

Book Review

Trickster Theatre: The Poetics of Freedom in Urban Africa. By Jesse Weaver Shipley. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. Pp. 320. £29.99/\$35.00 Pb.

Kene Igweonu
Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

Trickster Theatre by Jesse Weaver Shipley is meticulous in its examination of the earliest developments and contestations of national culture inspired by Pan-Africanism in post-independence Ghana, as well as the socio-political significance of the National Theatre Movement that it spurned. Even though the title of the book appears to impress upon the reader that its contents will involve an Africa-wide exploration, its focus is entirely on the emergence of contemporary Ghanaian theatre and the unique place the National Theatre of Ghana occupies in the country's socio-political history and cultural development. A reading of Shipley's main arguments in the book points to the belief that by drawing on Ananse storytelling tradition as its underlying aesthetics, Ghanaian theatre is able to root back to ancient Ghanaian culture to apprise contemporary existence in an ever-changing urban landscape.

Trickster Theatre is divided into two broad parts, with a total of eight chapters. Part I and Part II are made up of four chapters respectively. Both parts are framed by an introduction and an epilogue. Shipley's accounts in the book are told from a range of key perspectives, including personal conversations with some of the artists and leading figures of the Ghanaian National Theatre Movement, as well as archival sources.

Part I of the book represents Shipley's meticulous accounts of how several leading artists such as Mohammed Ben Abdallah and Efua Sutherland attempted to 'balance theatre and politics' (p. 111) in post-independence Ghana. It examines the ideological adaption of popular Akan trickster narratives and other indigenous performance traditions to

create a contemporary National Theatre Movement. Shipley notes, for instance, that '[t]he history of modern theatre in Ghana is rooted in the re-invention of Ananse storytelling and numerous other performance traditions combined and reconfigured within a Pan-African aesthetic' (p. 80). He also delves into earlier writing by Kofi Anyidoho to identify these 'numerous other performance traditions' in Efua Sutherland's assertion that 'a modern Ghanaian drama should draw on Anansesem and its eclectic, irreverent offsprings, concert party popular theatre' (Anyidoho 1996, cited in Shipley 2015 p. 63).

Part I which is entitled History and Mediations in Making Theatre starts off with Chapter 1, 'Making Culture: Race, History, and a Theory of Performance in the Gold Coast Colony'. This is followed by Chapter 2 which looks at 'The National Theatre Movement: Urban Art Infrastructures and a Contested National Culture in Independence-Era Accra' while Chapter 3 examines 'Revolutionary Storytelling: Pan-African Theatre and Remaking Lost Futures in 1980s Ghana'. Shipley rounds off Part I of the book by offering his readers a close reading of the politics and contributions of Mohammed Ben Abdallah, arguably the most significant personality in the post-independence Ghanaian National Theatre Movement, in a chapter entitled 'A Man of the People: Mohammed Ben Abdallah as Artist-Politician'.

In Part II, entitled 'Stagings in Millennial Ghana', Shipley moves on from his exploration of the historical and political contexts of contemporary Ghanaian theatre to explore the production process of the 1998 reprise of Abdallah's *The Witch of Mopti* in Chapter 5. Through his examination of the production process of the play, Shipley contends that 'performance theories are specific to particular place-times and contexts in how they enregister (sic) the use of signs and references, and how they order the relationship among specific events, affects, ideas, and bodies' (p. 117). Chapter 6 considers the influence of capitalist free-market economy in commercialising concert party popular performance at the National Theatre, thus transforming and challenging the expectations of both theatre artists and their audiences. Chapter 7 draws on the image of the false prophet or pastor as a metaphor to examine how societal anxieties about fakery can be addressed 'as a performance logic that is constitutive of the force of spiritual authority through which key contradictions of neoliberal life are addressed' (p. 176-7). The final chapter looks at the 2007 re-enactment of Kwame Nkrumah's independence speech of 1957 and demonstrates how 'The State's imagination of itself in a moment of anxiety, and the ways that actors relate to its performance, reveal how an enduring poetics of theatre shapes Ghanaian interpretations of state spectacle' (p. 206).

Trickster Theatre makes a hugely profound contribution to Ghanaian, indeed African, theatre scholarship. The book provides readers with an insightful and compelling account of the historical and political contexts, as well as the cultural underpinnings of contemporary Ghanaian theatre as we know it today. *Trickster Theatre* is an invaluable primary resource for students, researchers, theatre scholars or anyone interested in Ghanaian theatre.