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The Search for Definitions: Critical Perspectives on African Theatre and Performance

(Report of the 1st International Conference of the African Theatre Association (AfTA) held at Goldsmiths, University of London, 30 August-1 September, 2007)

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The 1st annual conference of the African Theatre Association (AfTA), as intended, provoked so much questions, debates and discussions. At the end, all the delegates signed up for the 2008 conference, as well as registering as members of AfTA.

Dr. Osita Okagbue, President of AfTA, in his welcome address had jokingly hinted that the accepted wisdom, especially in western scholarly circles, was that Africans can never do anything for themselves. Giving examples from his early teaching days in the United Kingdom, he argued that the struggle for identity and the marginalization of African theatre and its practitioners and scholars within European academia will remain for as long as those who hold the purse strings or make decisions about curriculum policy with regard to African theatre scholarship and practice are not indigenous. These include: the research councils who through their funding authorize what is researched; the education planners who decide what course/subjects are taught; the Arts Council which ensures what is performed; the publishing houses who determine what research makes it into the public domain; and of course, it also includes the young people at British High Commissions and embassies, especially those in Africa, who routinely and arbitrarily refused visas to delegates who wished to attend the conference, including a professor of theatre who probably trained in the United Kingdom or the United States of America.

A truly eclectic mix of papers was offered over the three days which the conference lasted; in all, twenty-one papers were presented and one performance installation. Most of the papers presented echoed Dr Okagbue's 'What is African Performance and Theatre?', the question with which he began his opening address. In his speech, Dr Okagbue had suggested that a critical perspective of African theatre and the biggest issue

facing it was one of defining its context within its own framework. This argument was taken up in Dr. Esiaba Irobi's paper, *The Problem of Postcolonial Theory: Re-Theorizing African Theatre and Performance in the Age of Globalization*, on the last day in which he argues for a new vernacular theory derived from the languages and cultures the performances originate from. This argument was previously buttressed in Professor Robert Gordon's *Fugard in Performance* presented on the opening day in which, in analysing a production of *Sizwe Bansi* by Peter Brook, he argued the performance lacked soul because it had no link with the culture of the play and its subject.

Dr Mercy Ntangaare, the keynote speaker from Uganda who spoke on Day Two, argued that while the quest for definition goes on, African theatre has remained a progressive practice because it is not just art but also a service. Dr. F. Ndu Anike's *Masquerade as Theatre*, Ikechukwu Nwaru's *Study of Omenimo*, Gbenga Windapo's *Dynamics of Sato Dance*, Dr Victor Ukaegbu's *Mediating Space and Venue* and Dr Sam Kasule's *Changing Concepts* all explored this unique process of theatre as service in the African milieu. Ms Ijeoma Akunna in her paper, *Dance as Mental Therapeutic in the African Experience: Beyond the Speculation*, went a step further to propose that African dance is therapeutic and curative by nature and Ms Uche Hassan in *Costume and Make-Up as Medium for Cultural Expression in Stage Performance* proposed that costume and make-up in performance are signifiers of African cultural identities. This position was borne out in Chikukuango Cuxima-Zwa's *Angola Body Painting in Britain: A Contemporary Cultural Identity* where the actor becomes the subject, object and context of the performance.

In *World of Drama*, Reginald Ofodile examined the social disparities among the Creoles of Sierra Leone as presented in the writings of Sarif Easmon, while Bisi Adigun's *The Vulture and the Ape* questioned Wole Soyinka's unacknowledged and uncelebrated pioneering role as an intercultural dramatist by arguing that long before Peter Brook's and Ariane Mnouchkine's *The Mahabharata* and *L'Indiade* respectively, Soyinka and other African dramatists had been adapting Western 'classics and mixing the foreign with the familiar'. Chikwendu Anyanwu's paper, on the other hand, concerned itself with inter-textual and inter-genre adaptation as he called for contemporary African writers to adapt classical African novels for the stage. He explored the challenges he faced in the *Kingdom of the Mask*, a stage adaptation of Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*. Victor Ladan's *Transcribing the Lexicon of "Culture of Silence" in Theatre for Development* urged the practice to 're-image itself from being a problem-solving practice to that of confidence-builder for affected communities', while Sam Kasule's *Simbawo Akati* looked at the changing concepts of 'popular theatre and performance in Uganda' beyond its present "finished product" approach. Prof. Duro Oni's *Assessment of Design and Technology* courses in Nigerian universities highlighted the challenges facing theatre

arts students wishing to acquire skills in computer-aided-designs. He posited that theatre practice in Nigeria and indeed, most African countries, was 'poor' *ala* Grotowski but that the process was a victim of circumstance and not design. The conference discussion in reaction to the paper suggested cross-departmental collaborations whereby Engineering, for example, will assist Theatre Arts.

Professor Dap? Adelugba's keynote speech, read by Osita Okagbue, explored the challenges of building and sustaining creative associations and exhorted AfTA to become a positive emblem and outlet for present and upcoming African scholars.

The final keynote speaker, Peter Badejo, OBE, encapsulated the difficulties of African theatre and performance practice abroad. He identified irregular funding as the bane of practitioners, but delegates argued that if most of the major practitioners would club together to make funding applications, things might turn out different. It was also proposed that practitioners should explore alternative means of funding for African arts, including seeking out the small, round-the-corner African businesses. Peter Badejo showcased his majestic dance drama, *Sango*, to general approval.

The three-day conference was pieced together by Sarahleigh Castelyn's *Proudly South African* or *How I Chased the Rainbow and Bruised My Knee*, an installation piece of poems, narratives and pictures. *Proudly South African* provoked questions on what it means to be white and African. There was a welcome presentation by playwright/dramaturg, Gabriel Gbadamosi (an AHRC Research Fellow at Goldsmiths), Akim Mogaji of BBC World Service Trust of their recent creative writing project in Nigeria entitled *Wetin Dey*, which also provoked much discussion among the conference participants.

As delegates pointed out in response to Babafemi Babatope's *Muse, Mood and Creativity*, the African child has been born, his destiny is decided; all that remains is for this child to be given a name that will not only define it as an entity but will be the embodiment of what will give it a place and a reference in the theatre world. The African Theatre Association, its conferences and its journal, the *African Performance Review (APR)*, are poised to answer the challenge thrown by Dr Okagbue's welcome speech; to sustain and promote knowledge and excellence among African scholars at home and in the Diaspora. Hopefully, very soon, will no longer be a contentious question.