a Jewish political radical of Polish origins secretly affiliated to New York's underground communist network (Sakmyster 2011). Famously, at about this time Lieber was accused of collaborating with the Soviet spy Whittaker Chambers, a former member of the American communist party who in 1948 had accused Alger Hiss of spying for the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Shortly after Hiss's conviction in 1950, and having been named by Chambers himself, Lieber fled, first to Mexico and then, on instructions from Moscow to Poland. It seems obvious that during this period Lieber had his hands full, over and above meeting his obligations to literary clients. He had acquired an undeniably glamorous list of writers including Saul Bellow, Carson McCullers, Erskine Caldwell, Langston Hughes, John Cheever and Theodore Dreiser, among others. Sachs was aiming high, and the ideological synergy was unmistakable, even if at this moment his chosen target may have been overly preoccupied. Many of the notables on Lieber's list were either communists or communist sympathisers, including Maxim Gorky, Otto Katz ("Andre Simon"), Ludwig Renn, Phillip Bonosky, Joseph Milton Bernstein, Maurice Halperin, Lillian Hellman, and Leon Trotsky, among others. Douglas Wixon recounts the story of an Alfred Knopf editor who saw Lieber approaching with a sheaf of manuscripts: "Are you bringing me another communist?", he asked (Wixon 1994, 199).

The political issue can hardly have been incidental. There is no explicit evidence, but Lieber's communist sympathies and Bright's standing as a member of the American Communist Party may well have influenced Sachs in his choice of agent. If so, the affiliation foundered ignominiously. When Leah Salisbury lodged the 1949 Library of Congress copyright application for *Black Hamlet*, Wulf Sachs as copyright claimant is registered on the document as "c/o Maxim Lieber" (Certificate of Registration, Leah Salisbury Papers). This first *Black Hamlet* contract was certainly a strange one, brazenly incompatible with theatrical realities. Bright complained to Salisbury that the Lieber contract put him under impossible pressure and made him liable for matters beyond his control:

The original contract between [Lieber] and Sachs was a very absurd one (and I think illegal) inasmuch as it pledged me to finish and have produced by Nov 7, 1948. Well, the first full draft of the play was finished under the

deadline; but how in hell I can promise contractually that it will be produced—and, failing, to lose the dramatic rights—is to me legal gobbledegook... (Bright to Salisbury, 3 March 1949)

Could an author be made responsible for getting his own script produced? Or on failing to do so, lose his dramatic rights? This sounds like rocket-fuel for a protracted legal wrangle, but Leah Salisbury managed to sort things out amicably:

...Lieber has considerable faith in my judgment and said that if I was interested in it [*Black Hamlet*], he would take it on my say so and we could draw up a new contract. (Salisbury to Bright, 1 March 1949)

This initial contractual fiasco suggests two things. First, Wulf Sachs seemingly had not realised that Lieber was mainly a *literary* agent, not a theatrical specialist, and hardly geared to handle theatrical properties successfully, something Bright tumbled to early on. In fact, from January 1936 Lieber had delegated the handling of any playscripts that came his way to an employee named Sally Tanenbaum, and it may well have been she and not Lieber who read and commented on Bright's script. Certainly, given everything else that was going on in Lieber's life, there must be some doubt over the degree of personal attention *Black Hamlet* received from the agency head. Whatever the case, Bright took against Lieber with characteristic candour:

I never met the man, but, judging strictly from my correspondence with him, he must be considerably under five feet tall; no man of normal size could possibly be so pompous. We have had nothing but acrimony since the contract was signed over a year ago, and lately I have reached the boiling point. (Bright to Salisbury, 27 September 1948)

Bright's acrimony was occasioned by what he saw as Lieber's laxity in promoting the play and especially by his failure to secure funding for a production. When challenged Lieber confirmed Bright's suspicions, writing back stiffly "that he wasn't interested in financing plays, and was an authors' representative not a theatrical agent" (Bright to Salisbury, 27 September 1948). The mismatch was all too apparent.

Secondly, the existence of this initial contract confirms that Bright must already have been committed to the project *prior* to the unfortunate signing with Lieber. Sachs had somehow already settled on him as the appropriate writer to put his brainchild on the stage. How the two met is unknown. John Bright may have read the book *Black Hamlet*, seen its dramatic potential, and contacted Sachs; or perhaps Sachs was directed to Bright by someone aware of his renewed Broadway aspirations and who

thought Bright's political sympathies would be aroused by the book. This might have been Leah Salisbury. Political affinities were undoubtedly at the root of theatrical decisions surrounding the *Black Hamlet* project. In the absence of further information, the best I can do is to present some evidence that, given political compatibility, a meeting between Sachs and Bright, however it took place, would not be unlikely.

Sachs's Political and Cultural Motivation

We can start with Wulf Sachs himself. He was a cosmopolitan, a Lithuanian Jew with strong socialist sympathies who with his family had fled oppression in Russia, arriving in South Africa in 1922. Before this he had earned degrees from the universities of St. Petersburg, Berlin, and London, and was both a qualified medical doctor and a practising psychoanalyst, belonging to the British and the International Psychoanalytical Societies. Later he became President and founder of a nascent South African Psychoanalytical Association, striving to establish Freudianism in the country on an institutional basis. A man of wide literary and artistic interests, Sachs's cultural and political sympathies in Johannesburg brought him into contact with a group of ambitious young academic anthropologists at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). Most were political liberals, many of them Jewish and, like Sachs, sharing the semi-outsider status of an immigrant background. The group, led by Alfred and Winifred Hoernlé, included Ellen Hellman (who, as we have seen, first introduced Sachs to John Chavafambira), Hilda Kuper, Max Gluckman, Jack and Eileen Krige, and several others. Partly because of their anthropological explorations but also in response to a growing tide of anti-Semitism in the country during the 1930s, the Left-leaning group espoused increasing social solidarity with South Africa's disenfranchised black majority, and fundamental opposition to South Africa's conservative and increasingly strident race policies.⁵ They were ardent supporters of the liberal South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), the organisation founded in 1929 to foster racial harmony and oppose the political oppression of Africans. They also supported the Bantu Men's Social Centre (BMSC), established in 1924 under white patronage to nurture the educational and recreational interests of African men in Johannesburg.

The prevailing culture at the Social Centre, outward-looking and socially progressive with strong input from white political activists (which

⁵ Sachs was an active Zionist. According to Joan Philips, "His delight at the proclamation of the State of Israel knew no bounds" (1949:18).

may or may not have been a good thing),⁶ provided an atmosphere and social prospect that Sachs found amenable. Personal history and his Jewish political experience had made him a confirmed internationalist. He viewed history in a world-historical perspective, informed by his early Russian experience of oppression and exile. This does not imply that his growing interest in African society and culture was superficial (though his then-pioneering approach does not align with today's presuppositions). His passionate concern for the predicament of South Africa's black population, expressed in the four versions of John Chavafambira's story, had caused him to delve into emergent South African social anthropology, exploring the remnants of "traditional" Africa (largely a "white" construct) while his contacts with the BMSC put him in touch with a developing African modernity forming itself round the notion of the "New African" (Couzens 1985). The ethos of the BMSC is described in *Black Anger* as follows:

...it was explained to [John]...that the great aim of the club was to give a cultural home to all Africans irrespective of tribe and origin; to eliminate tribal feuds and prejudices. Here, all black people were to be united in a common bond of color, culture, and ideals. It was therefore essential that they should speak a common language. English was the obvious choice: a rich and beautiful language spoken by half the world, including their brothers, the American Negroes. (1996,165)

The BMSC was alive to the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance of the 20s and 30s. African American figures like W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes and Marcus Garvey were common currency. People such as R.V. Seloape Thema and Sol Plaatje were consciously shaping a southern African response to modernity (Masilela 1996). Their approach was both reasoned and meliorist. The librarian at the Centre was that energetic author and intellectual H.I.E. (Herbert) Dhlomo, one of the figures central to the emerging concept of the "New African" in South Africa. Much of the exciting cultural ferment in the BMSC was influenced by Dhlomo. In 1936 he was appointed as a "touring librarian" to service the travelling box library system which had been inaugurated with funding from the Carnegie Trust in 1932, and its first library was at the BMSC. Dhlomo appears prominently in all three earlier versions of Sachs's story as the character Tembu,

⁶ Alan Cobley notes that "Ironically, white liberal influence through...the Institute of Race Relations and other, less formal, means...relied heavily on the attraction—even glamour—of inter-racial personal relationships" (1986, 266, n58). Cobley argues that while black reliance on white liberal support may have crippled the potential development of radical black opposition in the 20s and 30s, there were good practical reasons for this cooperation (142).

performing his role as the representative “New African”, his identity lightly disguised and not entirely flattering. Despite this jarring note, all things considered it is hardly surprising that Sachs’s ardent sympathy with the political predicament of black South Africans should meld with his concern for the struggle of African Americans against racism in the southern United States. The “Black Atlantic” connection which would see *Black Hamlet* transposed to America was firmly in place (see Masilela 1996).

The Democrat

Sachs’s ambition to put the story of John Chavafambira on stage in the United States coalesced around several further factors. Chief among them was his unwavering internationalism, his belief that countries, ideologies and political systems were viscerally intertwined. This belief found practical public expression in concerted efforts to elevate and internationalise political and cultural discussion in his adopted country. WW2 was raging. Wanting desperately to shake white South Africa out of its parochialism and blinkered self-interest, between 1943 and 1947 Sachs took over and edited an enterprising fortnightly review, *The Democrat*, strongly pro-Soviet and anti-fascist in temper. The periodical was published in Johannesburg and splendidly eclectic in its range. Figures from the BMSC milieu such as Herbert Dhlomo, Jordan Ngubane and A.B. Xuma contributed (see the Bibliography for sample articles). With interwar Europe overrun by fascism, and right-wing sentiment thriving in South Africa, the novel Soviet experiment seemed to Sachs the best hope for humanity’s future. (The figures of “Hamilton Ashley”, “Hendrick van der Neer” and “Herbert Lustic”, indicted at the end of the play, represent the fascist strain in formal South African politics at the time.) The socio-political orientation of *The Democrat* is a clear indication of the impulse informing Sachs’s efforts to put *Black Hamlet* on stage in the United States. Right-wing politics in South Africa echoed remarkably similar political forces being experienced and challenged by African Americans, especially in the American South. Appropriate remedies might be comparable. Sachs’s political allegiances were uncritically socialist, and he viewed the Soviet Union as an ideal antidote to both Nazi brutality and capitalist greed. As with many socialist sympathisers at the time (and unlike Bright), Stalinist atrocities remained *terra incognita*. He commissioned pieces for *The Democrat* in an even-handed fashion from his many contacts and acquaintances in the Soviet Union and in the United States. Paul Robeson, the African American bass-baritone, star of stage and screen who had become a noted political activist, contributed several articles to *The*

Democrat protesting about the treatment of “natives” in South Africa (see Bibliography). Robeson was a particular *bête noir* of the HUAC so that when, for example, Max Lieber appeared before the Committee, he was particularly pressed as to his interactions with Paul Robeson. The story of Lieber’s deposition is told in Anthony Sacco’s *Little Sister Lost* (2013). In seeking to vitalise and extend *The Democrat*’s international coverage, Sachs became deeply interested in American society and its politics, especially the state of trade unionism in the country. However, the periodical’s range was never confined to political and social matters. Its flavour can be gauged from Oliver Walker’s description in his tribute to Wulf Sachs:

Dr. Sachs made “The Democrat” a mirror of his many-sided character—a character which embraced a fervent, rationalistic belief in Socialism, combined with an all-embracing humanity and breadth of culture. In it you saw reflected his love of his fellow-man, his impatience with cant and hypocrisy, his attachment to music, painting and the other arts, his sense of fairplay, justice and pursuit of truth. (Walker 1949, 7-8)

Sachs not only edited *The Democrat* but wrote a substantial proportion of its copy. He obviously cherished intense theatrical enthusiasm for he wrote many lively reviews of Johannesburg theatre and film under the pseudonym “P.A. Lyst” (see the Bibliography for a selection of these reviews). He also nurtured a personal theatrical ambition. Early in the 1940s he wrote a play, *Escape from the Past*, set in his home country of Lithuania in the summer of 1939, which was produced and directed by Rose Erlich in the Library Theatre, Johannesburg, with Moira Lister in the lead. A copy of the programme, lodged in the Amazwi South African Museum of Literature in Makhanda, features on its cover a wonky sketch of Russian minarets alongside a call for “Medical Aid for Russia” and, below this, another image in silhouette of a Soviet soldier with his machine-gun and a “Red Star”. One of the sponsoring firms, “Censor and Braudo” of Market Street, Johannesburg, runs the slogan “With goodwill to our Soviet Allies” under its advertisement. The cast was predominantly Jewish. I have been unable to locate a script, but the date and setting suggest that the play may have been about Nazi Germany’s strenuous efforts to claim the Klaipėda region of Lithuania just before the outbreak of WW2. Be that as it may, somewhat later, in 1944, Sachs translated Konstantin Simonov’s play *The Russian People*, a work celebrating the heroism of the Russian infantry, again in hopes that a Johannesburg production would raise funds for “Medical Aid for Russia”. Unsurprisingly, the initiative met with trouble and permission to stage the production was refused: “The powers that control the Witwatersrand University refused to allow Simonov’s great war play ‘The

Russian People' to be performed there" (see Sachs 1944, "Famous Soviet Playwright's Message to South Africa").

With this background, that Sachs should harbour international theatrical hopes for *Black Hamlet* is hardly surprising. Nor could his ideological orientation and motivation be plainer. Sachs's belief that *Black Hamlet* was part of a wider political conjuncture, that it would resonate with African Americans in a context far removed from South Africa, this, combined with his conviction that the story could work on the stage, was what impelled the decision to search for a publisher and a writer in the United States. Even here *The Democrat* may have played an indirect role. Towards the end of the publication's short life Sachs undertook several trips to the United States. Indeed, Psychoanalytical Societies in Boston and New York were urging him to move to the United States (Philips 20). His primary impulsion behind these trips was the desire to satisfy several prestigious lecture invitations but also to undergo further psychoanalysis himself. He took the opportunity to commission international contributions for his review. He was there in May 1947, staying in Boston for the launch of *Black Anger* which had been published by Little, Brown and Company. At the end of that same month (30 May) he was in New York lecturing to the Academy of Medicine on "Psychotherapy in South Africa" (Wertheim papers). It was at this time that John Bright started work on his script of *Black Hamlet*. As I have suggested, Leah Salisbury may well have introduced them, unaware of Sachs's pre-existing contract with Max Lieber. Solid evidence has yet to emerge of exactly why John Bright and no-one else came to dramatise Sachs's *Black Hamlet* for the stage, but the network of cultural and political affiliations I have described makes sense of Sachs's decision to trust his project to the Hollywood tough guy.

A Fruitful Collaboration

The playscript is copyrighted in both names. Certainly, the play was crafted by Bright. The question is whether Sachs had any identifiable input beyond the published text of his book, *Black Hamlet*. There must have been serious consultation between the two men, but in the absence of surviving correspondence there is no way of knowing how much direct input Sachs had. Nevertheless, some points seem obvious.

One of the clearest indications of Sachs's influence on Bright's play is the name of the principal character, Dr Alexander Viertel. This is the Sachs figure, very much the "hero" of the play, and often referred to in the books as "the European doctor". The name "Viertel" is reminiscent of two words, one Afrikaans, one German: *vertel* in Afrikaans means "to narrate",

and *viertel* in German means “quarter” or “fourth”. *Black Hamlet*—the play—is the fourth iteration of the story of John Chavafambira, following *African Tragedy*, *Black Hamlet* and *Black Anger*. John Bright would scarcely have come up with this tricky South African wordplay on his own. The list of anthropological experts cited by Kate Woodrow as her academic *entrée* to South African indigenous culture, “Mead, Malinowski, DuBois, Shapera, Junod”, may also derive from Sachs. Viertel’s eviction from his professional offices, on racist grounds because Africans regularly visit the premises, is more prominent here than in the published books (see *Black Hamlet* 1996, 284), as is the participation of Sachs’s wife in the episode, suggesting the scene may have been developed from conversations with Sachs: “My wife has been with me here twenty years—and she still can’t get used to officious policemen, and much of what goes on.” The horrific account of rogue police officers apprehending blacks, falsely, then forcing them to fight each other under animal sobriquets is unlikely to have been Bright’s invention. I have been unable to verify such events historically. Sachs must be the probable source. Similar instances of Sachs’s possible influence could be multiplied but, while intriguing, they are undecidable without evidence.

On the other hand, there are clear signs suggesting that Wulf Sachs never read the final draft of the play, or perhaps any continuous draft. In Act 2 we hear that “a rhinoceros came out of the water with a monkey on its back”: the reference must surely be to a hippopotamus, something Sachs would have noticed had he read the text. I doubt he would have approved Bright calling Chavafambira’s quarters in the Swartyard an “apartment”, which would convey quite the wrong impression to an American audience, nor would he have been happy to read of a hunter entering “the jungle”—unrecognisable either as southern African terrain or usage. “Bushveld” is an unlikely descriptor for the landscapes of the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe (Manyikaland). There is uncertainty over the nature of the weapon Mdlawini uses to kill Charlie: “Have you a dagger, an assegai?” Even the short Zulu stabbing assegai is heftier and nothing like a dagger in shape. In the ms, *midzimu* (ancestral spirits) is consistently spelt *midzumu*—possibly a mistake by the typist, but something Sachs would have picked up—and “Manyika” appears as “Manyoka”.

The terms “native” and “Negro” are used interchangeably, sounding oddly in South African ears, but a clear indication of the audience the play sought to address. Indicatively, the story’s first published version, *Black Hamlet* (1937), bore the subtitle “The Mind of an African Negro Revealed by Psychoanalysis”.

These are minor points. Overall, Bright creates a theatrically competent playscript, redolent of the age and predicament in which it was

written. He takes pains to orientate his American audiences by providing American social and political references, establishing a point of view from which his South African material would speak to them.⁷ To this end, Bright transmutes the character of the “woman anthropologist”, based on Ellen Hellman, the young South African anthropologist who in real life first introduced Sachs to John Chavafambira, into the character “Kate Woodrow”, a hoity-toity young Vassar graduate visiting South Africa who adopts Dr Viertel as a mentor, hoping one day to earn a Doctorate from Columbia “if I can make some kind of anthropological sense out of Africa”. She functions as a bridge between the unfamiliar African context and the American audiences for whom the play is written. Aside from a chic dress sense, a certain overweening self-confidence, and a penchant for asking impolitic questions, there is little similarity between Hellman and the stage character.

Kate Woodrow makes possible a comparison for the audience between South Africa’s racial politics and America’s deep South. She is astounded at the differences between the American blacks she had surveyed in Harlem, and the South Africans she is meeting:

...I don't see why they're so *completely*
different from American Negroes...Look...I did a survey on
juvenile delinquency in Harlem once, and *everybody* talked to
me. And frankly too. I never heard such bitter things in
all my life—against the government, against the relief
agencies, against all the whites...

Viertel

(With a hint of irony)

Maybe the Negroes in your country—the Northern Negroes
anyway—do have a little freedom, comparatively. They
can vote, they can move about freely, they have some rights
in the courts, I understand...Here, it's more like your
South—on the day of a lynching, let's say—with every
Negro in constant fear...Or, to put it another way, South
Africa is what America would be if your Congressman
Rankin were President and could re-write your Constitution
to conform to his idea of a perfect Mississippi...Do you
see the picture?

Kate

(Manner chi-chi)

Back home we never *mention* the South: It went with the wind.

⁷ To assist readers I have provided brief notes in the text on some of these references, such as “Congressman Rankin” and the “Teapot Dome” scandal, topical details which have faded from popular memory.

Viertel misses the reference to *Gone with the Wind*, thereby confirming his foreign credentials despite an easy familiarity with America. The passage also deftly delineates South Africa as like-but-not-like the American racial terrain, allowing the audience to identify with South African racial bigotry while experiencing an exculpatory remoteness. The effect is to make Viertel the archetypal insider-outsider figure, a displaced but knowledgeable go-between linking America and South Africa, one who is also the universal moral authority in the play and the locus of ideas.

Bright's biggest challenge is to concertina the inter-generational Oedipal tensions which play themselves out at length in the books to fit the confined scope of a three-act play. The presiding influence of Freud is announced early on and persists to inform Viertel's arguments in the climactic trial scene. When Kate Woodrow jokingly denies causing the drought in John's village, she swears "—on the Bible—on Freud", giving the two authorities equal standing. In the books, the Oedipal triangle of John, John's deceased father (the much admired senior *nganga* Chavafambira) and John's uncle, the egregious usurper Charlie, who following custom has married his mother, the compliant Nesta, develops over long years with many unexpected turns and setbacks. But in the play John's girlfriend and wife-to-be is herself called Nesta and is described as "very like his mother", so John's Oedipal destiny is sealed with compact intensity. Unfortunately, the significance of the girl's name will remain obscure to those unfamiliar with the books. Similarly, whereas in the books the unfortunate Mdlawini kills a relatively peripheral character, David Mohali, believing him to be an evil spirit and so precipitating the climactic murder trial, in the play Bright cuts to the quick and has Mdlawini "accidentally" kill Charlie, the usurping Uncle, under John's malign influence, thus placing John at the focal point of the Oedipal conflict. The Shakespearean connection, that fundamental metaphor of early Freudianism which gives the play its name, is made explicit for the audience:

...our friend
John is a black Hamlet—complete with Oedipus conflict
unresolved, murderous vacillation, and—
(Points to Charlie's hut)
—a local Claudius...the parallel is astonishing, in almost
every detail—both in cause and effect.

Bright's telling theatrical innovation—whether or not he had bruited the idea with Sachs must remain moot—is the great "thought-experiment" of Act 3 scene 2, a *coup de théâtre* in which "victims" and "perpetrators" from the harrowing trial scene are made to change places. The toxic South African

racial dispensation meets its symbolic comeuppance. Viertel becomes the Judge, Kate Woodrow and Nesta, barristers for the defence. John Chavafambira displaces Viertel as the expert witness, the former Judge and Assessors are put in the dock, and a jury of ordinary black citizens with Mdlawini as foreman is installed to see justice done. While the passage peremptorily assumes, without argument, the superiority and appropriacy of trial by jury (the American practice) over South Africa's use of a judge and assessors in a very different political context, this factual short-cut deliberately highlights a form of inclusive, egalitarian democracy proposed as urgently desirable.⁸ The episode also cements the play's links to the American civil rights movement, the international platform Sachs wanted his work to reach. The imaginary transmutation achieved in this scene facilitates a great release of ideological and emotional pressure: the hurts and injustices which political repression has smothered can burst into the open, articulate at last. The episode propounds a revolutionary platform foregrounding many of the political and social ills implied and dramatised in the text but never openly expressed. It envisions the end of apartheid before the Nationalist scourge had properly begun, and the end is not vengeance (as with Hamlet) but justice. Considering the play was copyrighted before apartheid legislation had taken hold in South Africa—the Nationalists achieved their slender majority only in 1948—in this scene *Black Hamlet* offers a remarkably prescient anticipation of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the mid-1990s, that brave reconciliatory effort to excise or cauterize some of the wounds of apartheid.⁹

⁸ Mdlawini's trial is presided over by a judge and two assessors, possibly another instance of Sachs "updating" Bright's play. In *Black Hamlet* and *Black Anger*, Mdlawini undergoes trial by jury, even though by this time in South Africa jury trials had become increasingly rare. Arguments for or against the appropriateness of the jury system in South Africa turn on how best to mitigate issues of class and race in a deeply divided society. See South African Law Commission, Issue Paper 6, for informed discussion.

⁹ Bright may have developed the device by upending Sachs's musings in *Black Hamlet* about the opacity of human character and the small likelihood of his receiving justice were his own motivations to go on trial:

Judges never understand the men they try, I told myself, and then caught at the word. Try...Yes—I was on trial now. The coloured man, silent, lifeless with a masked face, appeared to be the judge; Tembu, vindictive and inwardly aggressive, the prosecutor; and Simon, the simpleton, the jury. Was I to place myself in the hands of these hostile men, and protest to them my innocence? Didn't I myself, a Jew, belong to a people ceaselessly driven from pillar to post? (1996, 286).

The device could be wonderfully effective theatrically. The fantasy scene's forceful and dignified polemic, while it might need some intelligent cutting, offers directors scope for extravagant theatrics and startling stage effects because the whole episode is wildly hallucinatory: wish fulfilment let loose to assuage a guilt-ridden polity. In marked contrast, the abrupt final scene returns the audience to a very cold reality and the play ends baldly with John Chavafambira being deported to Southern Rhodesia, forbidden to practice as *nganga* in South Africa. I suspect this dodgy "resolution" may have been influenced by John Bright's sympathy with Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles—this was the burden of his playscript *City of Angels*—but deporting the problem of African superstition and traditional psychic practices to neighbouring Rhodesia, as if migrancy were the problem and the territorial integrity of South Africa paramount, makes for an unsatisfying, legalistic, "Trumpian" outcome. Africa's traditional life-worlds take no cognisance of shallow political borders.

Why *Black Hamlet* Was Lost

It remains only to suggest why Bright's play never made it to Broadway. What he and Sachs were attempting by creating a transatlantic theatrical transposition of essentially southern African subject matter is of significant interest to Sachs scholars, even though the play's putative impact in America must obviously remain conjectural. The script sought to make a hitherto unrecognised contribution to the ongoing Black Atlantic discourse, a controversial intervention by two white writers seeking to articulate an "east-west" point of view within a complex stream of literary and dramatic influence which tended to flow more strongly from America to Africa.¹⁰ At the very least, the recovery of the playscript poses the question of whether this piece of anti-racist theatre about South Africa, written during the uneasy interregnum between segregation and the dogmatic advent of grand apartheid, could have found not only a place on American stages, but a response in the black American political psyche. How might it have been received and would its relevance to the contemporary civil rights movement have registered with general American audiences? These questions are today imponderable, irrecoverably hypothetical. In contrast, reasons for the play's failure to earn a New York staging come down to obvious and

¹⁰ The influence was not wholly one-sided. Sol Plaatje had certainly made an impact (Willan 2018). Charlotte Maxeke left an indelible impression on W.E.B. du Bois (Masilela 1996) and Booker T. Washington interacted fruitfully with both John Dube (Marable 1974) and D.D.T. Jabavu (Brandon 1972), among many equally significant encounters.