

African Performance Review
Vol 2 Nos 2&3 2008
pp 125-128

Book Review

Elizabeth F. Oldfield
University of Derby, UK

Odhiambo, Christopher Joseph, *Theatre for Development in Kenya: In Search of an Effective Procedure and Methodology* (Bayreuth African Studies 86, 2008) ISBN 978-3-939661-07-8 Price: €19.95 (pbk), 201pp

Christopher Odhiambo's text focuses on the evolution and subsequent growth of the type of interactive theatre commonly known as Theatre for Development. His aim is to explore Theatre for Development's 'nature and modes of operation, and to ascertain whether its procedures and methodology are truly reflective of its objective to promote change' (p.14). Whilst the term was not coined until 1973, Tfd is a phenomenon that was observed being used in the 1930s in Africa by the colonials as a tool to promote the associated benefits of modernization. However, Odhiambo demonstrates how, through the utilisation of the genre by various bodies, including Government and Non-Governmental Organisations during the previous fifteen to twenty years, Tfd in Kenya has matured into a commercial concern in its own right. He is anxious to illustrate that as an instrument of emancipation however, Tfd is failing because it seldom reaches the grassroots audience in either the villages or the cities.

The book is divided into five chapters, each dealing with a specific aspect of Tfd. Chapter One is a comprehensive introduction to Odhiambo's study, which is informed by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. He both defines and defends his adoption of the term Theatre for Development, in preference to the many current alternatives in existence such as Agitprop Theatre or Community Theatre, for example. In a bid to understand the increased popularity of Tfd in Kenya since 1991, he analyses the impact

of political developments upon forms of expression such as theatre performances. During the period after independence when Kenya 'in effect had only one political party' (p.13), Odhiambo suggests that the suppression of alternative political parties radiated outwards to effectively silence various forms of expression, and in particular theatre performances. Consequently, Odhiambo concludes that political developments in 1991 contributed to a greater freedom of expression, which in turn resulted in a renaissance of TfD. This offered a revolutionary and educative arena that has enabled a focus upon far-reaching issues such as Constitutionalism, HIV-AIDS and female genital mutilation (FMG). In analysing the function of TfD, whose target audience he quite rightly defines as the general community, Odhiambo observes that it is theatre with a message, and that it functions as a means of raising audience consciousness and encouraging self-empowerment in order to bring about positive change to social conditions. Whilst this chapter may be considered fairly repetitive, Odhiambo's research does however demonstrate that whilst there is much activity in this genre in Kenya, there is very little documentation. Hence, Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's famed Kamĩrĩthu Community Theatre Experiment continues to remain the most cited example of TfD in Kenya.

In Chapter Two, entitled 'The Evolution of Theatre for Development in Africa: A Quest for Relevance', Odhiambo attempts to take 'both a synchronic and diachronic approach' (p.41) to the evolution of TfD in various parts of Africa. He therefore subdivides the chapter to focus upon Botswana, Zambia, Swaziland, Malawi, Lesotho, Nigeria, Cameroon, Tanzania, Uganda, Eritrea, Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe and South Africa respectively. Odhiambo begins by examining the appearance of what can be perceived as TfD during the colonial period. Nevertheless, he is careful to highlight that it existed not as a revolutionary form but rather as a tool for propaganda 'to entrench colonial policies and ideologies' (p.42). Ultimately, his analysis of the evolution of TfD throughout Africa illustrates that the stress has shifted from an initial preoccupation with putting across a didactic message, to what he refers to as a "'bottom up'" (p.78) approach to change. Such an approach recognises that the target audience are capable of playing an active role in respect of development and change, and as such signifies the transference of power to the grassroots. Odhiambo highlights, however, that historically a key problem in Africa in the growth of TfD 'has been the over-reliance on expatriate skills and the conditionalities of the funding agencies' (p.79). He proceeds to observe that an area for concern which emerges as a

consequence of such over-reliance is the expatriate privileging of European theatre forms at the expense of indigenous forms, resulting in the subsequent alienation of the target audience.

Chapter Three, 'Theatre for Development in Kenya before the 1990s', takes Thiongo's Kamĩrĩthu experimental community theatre as its starting point. Odhiambo notes that Kamĩrĩthu is by no means to be understood as an ideal TfD enterprise, but he recognises that because the project revolves around the notion of the participation of the general community, it facilitates within the participants an understanding of the 'latent potential, which could be translated into real development' (p.88). Thus, Odhiambo highlights that Kamĩrĩthu engenders the realisation amongst community members that they can achieve things they previously thought were impossible. In contrast to this positive aspect of Kamĩrĩthu, however, he also draws attention to the fact that the project could not operate without donor funding. The draw back of accepting such funding is the requirement to adhere to a donor agenda which suppresses problems pertinent to the community if such problems do not fall within their parameters. Odhiambo concludes that in such circumstances the participants of the project do not actually achieve empowerment at all. Similarly, Odhiambo's reader is left with the notion that donor participation has the effect of suppressing the subversive nature of TfD.

In Chapter Four Odhiambo's concern is 'Proliferation of Theatre Development after 1992' (p.101). Political developments in Kenya during 1991 expanded the democratic space available to theatre groups which resulted in the growth of TfD due to the realisation of various organisations that theatre offers a form of communication and potential development. Odhiambo therefore groups together the many TfD projects in thematic order, enabling him to address their numerous approaches and to evaluate them in accordance with their methodology. In view of audience and community participation and contribution he also examines and assesses elements of TfD including initiation and creation of the schemes/plays and recognition of problems, in addition to studying pre- and post-performance procedures. Odhiambo's decision to classify TfD projects regionally ensures that his text offers the reader a comprehensive illustration of the genre's activities across Kenya.

The fifth and final chapter presents Odhiambo's suggestions of how to turn TfD into a more democratic practice and hence maximise its effectiveness. He is very definite about the 'need to critically reflect on the procedures and methodology of the practice of Theatre for Development'

(p.151). Whilst TfD is inextricably linked with the notions of audience participation and consciousness-raising – or what Odhiambo terms ‘conscientisation’ (p.151) - he is concerned to highlight that his research demonstrates the difficulties inherent in getting the audience to take part. He therefore suggests that this represents a major stumbling block, since in order for TfD to achieve its aims the participatory theatrical action is required as a dry run and in preparation for the real action that must take place in order for change to occur.

Theatre for Development in Kenya is an edited version of Odhiambo’s doctoral dissertation and in it he thoroughly researches and analyses past and current practice as it relates to TfD in Kenya. He illustrates clearly and comprehensively that the genre represents a powerful ‘tool of social and behavioural change’ (p.187), and throughout he endeavours to offer suggestions to facilitate a more effective and egalitarian practice. However, he is also careful to point out that social and behavioural change will not occur merely as a result of TfD alone. The back cover notes that the text was not intended as a TfD handbook. Nevertheless, it is accessible and easy to read, albeit a touch repetitive, making it of use to students, scholars and practitioners working in the field of theatre practice/studies.