



Communicating social inclusiveness¹: Paul Slabolepszy's *Fordsburg's Finest*² (1997)

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Abstract

Communicating social inclusiveness: Paul Slabolepszy's *Fordsburg's Finest* (1997)

*Paul Slabolepszy is a well-known South African playwright whose socially inclusive plays appeal to broad national and international multi-cultural audiences. His ability to reflect an authentic South African landscape with its stormy political background, diverse cultures and inhabitants, and to evoke empathy for all of his diverse characters within this South African milieu, adds to the dramatic impact of his plays. In his play, **Fordsburg's Finest** (1997), Slabolepszy depicts an empowered woman as the focus of his concern. In this play he takes us on a nostalgic journey of recognition, and with sensitivity and insight relates the return of an exile from America to South Africa. A black woman, Thandi, returns to her place of birth to redefine her heritage and roots. I would also like to demonstrate how Slabolepszy combines various degrees of comedy in order to evoke empathy for Thandi, as well as for his white characters. In so doing he is able to foster social inclusiveness in **Fordsburg's Finest**. Slabolepszy's play also ends on a hopeful note,*

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- 1 In this article, "social inclusiveness" is meant to convey the comprehensive scope of Slabolepszy's work within a South African context. The supposition is that most social groupings would be able to identify with the characters and the essence of what Slabolepszy is trying to convey. Slabolepszy's play actually serves as mirror of and a reflection on the cultural and political dynamics of the South African situation at a certain time and place in South African history.
 - 2 An in-depth study of *Fordsburg's Finest* was done in a section of a Ph.D. thesis (cf. chapter 8.1, *Free at Last* – Van Deventer, 1999:316-345).

for he suggests that by freeing our souls, there is hope for South Africa's emergent democracy.

Opsomming

Die kommunikasie van sosiale inklusiwiteit: Paul Slabolepszy se *Fordsburg's Finest* (1997)

*Paul Slabolepszy is 'n bekende dramaturg wie se sosiaal inklusiewe toneelstukke byval vind by die breë publiek, asook by nasionale en internasionale gehore. Sy vermoë om 'n outentieke landskap te skep teen Suid-Afrika se stormagtige politieke agtergrond, diverse kulture en boorlinge, en om empatie te wek vir al sy uiteenlopende karakters binne 'n Suid-Afrikaanse milieu, verhoog die dramatiese impak van sy toneelstukke. In sy toneelstuk, **Fordsburg's Finest** (1997), val die fokus op 'n sterk, bemagtigde vrou. In hierdie toneelstuk neem hy ons op 'n nostalgiese herkenningsreis. Slabolepszy beeld die terugkeer uit van 'n uitgeweke swart vrou, Thandi, na haar geboorteland, Suid-Afrika. Hierdie vrou keer terug uit Amerika om haar erfenis en verlede te herdefinieer. Slabolepszy kombineer in dié drama verskeie grade van komedie om sodoende empatie te wek vir Thandi asook vir die wit karakters. Sodoende slaag hy daarin om sosiale inklusiwiteit in **Fordsburg's Finest** uit te beeld. Die slot van Slabolepszy se toneelstuk veronderstel ook hoop vir die toekoms en Suid-Afrika se ontluikende demokrasie, mits ons daarin kan slaag om in die proses ook ons gees te bevry.*

1. Introduction

When Paul Slabolepszy's play, *Fordsburg's Finest*, was first performed at the Market Theatre in February 1998, it caused quite a controversy in the press. This began when MacLiam, theatre critic at *The Star Tonight*, who did not like the play, reported to Slabolepszy that it was 'stilted and uncomfortable' and suggested that 'it teetered on the brink of boredom'. Bristowe (1998:25) describes Slabolepszy's reaction as follows:

'Irresponsible' Slabolepszy roared in *The Star Tonight* a few days later. 'You leave your readers with the impression that this is a poorly written, poorly acted and poorly directed play and you fail to relate the sense of wonder, astonishment, laughter and tears – *copious* tears that occur night after night in this play. Why is this the first play of mine that receives immediate standing ovations?' (Bristowe, 1998:25).

One can sympathise with Slabolepszy's anger at the criticism in light of the audience reaction, as he perceived it and the fact that he

admits drawing on personal experience when he wrote the play: "... I never had the sense that I belonged. There's a lot of me in Thandi's story, the displaced exile" (Blignaut, 1998:3). (Slabolepszy was born in England to a Polish father and an English mother). It is Slabolepszy's personal and emotional involvement in his play that, in fact, adds to its authenticity, helps to make his characters more convincing and, overall, intensifies its dramatic impact. In addition, *Fordsburg's Finest* does not boast exclusivity, but is socially inclusive, for it caters for a broad spectrum of South African society, who are instantly able to recognise themselves in his quintessentially South African setting and familiar characters. Blignaut (1998:2) admits as much in his article, "The drinking man's hero", when he describes Slabolepszy as "The man who can take the common interests of the drinking classes and turn them into engaging theatre"; and again in "Much dialogue about nothing" that the play is "solid, entertaining theatre relevant to a refreshingly broad audience" (Blignaut, 1998b:1). Because Slabolepszy concentrates on universal themes such as loneliness, isolation, displacement and racism, his play is not restricted to South African audiences only.

Fordsburg's Finest takes place in the "new" South Africa, in the early summer of 1996 and relates the homecoming of a black woman who as a baby left the country with her parents for America in 1953 and has lived there in exile until now. Thandi returns to South Africa to find and redefine her roots. The play's social inclusiveness is emphasised by its content, for Slabolepszy draws on South Africa's stormy political past – most South Africans and other world citizens are familiar with the ramifications of political exile or have experienced exile in some or other form. The fact that Slabolepszy here focuses on a character personifying the independent, emancipated woman emerging in the new, democratic South Africa is commendable; it provides a refreshing contrast to his angst-ridden male characters, which Greig refers to as the "white male soul facing the abyss" (Slabolepszy, 1994:vii), in previous plays such as *Pale Natives* (1994), *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* (1992) and *Smallholding* (1989).

Slabolepszy contrasts familiar stereotypes by which to evoke laughter in *Fordsburg's Finest*. Simultaneously the play reverberates with the pain of displacement, demonstrating that it is not only blacks who were displaced because of apartheid, but that white South Africans also suffered a great deal as a direct consequence. It is as though Slabolepszy through this play makes a noble attempt to

exorcise the ghosts of apartheid (and his own) by revealing that everyone suffered in the process; nobody was left unscathed.

2. Aim and focus

It is generally accepted that plays are a reflection of social life and manners at a particular time in history. In this regard consider Shershow's (1986:15) contention about the "paradoxical relationship between drama and life" and that comedy through its characters distorts our world, but is simultaneously also representative of our world (Shershow, 1986:16). He also refers to the theatre goer's stubborn insistence that drama should be both a willing suspension of disbelief and, to a large degree, a depiction of the real world (Shershow, 1986:16). Therefore we may accept that many plays, such as Slabolepszy's *Fordsburg's Finest*, are historical beacons that hold up a mirror of events at the time.

Since very little formal writing on Slabolepszy's craftsmanship exists, I wish to shed light on the extent to which he has been able to make involvement possible in his drama, *Fordsburg's Finest*, and realise the potential of comic technique. In this particular play my focus is on how he fosters social inclusiveness by his combination of dramatic technique and comic/tragic elements to evoke empathy for his familiar multi-cultural characters in a post-apartheid South African setting. While acknowledging that audience reaction is varied and interpretation of plays is often restricted to particular performances, I wish to demonstrate that far from being the dismal failure that MacLiam suggests, *Fordsburg's Finest* is in fact a work of imaginative artistry. Consider in this regard Seerveld's observation (1994:61) in his article, "Human responses to art: good, bad, and indifferent":

An artwork or an artistic performance must be responded to first of all *imaginatively* or you miss its meaning. Artworks are *imaginatively* stimulating, *imaginatively* formed, *imaginatively* discussible, *imaginatively* thoughtful. That's what an art work is, if it is art – an object made to be known and responded to *imaginatively* by human subjects in God's world.

I shall attempt to maintain this imaginative approach to Slabolepszy's work by means of close scrutiny of specific passages from the play and relevant discussion in relation to the play as a whole. Again it should be clear that such assessment does not pretend to be devoid of subjectivity and that all plays lend themselves to unique interpretation. Birch's contention that the perception of plays

incorporates “a multiplicity of readings/interpretations” (Birch, 1991: 153) and that “no single interpretation of a text should ever be considered the ‘right’ one” (Birch, 1991:3), reinforces the aforementioned. References to political, social, historical, geographical and racial aspects, as well as class structure, are taken as understood to be the manifestations of social inclusiveness in my discussion and interpretation of the play.

3. Heightening awareness through the comic/tragic mirror

Slabolepszy’s overall approach in *Fordsburg’s Finest* is socially inclusive: by heightening our awareness through the comic/tragic mirror of his characters and setting, he suggests that all South Africans can walk the road of democratic freedom and indeed, inner freedom, through compromise, hope, understanding and love.

For example, Slabolepszy makes the setting clear in his stage directions: “The play takes place in the early summer of 1996” in South Africa. This was a time in South African history when many South Africans felt displaced in their new, democratic environment, after the euphoria of the 1994 elections had worn off. This is exemplified in the play by Freddie’s insistence that he was never responsible for the deaths of any blacks in apartheid South Africa. Freddie’s adamancy is significant, for it largely demonstrates the white man’s need of forgiveness for contributing to the inhumane apartheid system. We are informed that Freddie tried to redeem himself by leaving the police force, but he also admits that as a youth of eighteen years, for lack of knowing any better, he even cried at the death of Verwoerd. Here Slabolepszy reveals the degree to which whites in South Africa were indoctrinated and manipulated, without being aware that they themselves were condoning one of the cruelest judicial systems in the free world: “I cried on the day they shot Verwoerd ...! ... unashamedly! But, then – please tell me – what else you s’posed to do when you’re 18 years of age and you don’t know any different?” (p. 35)³

Mutually inclusive in this familiar South African setting, is Slabolepszy’s creation, Thandi, by which he further heightens our awareness through his comic/tragic mirror. We are informed of the old

3 All quotes with page numbers without indication of a source, throughout refer to the 1997 DALRO text of *Fordsburg’s Finest*.

homestead where she was born and that has been replaced by a tatty, used car lot, the premises from where Freddie now runs his second-hand car business. There is much humour and pathos in the picture that Slabolepszy paints of this disillusioned black woman. By combining pathos with humour, Slabolepszy is able to evoke a great deal of empathy for her. The fact that all those near to her and all her remaining relatives in South Africa have either died or fled because of the old apartheid system, adds to the image of Thandi's utter isolation. However, Thandi is not a tragic figure, for Slabolepszy's creation is humorous, spirited, compassionate and perceptive. She is even able to laugh at herself and at those around her who have been indirectly responsible for her sorrow.

Slabolepszy's creation, Freddie, also reflects both comedy and tragedy. Despite Freddie's humorous, optimistic attitude, his life represents a rather futile existence since the loss of his son while defending South Africa's borders in the "old" South Africa. Through this despair of his main characters, Slabolepszy emphasises shared experience between them, demonstrating the paradoxical nature of sorrow and reminding us that, despite our feelings of isolation, we are not alone in our suffering. Consider Bentley's (1966:301) view on comedy and tragedy as being genres that help us to cope with "despair, mental suffering, guilt and anxiety". It is as though Slabolepszy is suggesting that in this process of suffering in *Fordsburg's Finest*, a new type of freedom that transcends political boundaries has emerged to revitalise his main characters. A parallel with the present South African situation can be drawn from this: our pre-occupation with democratic freedom and how it can be attained emphasises our perception of freedom's extrinsic nature. Slabolepszy's subtext seems to be suggesting that true freedom is intrinsic in nature and has to be dealt with emotionally, from the inside, if we really want to be free. What makes *Fordsburg's Finest* exceptional is that the main characters, Freddie and Thandi, are able to come to this realisation by the close of the play and, as such, are set free and find inner peace. In other words, both characters grow to the extent that they are neither excluded nor exclusive by the close of the play; they become part of a socially inclusive world in which meaning and experience are shared.

Fordsburg's Finest is not a political play *per se*, despite its dark undertones and political allusions. Slabolepszy infuses his play with varying degrees of humour and wit to prevent it from becoming dismal. By evoking empathy for his characters and their circumstances, he reinforces the social inclusiveness of the play and

makes his play accessible to most South Africans and those who are able to recognise their own faces in his comic mirror.

Slabolepszy implements light-hearted wit and clever word play throughout the play to evoke laughter. For example, he makes fun of the average South African's awe of anything that is American through Rocco and Freddie's reactions to Thandi's American heritage. Freddie's South African English, pronunciation and typical slang such as "Lekker Like a Krekker" (p. 14) for "Very, very nice" are cases in point. Slabolepszy also makes fun of Freddie when Freddie informs Thandi that: "With friends like that, who needs enemas?" (p. 25) (punning of the word "enemies"): Freddie laborious explanation of what his mistake in diction means and that he is trying to be funny, contrasted with Thandi's deadpan reaction to his "godawful sense of humour" (p. 25), add to the comedy. Slabolepszy inverts the more typical South African stereotypes. By means of Thandi's grim, sophisticated American humour compared with Freddie's almost dull-witted naiveté, as well as Thandi's misunderstanding of Freddie's South African wit and way of expressing himself, Slabolepszy allows for many laughs.

Despite the sympathy with which Slabolepszy's Freddie creation is drawn, Slabolepszy initially exposes Freddie's racist tendencies when Freddie mistakes Thandi for what he regards as a typical black South African woman in search of a second-hand vehicle; he rather condescendingly assumes that she would jump at the opportunity of possessing a car such as a "two-litre Skyline", that would make her feel like the "Queen of Soweto" (p. 5). This type of satiric humour is intensified when Freddie blunders on, assuming that Thandi's husband would probably prefer "a Hi-Ace" (p. 5). In the latter reference Slabolepszy seems to be alluding to the flourishing taxi-business for black people in South Africa, but in the process enhances our perception of the many sources of misunderstanding and latent racism that still existed between blacks and whites in South Africa at the time, for Freddie naturally assumes that Thandi could not simply want a car for private use. Hereby Slabolepszy reiterates the isolation and exclusive status of his characters.

But Slabolepszy also focuses on the universality of human emotions through the shared experience of his main characters, which emphasises the play's appeal to an audience that is not socially exclusive. For example, both Freddie and Thandi want to be loved and accepted; they also want to fit in somewhere and to belong. Slabolepszy succeeds in communicating social inclusiveness through two unlikely and contrasting individuals such as Thandi and

Freddie who, in the end, are able to reach out to each other despite the past and despite their differences. In this way Slabolepszy not only engenders hope for the future South Africa, but for people all over the world who are struggling with similar personal and political issues.

Slabolepszy places Freddie within a certain category in the South African context: he is a lower working-class, simple, white South African who possesses the redeeming quality of compassion. But by the end of the play, Freddie has become a fully-fledged character with whom one is able to identify, and this endears him to one and enables one to share his pain. Like Thandi, Freddie is a loner who has no friends or associates to provide emotional and other support. Freddie's aloneness is reiterated when he jokes about himself and tells Thandi that she's "looking at a One Man Band here. A Solo Artist ready to take on the world and his brother!" (p. 8). It is through this humorous depiction of a courageous soul who is able to laugh at himself, that Slabolepszy succeeds in evoking empathy for Freddie and people like him. Slabolepszy by implication seems to be suggesting that our ability to laugh at ourselves is liberating and is one of the prerequisites for emotional maturity. At the 1995 American Comedy Awards a handicapped presenter reinforced this type of sentiment when he said: "To laugh at others is cruel; to laugh at ourselves is essential."

The contrast between Freddie's unsophisticated and Thandi's sophisticated humour is responsible for much of the comedy in the early stages of the play. The fact that these two damaged, lonely souls are still able to joke good-humouredly, despite their differences, endears them to one. For example, like Freddie, Thandi is also displaced and this is made clear when she tries to explain to Freddie by joking: "Don't call me 'exile' – please. Sounds like you got some sorta' – physiological ailment of somekind. You're kinda' 'interactively challenged'. A social misfit" (p. 10). (It is ironic that both Freddie and Thandi are unable to adjust and find a niche in society).

4. From exclusion and exclusivity to inclusion and inclusiveness

4.1 Common ground: the "chick" metaphor

Freddie and Thandi first share common ground in their mutual concern for the chick that has fallen from its nest. The chick seems to be Slabolepszy's way of referring to the fragility of the "new" South Africa, the foundation of which is shaky, where trust and hope

have to be rebuilt among people to prevent it from dying at its rebirth. It could also be interpreted as a metaphor for the “new” South Africa, where new relationships have to be nurtured and tenderly cared for in order to survive.

4.2 Comic contrast: comedy/tragedy

Nevertheless, Slabolepszy refrains from overt sentimentality and heavy moralising. With the image of the broken bird still fresh in our memory, Freddie’s amusing story in typically South African vernacular about how he ran down a dog with his car, provides immediate comic relief:

I smacked into this dog once in Albertville – Great Dane. Stupid brak’s up like a shot and he’s following the car, limping along behind me. Ten minutes later, I look in the rear mirror – he’s *still* there ...! ... I’m thinking – jislaaik! – I wind down the window, I’m shouting – *voetsek!* Hell, man ...! What chance you got of getting away with a Hit-and-Run, when the bladdy evidence is following you home? (p. 10).

The play’s socially inclusive status is enhanced when Thandi and Freddie’s conversation alludes to actual apartheid atrocities; for example, Freddie mentions the eviction of the blacks in Sophiatown, a place that Thandi knows by the name of “*Kofifi*” (p. 11). Thandi’s references to the “countrywide clampdowns” (p. 11) by the apartheid government against blacks in 1953 also allude to actual events in South Africa at the time.

Similarly Freddie, from a white perspective, alludes to actual events in present-day South Africa, which despite its new democracy, is not all that it is made out to be. Freddie tells Thandi of a South Africa where Third World standards prevail, where one’s life and personal property are in constant danger and where mass protest action, looting, violence and economic deterioration are the order of the day. Because Freddie’s tale is conveyed in a typically South African English, and because he attempts making fun of his desperate situation, Slabolepszy enables one to simultaneously laugh at, and empathise with Freddie.

Welcome to the Third World, lady. Purchase of a car these days goes something like this – (*making a ‘gun’ with his finger, gruffly*) “Shaddap! Get out! And leave a’ engine running ...!’ ... I mean, why go to the trouble of buying a secondhand car anymore when you can pick ‘em up free a’ charge on any old street corner? ... Time was when I carried a gun, you know – in

case it ever happened to me. Not anymore. Woke up one day, I thought – to hell with it! I'm getting too old for this. If a bloke wants my wheels – let him take 'em. Take everything. Take all I own. In fact, it's got to the point where I've started wishing that some of that rolling mass action we always hearing about would roll past my door here ... somebody chuck a nice-fat molotov cocktail over the fence and end all my worries. Boem! Bang! Finish and Klaar. Grab the insurance and head for the hills. Fish for a living. Sit under a tree (p. 12).

Slabolepszy's comic technique here corresponds to Kern's (1980: 72) interpretation of death and violence being able to evoke laughter and Kerr's contention that "There is no act in life that is not, when it is seen whole, both comic and tragic at once" (Kerr, 1968: 28). This irony inherent in comedy is also echoed by one of the characters in a Woody Allen film, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), in which a film producer remarks that comedy plus tragedy equals time: when Abraham Lincoln dies it is tragic; given time, one is able to joke about such a tragic incident. This angle to comedy suggests that when we are able to achieve distance from the tragic, whether it be literally or figuratively speaking, we are able to laugh and joke about matters that are indeed tragic (Van Deventer, 1999:8-9). This can be associated with what one interprets as black comedy and which McFadden (1982:151) regards as becoming "an attempt to make chaos acceptable, or at least interesting, without allowing it to become orderly or meaningful". In the above, Slabolepszy paints the South African situation from two different perspectives: both Freddie and Thandi's stories evoke empathy, even though Thandi's lacks humour. The way in which Freddie expresses himself and the fact that he actually makes fun of tragic circumstances such as violence and crime in the "new" South Africa should evoke much laughter. However, the laughter is that of recognition, which enables one to empathise with Freddie and his circumstances. Simultaneously, Slabolepszy highlights Thandi and Freddie's mutually shared suffering and how they are drawn to each other because of this. Through their sharing of common ground, Slabolepszy demonstrates how his characters have matured and grown from being excluded and exclusive, to being included and part of a socially inclusive environment.

Thandi is compassionate like Freddie, for when she realises that she is hurting his feelings, she starts communicating with Freddie at his level. However, Freddie inadvertently blunders when he, for example, mentions his lack of a Night Watchman, otherwise known as a "Boss Boy" (p. 19). Freddie reveals that he has a conscience

about the iniquities of the past, for he is quick to explain that a “Boss Boy’s a name we have for a ... it’s got nothing to do with ... it’s sort of a kind of a ... a figure of ... speech” (p. 19) and is also quick to change the subject for fear of affronting her. Freddie’s honesty, lack of social graces and sincere attempt at covering up his mistake, simultaneously make one laugh and endear him to one. However, in this example, Slabolepszy once again touches on a sensitive issue by satirising a form of address that is insulting to the person being addressed, and which is commonly used by whites in South Africa to address black, grown-up working males, especially in the “old” South Africa. Such a form of address becomes even more insulting when one realises that many traditional blacks in South Africa have to be initiated into manhood through ceremonial rites according to their custom and that it is then a tremendous insult to address someone who has been initiated into manhood as a “boy”, when he has already earned recognition as a “man” among his people.

When Freddie starts visualising with Thandi what her old house must have looked like, they even find the spot where Thandi was born supposedly, or would like to believe she was born. However, Thandi is not even afforded this luxury of belonging somewhere because she realises that she is not “spiritually attuned” (p. 20) to her ancestors, as black custom requires. Thandi relates how shocked and disillusioned she was to arrive at her envisaged Utopia. Slabolepszy emphasises her displacement in a world that is alien to her and which she is unable to identify with. Slabolepszy’s comic description of a Third World landscape within the South African context also evokes empathy through our laughter of recognition:

The day I arrived, I checked into a hotel at the airport and took a cab to Soweto ...I figured I oughta get right to the heart of it, right? The sooner the better. Hoo-boy – talk about Culture Shock! The ride on the highway was straight outa’ Disneyland – without the crashbars and the candy floss. We’re dodging minivans and tow trucks, luxury sedans – coulda’ sworn we passed a mule-cart! Before we know it, we’re bumping along this dirt road from hell. Block upon block of jelly-mould shacks and a ... swirling mass of humanity. The cabby turns round – smile half a mile wide – he says: ‘Yo, this is Meadowlands’. Meadowlands!? It was like – *my God!* – that’s the song, right? The song my father played over and over on his old reed pipe, and here I am – I’m right in the middle of it! (p. 20).

Thandi shares her deep sense of loss with Freddie: “There is no pain in not belonging. Only a sense of – emptiness” (p. 21). Freddie

shows that he is a caring person when he plays Thandi a tape of the penny whistle song, "Meadowlands", to bring "the true sound of Jo'burg" (p. 22) to her. He even invites her to dance: "I can't do a *toi-toi*, but I sure as hell can *tiekiedraai*" (p. 23). Here Slabolepszy paints an authentic South African picture: "*toi-toi*" is a well-known South African rhythmic dance by which blacks move together at, for example, protest marches or festive gatherings; "*tiekiedraai*" again, is a well-known word known by most South Africans, meaning a twirling motion that forms part of traditional Afrikaner folk dances.

Although Freddie and Thandi share a different world-view, they are able to articulate and share their aloneness. For example, Freddie shares his son's death on the border with Thandi and she is able to share his pain because, as she explains, "I've been there" (p. 29). In this way Slabolepszy demonstrates how mutual pain and struggle are able to unify his characters; he also seems to be alluding to man's capacity for change and that those of us who are divided are capable of reconciliation, despite our differences.

Thandi's pain is evident when she tells Freddie of her childhood days in New York, how her mother died and she was made to feel special by being called "Thandeka" (an African word for "Princess"); how her father kept her dream of Africa alive by telling her that her "real home was never a windowless box in this ... fortress of concrete and steel. It was a green pasture somewhere under a big African sky ..." (p. 31). When Freddie tells her that he could never live anywhere else than in Africa, she shares one of her most painful moments with Freddie by telling him: "Neither could my parents. I guess that's why they drank themselves to death" (p. 31). There is much pathos in her description of her mother's grief (Slabolepszy's allusion to the ancestral bones of Thandi's family that slowly choke her mother to death like lifeless stones, reinforces the image of death and desolation that is so particularly effective in the passage below):

She could never bring herself to sing the songs he sang so easily, so powerfully, so – so right from the depths of his soul. They stuck in her throat like dry bones. Like ... stones that ... slowly choked her (p. 31).

Through Thandi and Freddie Slabolepszy implies that people are unique individuals who are able to adapt to new circumstances, transcend petty differences and share their most intimate, painful moments with one another. Freddie's heartfelt empathy for Thandi's plight is clear from the following:

I wish your house was still here. I wish you coulda' come along here, and ... found the path and the flowers and all the pretty things you were looking for ... (p. 32).

However, it soon becomes clear that saying sorry is not enough, for Thandi wants more than just pretty things to come back to, she wants "Answers as to *why!*" (p. 32). Freddie is unable to answer her, but clumsily attempts to relieve her sadness and bitterness momentarily by trying to be humorous. In the following, Slabolepszy captures the mood of the moment, demonstrating that, although the sufferer himself can perhaps only truly experience the extent of individual pain, there is nobility in the other party's attempts in at least trying to empathise, share and relieve that pain. In so doing he not only evokes empathy for Thandi, but also for Freddie:

He holds out his hand to her, keeps it extended. She takes some time breaking out of her mood, getting up, slowly moving to the door. Freddie indicates the car seat outside, makes way for her to pass.

FREDDIE: Take a seat, *madamoselle*. Front row.

She puts on a brave face and sits down on the car seat. Freddie activates the coloured lights, remaining on the top step.

FREDDIE: *Voila!*

The effect is magical in a sad, tatty kind of way.

FREDDIE: (*Brightly*) Howzat? (p. 33).

4.3 The empowered woman

By depicting Thandi as a strong woman, Slabolepszy again reinforces the play's social inclusiveness, for not only in South Africa, but also all over the world, women would be able to identify with Thandi's strength despite her suffering. In this regard one calls to mind Mhlope's *Have you seen Zandile?* (1988 [1986]), which Stephen Gray (1990:85) refers to as "liberation theatre" in his article on women in South African theatre. In this play Zandile is a black disempowered female, who in the end reveals her hidden feminine strengths and qualities. Similarly, Slabolepszy through Thandi seems to be alluding to the newly empowered South African woman that has been emerging since the 1990s. For example, Thandi is concerned about animal suffering and forces Freddie to respect her and share her concern. She is sophisticated and poised, her language and bearing reflecting her dignity and breeding, in contrast to the roughness and down-to-earth language employed by Freddie.

4.4 Racism and class structure

Rocco is Slabolepszy's stereotype, white-trash Afrikaner creation through which he is able to implement ribald, darkly comic/satiric humour to expose the level of racism and differences in class structure that still exist in the "new" South Africa (Slabolepszy clearly criticises the boss/underling relationship peculiar to a racist society). The brief interlude between Rocco, Freddie's brother, and Thandi, simultaneously also provides immediate comic relief. In the following example, Rocco mistakes Thandi for the cleaning lady and because she does not respond to him, he starts speaking "down" at her in coarse South African jargon, in order that she might understand him. Our laughter would be that of recognition and through humour that is simultaneously comic, tragic (and offensive, even) Slabolepszy is able to evoke much empathy for sophisticated, intelligent people such as Thandi who have to suffer fools and racists such as Rocco. Rocco adds insult to injury by making lecherous sexual advances to Thandi even though he thinks she is inferior by virtue of her sex and skin colour:

ROCCO: Who the hell're you? (*Spotting her apron*) You the girl? (*No response*) Since when you work here? (*Thandi is rooted to the spot, aghast*) Never mind. Wheresas' boss? Boss ...! *Waarsie baas? Makulu Baas?* (*She remains speechless*) ... 'You quite a sexy little bitch ...' (p. 23-24).

4.5 Catharsis

When Thandi learns that Freddie is an ex-policeman, she gives vent to all her pent-up feelings of anger, resentment and sadness. There is much pathos in the picture of Thandi finally breaking down and sobbing her heart out. Slabolepszy reverts to straightforward dramatic writing when Freddie and Thandi unburden themselves. There is little to smile or laugh at as Thandi poignantly bares her soul to the audience, accusing their guilty conscience outright:

Mamma ...! Can you see me, Mamma? I've done it. I've come home. I've come home, like I always said I would. (*A tender, heart-felt plea*). And now you can come home too, Mamma! It's OK now. It's OK now. It's here ... I'm here ... we're here ... we're home ... we're home ... home ... home ... (p. 38).

Freddie is unable to comfort Thandi, but does try to offer some consolation. It is through his simple, pragmatic advice and his own suffering, that things seem to revert to normal after Thandi's dramatic outburst:

I can't make it right for you. I can't bring it back. If saying sorry is not enough, I can offer you my prayers, for what they worth ... We have to accept what's given to us in this life – hard as it is. Lord, I should know ... This is life. This is how it is (p. 38).

Blignaut's (1998a:3) interpretation that "What Slabolepszy wants to say is that we must deal with our past; that there is not some mythical, greener pasture on the other side" accurately pinpoints the subtext in the above passage.

After both Freddie and Thandi have cleansed their souls, Thandi is even able to admit quite jokingly that, although she "had this crazy notion about roots" (p. 40), she now realises that there is no turning back for her anymore, and that she carries the land within her, even if she has moved away. Slabolepszy's underlying message is clear: through this type of cleansing of our souls or catharsis, we, too, will be able to move beyond apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. In this regard Slabolepszy's citation of Adam Small in the Foreword to *Fordsburg's Finest*, reinforces such an interpretation:

You have to visit yesterday
to make sense of tomorrow ...

It is when a battered, "literally smoking" (p. 41), half-drunk Rocco reappears on the scene that dramatic justice is meted out to him, for Slabolepszy allows many laughs at Rocco's expense, hereby restoring the comic equilibrium that was maintained before Thandi and Freddie's dramatic interlude of soul searching, confession and catharsis.

Shershow comments on the paradoxical nature of comedy by referring to George Bernard Shaw's belief of "future" that turns "the comic convention of optimism into a vision of the possible" (Shershow, 1986:126). In spite of the fairy tale quality of the future envisaged through the ending of *Fordsburg's Finest*, the overall optimism of the play is uplifting and suggests "a vision of the possible". In a biblical sense, almost, Slabolepszy's ending suggests that there is hope for the future, for everything in life is able to be conquered through understanding and compassion, despite hardship and suffering (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13: "Meanwhile these three remain: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love").

The play closes to the strains of "Meadowlands", Freddie and Thandi firm friends, trying to carry bundles on their heads, proud of their successful attempts at mastering this African art and beating the "Gender Issue" (p. 45) through this. By means of this type of

imagery, together with the rich, underlying subtext, Slabolepszy is able to intensify the dramatic impact of his play. For example, the "bundles" could be interpreted as South Africa's burdens from the past; the characters' attempts at mastering of this art could in turn be interpreted as graceful attempts, without awkwardness, at overcoming problems of the past, by bearing the burdens together, and by compromising. By implication, Slabolepszy seems to be communicating social inclusiveness by his suggestion that this inner peace or freedom is not only what his characters, but also all South Africans, should be striving for.

5. Conclusion

The pathos of Slabolepszy's two main characters is enhanced through comedy and makes identification with them possible. In *Fordsburg's Finest* Slabolepszy has revealed his comic range, and has been able to extend the function of his comedy, which informs, teaches, provokes imaginative reflection on compassion, understanding and inner freedom; his comedy also evokes various responses such as laughter at and with, enjoyment and empathy. The tragic undertones of the play are also enhanced by Slabolepszy's comic approach that highlights comedy's affinity with tragedy and to a large degree demonstrates Kerr's idea of comedy's being able to extend itself "in the presence of tragedy" (Kerr, 1968:145). Hough's interpretation of *Fordsburg's Finest* corresponds with the above when he describes Slabolepszy's typical style as contrasting robust comedy with poignant tragedy, that allows his diverse characters, Thandi and Freddie, to attain catharsis by bringing them to a point where they are able to open the windows of their souls to each other and which sets them on the road to healing (Hough, 1998:28).

At the close of *Fordsburg's Finest* one realises that its significance lies in Slabolepszy's attempt at what I shall call reconciliatory theatre. From positions on the "outside" (exclusion), Slabolepszy enables Thandi and Freddie to move to the "inside" (inclusion) through shared experiences and suffering; in so doing, they are reconciled. The underlying suggestion is that we, too, can be optimistic about the future if we are prepared to reconcile through sharing and compromise, as they have done.

Hough commends *Fordsburg's Finest* in this regard with his comment that Athol Fugard promised the groundwork for reconciliatory confrontation between black and white on the South African

stage in his drama, *Playland* (1992), and that in *Fordsburg's Finest* this promise is fulfilled (Hough, 1998:28).

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