

Book Review

Africa on the Contemporary London Stage, ed. Tiziana Morosetti, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 246pp, ISBN 978-3-319-94507-1 (cloth); ISBN 978-3-319-94508-8 (e-book)

Sola Adeyemi
Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

The list and relative importance of productions, collaborations and theatrical interventions from Africa, or with an African bias in terms of producers, writers, performers and managers, on the London stage is probably longer than has been documented. This collection of essays edited by Tiziana Morosetti does not pretend to do this or offer an archive; in fact, the book starts a new strand of research interest to fill the gap often left by current academic interests in diasporan African performances and black British theatre in Britain. To do that, the chapters and interviews in this book have been selected with a very broad focus on what Africa is, and how it is performed on the London stage.

First, the period covered by the volume is limited to between 1955 and 2013, fifty-eight years during which hundreds of productions relating to Africa or written and produced by Africans were staged in Britain. It is relevant therefore that the area covered by the book is restricted to London. There is no particular reason for the dates however (except, perhaps to draw a tenuous link to the arrival of Wole Soyinka in England in 1955). Thirdly, though the title emphasises, and the editor qualifies, 'Africa', this title could have worked well if 'Nigeria' had been substituted for Africa, for with one or two exceptions, the volume is about the representation of Nigeria on the London stage. That however does not discount the brilliance of the book or the essentiality of its contribution to the study of Africa on the London stage. The aim of the book, according to Morosetti, is to "offer evidence of what artists from Africa or of African descent *do* and have done in London theatres, including when their work is questioned by their own community and/or does not 'advance' a political cause (pp.

5-6).

The volume is divided into two parts. Part I comprises contributions that examine construction and representation of 'Africa' on the London stage from the 1950s to 2013, whilst Part II is devoted to the voice of the participants: interviews with three writers, reflections by two practitioners and a survey of black British and African theatre companies who have staged plays in London.

The first contribution in this volume is 'Freedom, London 1955: A Story of Modern Africa Written and Acted by Africans, or Perhaps Not' by James Gibbs. Here, Gibbs highlights how a collaboration between a Nigerian, a Ghanaian and a South African responding to an agency's action, was a valiant attempt to voice Africa's response to world domination and political strategies perceived as detrimental to Africa's progress on the world stage. Historically factual, with detailed exploration of the play's presentation in London, Paris and Nigeria, and its later metamorphosis as a film, Gibbs observes that despite the enthusiastic reception, "African input was in fact secondary to the project" (p. 36).

In 'Africa on the British Stage, 1955-1966', Steve Nicholson examines the perception of Africa on the London stage, and how performances from or about Africa "were framed within narratives that re-established racial and artistic hierarchies between African and Western theatrical practices" (p. 8), using such plays as Wole Soyinka's *The Invention* (1959), South Africa's early musical, *King Kong* (1960), and the three plays from Nigeria that was presented at the first Commonwealth Arts Festival in 1965. The three Nigerian plays are *Song of a Goat* (1964) and *Masquerade* (1964) by John Pepper Clark (-Bekederemo) and Duro Ladipo's folk opera, *Oba Koso* (1964).

Essays on 50 years of Africa at the Royal Court Theatre (Tiziana Morosetti), Biyi Bandele's theatre (Michael Pearce), an examination of Oladipo Agboluaje's plays at the Soho Theatre (Lynette Goddard), and Sophie Duncan's article on Black Masculinity and Black Voice concludes Part I of the volume.

In Part II, there are three main interviews with writers Ade Solanke, Rotimi Babatunde and Oladipo Agboluaje on their plays and their influence on the London Stage. At the time of the interviews, Ade Solanke had produced *Pandora's Box* at the Arcola Theatre, Hackney, East London, whilst Babatunde had co-written *Feast* for the Young Vic, and had a workshop of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* at the Theatre Royal in Stratford. The third writer, Agboluaje had had several of his plays staged in London, beginning with *Early Morning* in 2003 to *New Nigerians* in 2017. In this part is also Alex Oma-Pius's contribution on his Theatre-in-Education practice, using IROKO Theatre, a company he formed in 1996

to enhance the understanding and appreciation of African culture and arts in Britain, through the use of traditional African theatre art forms. With “But [We] Will Delve One Yard Below Their Mines / And Blow Them at the Moon’: Two Gents – ‘Africa’, Shakespeare, and the Silent Revolution’, Arne Pohlmeier discusses the work of the London-based but Zimbabwe-originated Two Gents Productions theatre company and their performances in London, which are heavily influenced by the works of South African Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema.

With this volume, Morosetti and the contributors have started a fresh conversation on the legacy of Africa on the British stage. Apart from the recuperation of legacy, another importance of this book is the wealth of information and cross-referencing between the chapters that offer a succinct understanding of how Africa has been performed on the London stage. What would have enriched this volume further would include the performances (and directions) of Athol Fugard, the practices of Adzido Dance Ensemble, and the practitioners and performances from other parts of Africa, in particular Uganda, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa. Nonetheless, this is a welcome addition to the study of African theatre and Black Theatre.