

Review

A case of art imitating life in Paul Slabolepszy's *angst-ridden Pale Natives* (1994)

M. A. Van Deventer

Department of Communication Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, Central University of Technology, Bloemfontein, Free State, South Africa. E-mail: mvdvente@cut.ac.za.

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Pale natives is one of the gems in Slabolepszy's dramatic repertoire. The play focuses on the surviving clan of white males in South Africa, with South Africa's imminent changeover of government as a backdrop. With typical machismo, Rabelaisian (Rabelaisian humour refers to vulgar use of bodily (scatological), sexual humour through exaggeration and suspension of disbelief (Walter-Barden, October 6:2010; accessed on 31 May 2012: http://voices.yahoo.com/rabelaisian_humor-7058140.htm) and comic humour, Slabolepszy relates the personal angst of his five forty-plus male characters facing and handling their lives, in a turbulent South Africa. By poignantly combining pathos, satire and comic humour, Slabolepszy enables us to empathise with them. The positive note on which the play ends suggests hope for the future, but this hope is ambiguous. The comic mirror Slabolepszy holds up to his audience ultimately questions the fate of present-day South Africa's disillusioned "pale natives".

Key words: Comedy, South Africa, imitation.

INTRODUCTION

On the surface *Pale Natives* (1994) is a straightforward, two-act play about a group of school friends who get together after an interval of twenty-five years to celebrate the freedom of the bridegroom-to-be, Dave, before his third marriage. The inevitable night of machismo debauchery and drunken fun of this class of 1966 was appropriately billed as "that most bizarre and morally questionable of modern Western-male rituals - the Stag Party" in a programme advertisement for the Market Theatre in 1994. However, Slabolepszy's initial revelation about these "pale natives" in his play is misleading. In the preface to *Pale Natives*, Slabolepszy informs us that the "Action takes place over the course of one night in the early Summer of 1993", a time in South African history that was marked by political uncertainty and change. The uncertainty and change to a large degree parallel the inner conflict of Slabolepszy's mid-forties male characters in *Pale Natives*, who are plagued

by fear, uncertainty and dissatisfaction with their lives in a changing South African landscape.

In *Pale Natives* Slabolepszy shows a marked development, by questioning the deep displacement of the white South African male in South Africa in 1993. Therefore Willoughby's remark in the Financial Mail of 4 February 1994 about Slabolepszy's being "the chief claimant of Athol Fugard's crown" is justified.

The question remains whether South Africa's pale natives have at all changed or are they a mirror of the white South African male of the 21st century? Are Slabolepszy's pale natives an indication of what has become or will become of the South African white male? Albeit that *Pale Natives* is a play imitating South African life and at best is a *willing suspension of disbelief*, (Willing suspension of disbelief is defined as: "Temporarily and willingly setting aside our beliefs about reality in order to enjoy the make-believe of a play ... the

audience members must set aside their sense of 'what's real' for the duration of the play ...") (Wheeler, 2012: web.cn. keukesler/lit_terms-W.html), are there similarities between Slabolepszy's *pale natives* and the white male of the twenty-first century? An analysis of the subtext of *Pale Natives* as social commentary suggests that what is left of South Africa's pale natives leaves much to be desired. According to the Human Sciences Research Council (Erasmus and Breier, 2009), "South Africa's skills shortages ... of professionals and artisans in particular, need to be seen in relation to a number of issues that arise from the country's apartheid history, as well as post-apartheid attempts to rectify historical imbalances". Johnson (2009) reiterates South Africa's brain drain in his article, "Fourteen years after apartheid, why are the best and the brighter leaving Africa's most successful state?" If one were to analyse Slabolepszy's characters as a microcosm of the present-day South African white male, the implications of the white males that have remained behind in South Africa, are far reaching.

The familiar, typically South African middle-class accents and dialogue extend the comedy in *Pale Natives*, for by exaggerating and making fun of the way in which a large section of South Africans speaks, Slabolepszy uses language as a comic tool to evoke laughter. Wilmot commends Slabolepszy's dialogue in *Pale Natives* as coming "off the streets and out of the locker room, used to create living, breathing personalities" (Pretoria News, 27 January 1993). However, the greatest strength of *Pale Natives* lies in Slabolepszy's success at portraying with perceptive insight the personal *angst* and vulnerability of his believable, white South African characters, which Greig refers to as the "white male soul facing the abyss" (Greig in his introduction to *Mooi Street and other Moves* cited in Slabolepszy, 1994:7). However, despite its tragic undertones, Slabolepszy's razor-sharp wit prevents the play from becoming too bleak. The words of Paul McCartney's 1965 hit song, *Yesterday*, which features in this play, sum up the inner quality of hovering sadness and nostalgia in *Pale Natives*: "... Suddenly ... I'm not half the man I used to be ... There's a shadow hanging over me ... Oh, Yesterday came suddenly ..."

Slabolepszy's title seems to be alluding to a surviving clan of white natives in South Africa who are stuck in a situation against which they are powerless. An underlying socio-political comment on the white minority predicament in a country, which in fact belongs and has belonged to a black majority for many centuries, is implicit. However, *Pale Natives* also to a large degree interrogates the morality of the surviving white male in South Africa, which goes far beyond South Africa's stormy political pressures. Willoughby's summary of the play in the *Financial Mail* (4 February 1994), is particularly insightful: "Ultimately, *Pale Natives* interro-

gates the middle-class white predicament - we're pale natives in a sunburnt land".

Slabolepszy suggests that all of his five white, male characters in *Pale Natives* are lacking in some or other way. By creating these life-like persona on stage who are simultaneously funny and pathetic, Slabolepszy is able to evoke empathy from his audience for recognisably South African, but universally human characters, situations and dilemmas.

THE CHARACTERS

Slabolepszy clearly describes Ashley as a distinguished company director of forty-five, who is "Urbane and slightly aloof", but who is "nonetheless able to let his hair down among old and trusted friends". His humorous description of Kyle in his stage directions is also telling: "One time Lady Killer and High Operator, he has well and truly shot his bolt. Forever into get-rich-quick schemes, he constantly strives to regain his lost youth". Although this description is an amusing exaggeration of the typical male, macho show-off, it immediately also suggests that Kyle is lacking as a human being. Kyle reminds one of Slabolepszy's earlier characters, Vince, in his breakthrough play, *Saturday Night at the Palace* first performed in 1982. Both Vince and Kyle are very aggressive and search for unattainable ideals. Kyle also seems like the older version of Slabolepszy's depiction of Vince in *Saturday Night at the Palace* (1985); both characters in the end also succumb because of their limitations as human beings. However, Kyle is also a tragic figure, for Slabolepszy paints him as an individual who is unable to come to terms with his homo-erotic roots.

Slabolepszy's mocking description of Eddie as forty-four years old "Bulky, balding and gone-to-seed, hen-pecked and repressed, he is nevertheless one of life's optimists; a Rising Damp Remover of long-standing and no-mean repute", is amusing. He can be labelled as a typical, not-too-clever, hen-pecked husband whose life is mediocre, despite his elevated blue-collar job status.

In familiar South African jargon, Eddie confesses his love of people to Ashley and how he enjoys talking to them "... these days everyone is like - going through a hard time, you know, so I just say to them - hey, you must maar hang in there, hey! You must vas-byt." Here Slabolepszy makes Eddie more human and easily identifiable as a well-meaning person, despite his limited mental faculties and way in which he expresses himself. Through Eddie's use of comic, mixed Afrikaans/English words and expressions such as "vas-byt" and "must *maar* hang in there", Slabolepszy is able to extend his image of people needing the type of love and encouragement a simple person such as Eddie is able to give. The Afrikaans "vas-byt" means literally to bite on your teeth,

and greatly adds to the image we have of South Africa as a "sunburnt land" and its white survivors. Through our laughter of recognition, Slabolepszy is able to evoke empathy for South Africa's pale natives. Eddie's words are ironic for they reveal that although he is not the cleverest of people, he is able to recognise human suffering in others. It is through Eddie's simple, humorous words that Slabolepszy seems to be encouraging his audience not to give up hope:

You mustn't fight against the things in life. You must maar make a plan. Because you can always make a plan, Ash. Always.

The well-meaning Eddie character with all his shenanigans is also used to relieve much of the tension initiated by Kyle, reminding one of the comic convention of using a clown or trickster figure as a diversion or to provide insight. Eddie at times even takes on a comic-tragic stature, for example, at the close of *Pale Natives*, when he excitedly suggests that there is hope for the future, without realising that Kyle is lying dead in the drinks tub.

Roux, Slabolepszy's most toned down character, is a forty-five year-old sales representative at a petroleum company, who is struggling because of a few bad investments, but is able to "take a stiff drink with the best of them", according to Slabolepszy's stage directions.

Slabolepszy describes the forty-three year-old bridegroom-to-be, Dave, as a person who has problems holding his drink and who runs a "thriving Car Air-Conditioning and Immobiliser Business". Despite his material success, we suspect Dave has problems relating to the opposite sex and family life, because he is not able to make his marriages last. Dave lies inert on the floor throughout most of the action in the play, which could be interpreted as his way of escaping the realities and responsibilities of his unsatisfactory life. Dave's inaction on the stage also becomes a symbol of the inertia of Slabolepszy's "pale natives".

Slabolepszy's satiric mirror is clearly South African. *Pale Natives* is set in the "Private Entertainment's Lounge' of a modest Sports Club in the South-eastern suburbs of Johannesburg", but Slabolepszy emphasises the lack of "CLASS OR DIGNITY" usually associated with these second-rate sports clubs, which would be familiar to most South African white males.

Eddie's appearance on stage is enough to raise a laugh or two for he sports a "HIGHLY UNFASHIONABLE LIME GREEN SAFARI SUIT AND BEIGE SHOES WITH WHITE SOCKS" and "HIS SUIT POCKET IS LINED WITH FIVE OR SIX BALLPOINT PENS. Slabolepszy is very perceptive at depicting a recognisable South African type by means of his not-so-clever Eddie creation whose attempts at looking like a distinguished, successful businessman are totally defeated by his attire and

snatches of the ever-popular "Achy Breaky Heart" which he invariably sings while tugging at a well-used music centre. Eddie strikes an extremely comic pose, something between ultra "Boere kitsch" and the conservative Afrikaner right-wing type who, despite his laborious efforts at getting into the swing of things, fails miserably to do so. Through Eddie, Slabolepszy also alludes to South Africa's black heritage, which is both informative and amusing - Eddie greets Ashley with an "ETHNIC DOUBLE-HANDSHAKE", which is supposed to mean, according to Eddie, "that your two spirits like combine together and then fly off into the sunset. Like - a Bird of Freedom, Bird of Peace". This type of handshake is peculiar to black South African culture, and Eddie's exaggerated, simplistic explanation of this black custom evokes laughter. Simultaneously, Slabolepszy's ironic allusion to the *lack of peace and freedom* in the sunburnt land's changing political landscape is implicit. This impression is reaffirmed by Roux's rather pessimistic rejoinder: "As long as it doesn't crap on your head", to Eddie's bird explanation about what Eddie considers to be "the new handshake for the new South Africa". Slabolepszy indirectly also seems to be making fun of the emphasis on peace and freedom in the "new" democratic South Africa emerging at the time and this immediately recalls a similar comic approach in his 1995 hit play, *Tickle to Fine Leg* (No script of this play was as yet available at the time this article was written), in which Corky's dog is called "Freedom".

Ashley rather condescendingly refers to Eddie's blue-collar job with the words, "Something to be said, I suppose, for working with one's hands?" and Roux retaliates with, "Spends half his life knee-deep in mud and slush, but he's as happy as a pig in shit." Slabolepszy here is able to evoke laughter through clever word play, by which he targets the mundane existence of the "small man" with the "small" mind, who is too conditioned to realise that there is more to life than merely existing. What Slabolepszy makes Eddie say is both clever and comic, for example, when Eddie proudly tells his friends that the motto on the wall at his business is: "Quality is Never Having to Say You're Sorry"; (a comic allusion to the well-known line in the sentimentally romantic film, *Love Story*: "Love means never having to say you're sorry").

When Ashley says, "I didn't know who or what the hell I was 25 years ago ... Sometimes I think I still don't know", his words reveal his identity crisis and hint at his underlying sadness. Ashley and Kyle's homosexual tendencies which found expression in an encounter during their youth, could also be interpreted as what Willoughby in the *Financial Mail* (4 February 1994) refers to as the "homo-erotic roots of male friendship", a theme which Slabolepszy picks at in *Pale Natives*.

Roux's words, "... when you invest all your hard-earned savings with high-flyers, you're bound to belly-flop now

and again” reveal his own sense of failure. Roux’s failing marriage adds to our image of Roux as a person whose life is unfulfilled. Roux’s story of how he managed to get hold of a slaughtered chicken in order to please his father is amusing, but also revealing. There is underlying criticism of the authoritative, cruel father in his story of how he as a young boy had to prove his worth and manhood to his father by slaughtering a chicken: “I’m nine and a half years old - the old man sticks this axe in my hand. He says - let’s see if you are the Fruit of My Loins ...”. This example also seems to be alluding to the Afrikaner cultural heritage in South Africa, where the machismo Afrikaner male is the patriarch and the ‘boss’ of both the family and the Blacks.

Ashley’s homosexuality is nowhere as obvious as when he exits to the toilets in order to comb his hair in front of a mirror on hearing that Kyle has arrived (Slabolepszy here seems to be making fun of the type of gesture one would usually associate with homosexuals). The contrast between the macho Kyle and the gentlemanly, soft-spoken Ashley is able to evoke laughter. Consider, for example, Ashley’s polished manner and how Kyle makes his grand entrance after swearing and blaspheming offstage because of his car that has broken down: “Locally manufactured piece of local shit ...! Affirmative Action se moer, man ...!” Kyle’s banal words are funny, but they also expose typical white racist tendencies in South Africa. Simultaneously, Kyle’s words also echo developments in present-day South Africa. For example, Van Aardt’s article, “Affirmative Action and High Crime Blamed for Shocking Decline of South Africa’s White Population: One Million Whites Leave SA – Study” (*Administrator*, 23 June: 2007) investigates the statistics of South African Whites leaving South Africa for greener pastures from 1995 to 2005, according to the South African Institute of Race Relations. Frans Cronjé, who compiled a report on the aforementioned statistics, predicts that “the white population would continue to shrink ...” (ibid). On the same note, in the article, “Basic Guide to Affirmative Action South Africa”, it is stated that the “policies of affirmative action indirectly give rise to reverse discrimination” and that “... often white males, have to pay for past discrimination and may not get the jobs they deserve” (16 February, 2011: www.humanresourcesouthafrica.co.za).

Through Kyle we immediately recognise a typical South African type: the chauvinistic, “angry young man” (who is not so young anymore), but who thinks the world owes him something and who believes that the way in which to solve problems is through aggression, and by blaming something or somebody. Slabolepszy’s satiric humour also exposes Kyle as a typical white South African racist. Consider the example in which Kyle implies that although Blacks are as stupid as baboons, they are the ones who are taking over in the “new” South Africa. Slabolepszy here targets the racist type of

mentality that still prevails in present-day South Africa:

I mean - three-hundred years ...! That is three centuries to civilise this country And for what ... For a whole buncha’ Branch Managers to come down from the trees and try re-invent the fucking wheel ...!

The fact that we laugh at someone who is being racist, which is actually quite tragic, makes us reassess our impression of the cruelty inherent in satiric comedy.

Kyle’s attire and his foul language betray him at every turn as the typical macho braggart, with few redeeming qualities. However, the way in which Kyle expresses himself cannot fail to amuse. A good example of Slabolepszy’s bald, comic humour is when Kyle lashes out against the defective bulbs that are sold in the shops nowadays, in a type of language that one would easily be able to associate with the belligerent Kyle types of this world:

So what do I do? I do what any reasonable fucker would do under the fucken circumstances - I fucken change it, right? I get a new fucken bulb ... I grab the fucken ladder, up I fucken go - Hey, wow, fuck me ...! Got a fucken light that works again. But for how fucken long?

The above demonstrates the popular comic device that evokes laughter at crudeness or “baseness”. By exaggerating the foul language usually associated with stereotypes such as Kyle, Slabolepszy doubles the comic impact.

Through base humour leaning towards the Rabelaisian, vulgar kind, Slabolepszy is able to capture the atmosphere likely to prevail at a stag party. The following serve as good examples of this: Eddie’s insistence that he was not responsible for the unbearable smell in the toilets and his remark to Kyle that if he forgets the name of Dave’s new bride, he will be “as popular as a fart in a crowded telephone booth”; Eddie’s teasing of Kyle’s sexual prowess and Roux’s information about Kyle’s record time of two-and-a-half weeks when “Kyalami Salami Broberg screwed his way through the entire Matric Class of the Holy Cross Convent”. Slabolepszy is very realistic in his portrayal of a stag party where men usually have few inhibitions, say what they want to say in the type of language they want to (however foul it may be) and where the free flow of alcohol adds to the wholehearted abandonment of all respectability or finesse. A good example of the ribaldly humorous dialogue is the conversation that ensues as a result of Kyle’s reluctance to act as Best Man for Dave:

KYLE: ...Every time I’m Best Man, the marriages fuck out and then everyone blames me.

ROUX: Whose fault is that? You s'posed to kiss the bride, not pomp her

"Pomp" (literally, "to pump") is the crude Afrikaans for "making love", and even more crass than the English word, "fuck", but in the context of Slabolepszy's machismo stag party, it seems realistic. Despite our laughter, it also poses an underlying question: "What in the world has become of Slabolepszy's and, indirectly, of South Africa's pale natives?"

Kyle's explains why he has such a good memory: "(TAPPING HIS HEAD) When you pickle shit in alcohol, it lasts a helluva lot longer". Although Slabolepszy targets Kyle in the above example, there is both pathos and humour in his remark, for the implication is that this pale native has been forced to turn to alcohol in order to blunt the rough edges of his unsatisfactory, unfulfilled life.

THE IMAGE IN THE MIRROR

Act 1 closes on a rowdy note, after Dave at last makes his appearance and "A BEER IS LITERALLY THRUST INTO HIS MOUTH." The friends sing loudly "... WHILE EDDIE FILMS THE PROCEEDINGS (SINGING ALONG ALL THE WHILE) - WE ARE INTO HEAVY DOWN-DOWN SONGS, WITH MUCH FROTH, NOISE AND SQUIRTING, ETC." By means of this machismo humour, Slabolepszy succeeds in capturing the prevailing atmosphere of a stag party very effectively. The same applies to Act 2, which in the beginning is described as a "... POST-PARTY WAR ZONE. THE PLACE IS AWASH WITH GLASSES, BOTTLES, FULL ASHTRAYS AND THE TELL-TALE DEBRIS OF SERIOUS PARTYING. THE LARGER TABLE UPSTAGE GROANS UNDER THE WEIGHT OF ASSORTED ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES AND MIXERS ... OUR FIVE CHARACTERS (IN VARIOUS STATES OF DISHEVELMENT AND SEMI-UNDRESS) ARE SCATTERED ABOUT THE PLACE LIKE RAG DOLLS WITH THE STUFFING KNOCKED OUT OF THEM." Because Slabolepszy's description of the revelry and chaos after a stag party is largely an exaggerated picture, it is able to evoke much laughter. Slabolepszy also seems to be satirising the type of revelry and chaos that is possible at stag parties. In this way he questions this type of moral degradation, which in essence is tragic, for it exposes the depths to which the pale natives of South Africa have actually sunk.

Ashley stares intently at Kyle while arguing about the meaning of life. Ashley maintains that "If you've got what you want - here ... (HAND TO HIS HEART) ... then Life Meaning. Purpose". While making the audience laugh at Ashley's seriousness, Slabolepszy also seems to be implying that Ashley himself lacks inner peace, despite his intellectualising to suggest the contrary. Kyle

also lacks inner peace, which finds expression in Kyle's aggression as he angrily lashes out at everyone and everything. By implementing this type of comic technique, Slabolepszy even succeeds in evoking empathy for foul-mouthed individuals such as Kyle, as well as more soft-spoken individuals such as Ashley, who are unable to come to terms with their lives. One is able to understand Kyle's anger, if one reasons in terms of his latent homosexuality. It seems as though Kyle is trying to hide his inner conflict by an exaggerated outer macho image and through aggression, which in essence reduces him to

a pathetic creature. Slabolepszy also seems to be criticising a society whose intolerance towards homosexuality results in people reacting in the same way as Ashley and Kyle do.

Slabolepszy prevents the conversation between Kyle and Ashley about the meaning of life becoming too philosophical or intense through Roux and Ashley's side comments, which provide comic relief. Eddie's inability to understand Kyle's jibe about considering euthanasia (for Eddie's wife), rather than an overseas holiday, serves as a good example of this type of interjection by Slabolepszy. The friends' disjointed conversation, with the exception of Dave who lies unconscious on the floor, with his trousers about his ankles (which is viciously satiric in terms of people who have lost all control) reinforces our impression of people who are unable to communicate.

Although, Ashley tries to make Kyle understand that contentment and fulfilment come with achievement, Kyle still blames his unenviable personal circumstances on his South African legacy:

Legacy, you see. After three-hundred years, this is what you left with. This is the result. Third World Circus, man ... Banana fucking Republic! (p. 39)

Through Kyle, Slabolepszy alludes to the "new" South Africa after its three-hundred years of white domination, which is now being ruled by people whom Kyle regards as baboons eating bananas. Through Kyle's audacity and choice of words, Slabolepszy relentlessly exposes how many white South Africans are not able to accept the new dispensation in South Africa, which is even prevalent in present-day South Africa. Such individuals perceive the Black's takeover in the new, democratic South Africa as threatening, inferior and inadequate. While we are laughing at Kyle in a superior manner, Slabolepszy also simultaneously makes us aware that because Kyle is unable to find inner peace, there is something tragic about him and those individuals who share similar sentiments. In our interpretation of Kyle as a comic/tragic figure, Slabolepszy is able to evoke empathy for men such as Kyle.

Slabolepszy provides comic relief in the form of lewd jokes. When Eddie diverts the attention away from Kyle's personal crisis or *angst*, he tells the crude story about his son's asking him for money to buy a computer diskette: "Dad, I need some bucks for a stiffie. I think - no man - what's this now! Is my laaitie going up to Hillbrow ... so he can stick his stiffie in some floppy ...? No, man!" The sexual innuendo in the above example is obvious, but by means of this type of joke, Slabolepszy succeeds in preventing *Pale Natives* from becoming too heavy and moralising.

Kyle to a large degree provides comic relief by evading the homosexual issue between him and Ashley, and by hammering on the political issues in South Africa. For example, Kyle refers to the Blacks in South Africa as "houtkoppe", a derogatory term white racists use when they liken South African Blacks to people having no brains (brains of wood). This is an example of the popular comic device encountered in low comedy by which cruel jokes are targeted at those who are considered inferior.

It is once again Eddie who awkwardly verbalises the dilemma facing the men at the stag party when he explains that they have never had the opportunity of being officially initiated into manhood like the Blacks, who have rituals and ceremonies initiating them into manhood. Slabolepszy vividly portrays the personal crises facing his characters, and the visions they have about death emphasise their suffering. For example, Ashley recalls how one of his friends drowned and looked as though he was asleep, except for his hard, white face, which looked like alabaster, "Like a smooth white stone you find on the bottom of a river". This image of a white, lifeless stone at the bottom of a river enhances our perception of life's futility and meaninglessness, and also heightens our awareness to Slabolepszy's allusion to the fate of South Africa's own 'pale' natives.

Roux's tears while relating a dream he had about his own funeral seem like typical maudlin drunkenness that one is able to laugh at. Nevertheless, through this type of humour invested with pathos, Slabolepszy makes us aware of Roux's pain.

It is only Ashley who seems to have made peace with himself, for he perceives death as an inevitable part of one's life. However, Ashley's inner peace is misleading in the light of his slightly inebriated state. It is also ironic that it is only Ashley who seems to come to terms with life, despite his homosexuality and being so different from his machismo friends - it is as though Slabolepszy is implying through his Ashley creation that nobody's life is perfect, but that inner peace and happiness can only come through acceptance of life and of oneself. Slabolepszy's allusion that inner (intrinsic) freedom is preferable to extrinsic freedom (purported by present-day South Africa) is also insightful.

Ashley's confrontation with Kyle about accepting life

and what one is, is interrupted by in-between, lewd conversation about the female stripper who did not arrive because all the money for the party "went on the booze". Their conversation provides much entertainment in the form of comic humour, but simultaneously points a finger at the "pale natives" of this world and the level to which they will drop in order to assure a good time. However, the meaninglessness of Kyle's futile life is clear from his words (albeit crudely humorous):

Eating. Sleeping ... And waiting for your Annual fucken Leave. Everyone sits and fiddles while Rome fucken burns.

Slabolepszy's allusion to South Africa's political situation at the time ("Rome burning") is also clear from the above. However, it is by making us aware of Kyle's meaningless life through this type of humour that Slabolepszy succeeds in evoking empathy for people such as South Africa's pale natives who feel that they have nothing left to make their lives worthwhile any more.

The stag party inevitably becomes very heated and it seems as though the characters need to relieve their underlying tension through aggression: "EDDIE GRABS KYLE. ASHLEY GRABS ROUX. THEY ARE LIKE A PAIR OF WILD DOGS AT EACH OTHER'S THROATS." After Kyle has stormed off stage in a fury, Roux tells Ashley the truth about Kyle and how the "Golden Boy" when he "hit 40" lost control and turned to crime in order to become the "Absolute Best." Although, Kyle to a large extent seems to be responsible for his own downfall, there is pathos in this picture Slabolepszy paints of Kyle as a youngster who had all the potential, but who in the end was not able to make it to the top.

The friends' nostalgic longing for days gone by, despite its largely being a case of "dronkverdriet" ("Dronkverdriet" is an Afrikaans term used by many South Africans to indicate that a person has overindulged in alcohol that either results in sentimental emotions such as sadness, or evokes aggression) is comic, especially to those of us who have experienced similar wistfulness. Ashley's remark: "People grow up. Time marches on", seems to sum up the predicament facing these friends who are not able to come to terms with their lives, nor achieve their potential because they have not been able to handle the responsibilities of adulthood. Here, Slabolepszy poignantly alludes to the personal *angst* experienced by the white male soul facing the abyss.

Like Slabolepszy, Mda (1990) also employs graphic examples of low comedy (scatology); for example, in his play, *The Hill*, when the old and the young miner compete over, and protect their faeces. A similar comic device to evoke laughter is used when Eddie appears on stage, with a vomit-bespattered toilet seat about his neck, adamant that he, too, is now drunk and which he

verbally proves by using the f-word. Although Eddie is perceived as the harmless, dim-witted joker, the fact that he has always been the odd-man-out among his friends evokes empathy for him.

Matters are brought to a head when Kyle is unable to take Eddie's attack of "VERBAL DIARRHOEA" (Slabolepszy's euphemism about Eddie's loquaciousness says it all) on how intoxicated he is any longer, and fires a shot into the ceiling. He then turns the gun on Eddie, warning him that he will kill him if he does not shut up. The contrast between Slabolepszy's more light-hearted comic approach earlier and the seriousness of the present heightens the tension of the moment. Kyle now turns the gun on whoever is protesting and although it is amusing when all the friends, afraid of being shot, now find an excuse to leave, the underlying tension of this volatile situation and the menace inherent in the Kyle character add to the dramatic impact of the play as it draws to its climactic close.

The old buddies finally drink a toast to the sleeping Dave and his forthcoming marriage, after which they submerge his head in the cold water of the drinks tub. Kyle and Eddie unceremoniously dump the dripping Dave beside the sofa, and Slabolepszy describes Dave as "A DRIPPING, PATHETIC HEAP", an accurate image of a person who is unable to make it in an unsympathetic world, except by numbing himself with alcohol.

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL IN THE HUMAN BREAST?

Kyle bets his friends that he will be able to keep his head under water for three minutes. When Kyle pulls his head out the drinks tub after only thirty-four seconds under the water, he dares Roux to meet the challenge, which Roux immediately does, beating Kyle by seven seconds. Kyle insists on going under water again, but as they prepare to leave, Eddie forgets to count how long Kyle was under. Kyle eventually lifts his head out of the water, but when he discovers that Ashley has left a cheque in his jacket pocket, he is furious and grabs Ashley, cocking his gun in Ashley's face.

It is now that Dave breaks the tension of the moment by rising from behind the sofa and calling for Melanie, which comes as a complete surprise and evokes much laughter, because he is supposed to be getting married to Catherine. Dave, whom Slabolepszy describes as the "EPITOME OF DRONKVERDRIET", adds much to the humour at this late stage of *Pale Natives*, as the play draws to its shattering close. Slabolepszy manages through this roller-coaster technique of intense drama relieved by comedy, to keep his audience riveted, never allowing a dull moment.

Ashley and Kyle's secret is finally disclosed after the other friends have left and Ashley apologises to Kyle by saying:

You've been terrified out of your wits all night that I'd undermine your so-called manhood by telling the others what happened all those years ago. But rest assured, I could never do that. I wouldn't dream of it. I loved you, Kyle - I always did.

Kyle's rather pathetic, "Ash ... Ashley?" to the empty stage after Ashley has left, adds to the image that Slabolepszy creates of a broken soul who is unable to admit his homo-erotic roots and is abandoned by everyone, especially the one person who truly loved him. There is humour, but also pathos in this picture that Slabolepszy paints of Kyle as a person who is utterly alone. After knocking back a half-bottle of whiskey, Kyle plunges "HIS UPPER BODY INTO THE ICY WATER ONE FINAL TIME. THE SECONDS TICK BY ... PERHAPS KYLE THRASHES ABOUT, THEN GOES STILL".

When Eddie returns on stage, he does not realise that Kyle is dead, but optimistically enthuses about how he has never witnessed a sunrise in his forty-four years until now. Slabolepszy ends *Pale Natives* on an optimistic note with Eddie's words, "Come on, Kyle. Come see the sunrise, man. It's so fantastic, man. It's the most fantastic thing you ever seen in your whole life, as God is my Witness!" hereby implying that there is hope for the future. This example could be interpreted as black humour, for we are actually laughing at the image of someone who has died in a tragic manner, and the fact that someone else is oblivious that he is actually speaking to a dead person. There is also pathos in the above image; the underlying tragedy of wasted life is vivid in our minds as the lights slowly fade with Kyle's solitary, lifeless body on stage, the music of Procul Harum's "A Whiter Shade of Pale" swelling until blackout – once again Slabolepszy alludes to South Africa's pale natives who are unable to make it in an uncompromising world. Here, Slabolepszy invests *Pale Natives* with a tragic/comic dimension, which extends the dramatic content of his work and makes it more forceful. By the close of the play, we are able to empathise with the wasted life and futility depicted on stage by Slabolepszy's pale natives. In addition, the hope implied for Slabolepszy's *Pale Natives* is ambiguous. It recalls Shershow's interpretation of the optimism in the conventional happy endings in comedy as actually being cynical, for it "magnifies the world with its infinite sense of the possible, and diminishes it with its ironic sense of the impossible" (Shershow, 1986).

It is clear that Slabolepszy's multi-faceted humour functions on many levels in *Pale Natives*. In addition, it ultimately poses the question: "Is there hope for South Africa's angst-ridden pale natives left in the sunburnt land?" What has become or will become of them? Our eventual answer in the context of what the play implies is devastating in its indictment of the remaining clan of

South Africa's pale natives. The image of an ignominious Kyle, dead in the drinks tub, conjures up images of redundancy, of being swallowed up by the 'system', by life itself. Through irony, the chaos in the play reinforces the tragic dimension in the play. There is no escape, no niche for the pale natives of South Africa – the satiric exposé of South Africa's pale natives as debauched nobodies is also scathing social commentary on the 'reality' of what they have become to escape a world which has no place for them. Their 'reality' implies that it is only by drowning themselves in alcohol (figuratively and literally) that they are able to blunt the edges of their hopeless lives and face their uncompromising South African heritage. It seems as if Slabolepszy has succeeded in blurring the lines between art and reality.

In 2002, Max Du Preez, a renowned South African journalist, was interviewed for a job. His commentary is enlightening and seems to reinforce the image of displacement of the white male in present-day South Africa at large:

The interview with the panel was interesting. I quickly realised I probably knew a lot more about my (and their) craft than they did ... it quickly became clear to me that the interview was a charade. What I'd feared was going to happen, was happening. I was not black. I could not even try to be black. My parents and their parents and grandparents were white-skinned. I could change my personality, my qualifications, my appearance – I could even have a sex change. But I could not change the colour of my skin, ever ... the new South Africa about which I'd dreamt so much, worked so hard to help achieve and was enjoying living in, was finally turning its back on me ... one of my interviewers ... phoned ... 'I'm sure you'll understand it is politically and strategically impossible to appoint a white person. We have to go black now.' (Du Preez, 2010).

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