

Introduction

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In 2003, Martin Banham, in his review of Frances Harding's *The Performance Arts in Africa: A Reader*, proclaimed that: 'The study of African theatre and performance has now firmly established itself throughout the academic world' (117). The numerous anthologies and books written about African theatre and performance within the decade following Banham's review attest to the sustained interest in contributions of African and African diaspora theatre. (e.g. Banham, 2004, Conteh-Morgan and Olaniyan, 2004, Okagbue, 2007, Ukaegbu, 2007, Asagba, 2008, McNaughton, 2008, Igweonu, 2011, Igweonu and Okagbue, 2014, Asiedu *et al*, 2014, Banham and Plastow 2017) The articles collected here demonstrate a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of African theatre and performance; they cover a range of subjects; the nature of performance in African contexts, the continued engagement with post-colonial identities through the expressive and literary arts, the role of African universities in building new pedagogies, and the relationship between the arts on the continent and the African diasporas.

The question of the place of Performance Arts — theatre, dance, music and film—within the global academy is one that has been contentious. They have not always been considered as academic subjects. (see Levy, 2001, Jackson 2001, Geirsdof 2009) It is in this light that Banham's proclamation, quoted above, gains greater significance in the African context. Clearly, as academic disciplines these subjects have gained much currency, since the first schools of performing arts were established in universities after independence in the 1960s. The growth of literature on the discipline, therefore, marks its firm establishment 'throughout the academic world'. Having established that, however, there are still lingering doubts about the validity of these disciplines within the academy. We have noted difficulties talented students wishing to study these disciplines at the highest levels often endure due to parental restraints or

societal mockery; or indeed, the frequent marginalisation of departments of Performance Studies when it comes to the equitable distribution of resources within Higher Education institutions globally. The so called 'engines of development', Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) are often prioritised above the Liberal Arts and within the Liberal Arts, the Performance Arts are further pushed to the background in African contexts.

Performing Arts academics are constantly faced with the need to justify their presence in the academy and often have to revise their curriculums to serve developmental and career needs of their students rather than purely artistic and performance focused ends. There is constant need to question how our scholarship and theatre and performance practices intersect. The visibility of African Theatre and Performance may have increased on the global stage via the many publications on the subject, but it still remains to be asked, what is taught/and not taught about African theatre and performance in different parts of the world. The vexed question of the language of African theatre and performance, as a result of Africa's colonial past remains, as there are still issues about the barriers of indigenous languages and divisions of Lusophone, Francophone and Anglophone. Writers choosing to write in their own mother tongues, unless translated into English or French, remain marginalised within academic studies due to issues of accessibility of their works. These and other related questions were the major focus of the 8th African Theatre Association's (AfTA) annual conference hosted by the School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Accra on July 9 -12, 2014. Under the theme 'African Theatre and Performance and the Academy', the conference brought together delegates from Barbados, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Canada, Germany, Ghana, Lesotho, Nigeria, Puerto Rico, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. This issue of *African Performance Review*, features a selection of papers presented at this conference.

There were three dynamic keynote presentations at the conference. The first was by Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, of Temple University, USA. She addressed the topic, "Researching Performance - The (Black) Dancing Body as a Measure of Culture". This was a paper performed, rather than read, with many images illustrating her point. As a dance practitioner and scholar, Gottschild's paper negotiated that delicate balance between performance practice and academic scholarship. Another keynote presented by the Zimbabwean filmmaker and writer, Tsitsi Dangarembga, was on "Aspects of African Filmmaking Practice: Hopes, Achievements and Struggles". To a large extent, Dangarembga's paper exposed the need for greater dialogue between performers and academics on the African continent. It showed the lapses in connections between African

practitioners on the continent as against the greater affinity, sometimes between academics and practitioners on the continent and in western countries. She argued therefore that there is need for greater engagement of African academics with performance arts from across the continent. We are pleased to present in this volume, the 3rd of the keynote addresses delivered by John Collins, of the Music Department of the School of Performing Arts, Legon, on the topic, "Popular Performance Research and Practice in the Academy: The Case of the Ghanaian Concert Party".

John Collins's paper directly addresses the theme of the conference, as it traces the shaky place of popular performance, and in particular the Ghanaian Concert Party and Highlife Music, in the Ghanaian academy; the paper looks at Concert Party's history from when it was totally unwelcomed in the academy to its more recent acceptance, albeit sometimes grudgingly. Collins attributes this rejection to imported notions of highbrow and lowbrow art, which drew artificial lines between types of performances, giving the so called highbrow art greater legitimacy in the academy. He concludes the paper by making a number of suggestions aimed at engendering a greater engagement between theatre departments and existing/dying out concert parties and their aged practitioners. He suggests that there is a lot these elderly practitioners can teach the younger generation, and the latter in turn can contribute towards preserving the legacy of concert parties, by documenting the lives and works of these professionals.

The two papers that follow Collins's both engage with African oral performance modes. Colter Harper's "Performing Value - The Proverb as Analytical Framework in West African Music", presents an analysis of a traditional Akan harp, *seperewa*, music as it relates to the performance of proverbs. Working with an astute *seperewa* artist, Osei Korankye, a tutor at the School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana, he explores the relationships between musical forms and context, individual performance and tradition, as well as language and music as forms of communication. He finds a series of 'pedagogical exercises' created by Korankye useful for his analysis. 'These exercises for beginning *seperewa* students serve to build facility playing across the instrument's range as well as in-grain a sense for dialogic processes' discussed in the paper. In a real sense, therefore, Harper, among several other things, brings to the fore, how this traditional instrument is taught to contemporary students of African Music. Annette Bühler-Dietrich, a visiting researcher at the Université de Ouagadougou, gives some valuable insights into the life and work of Sotigui Kouyate, the world famous but little known in English speaking West Africa, Burkinabe actor, in her paper "The Griot as Actor: Sotigui Kouyaté on Stage and on Screen". This paper is a particular treat

as information and studies about French-speaking African performers are not so readily available in English. The African Theatre Association has been seeking greater engagement with all sections of the continent and this article, certainly provides a lead in the right direction. It was indeed exciting to have participation from Burkina Faso and Cameroun at this conference.

The next two papers take the reader outside the continent into its diaspora; again a desired aspiration of the AfTA to engage the African Diaspora more closely. Dannabang Kuwabong, a Ghanaian scholar based in Puerto Rico, presents a study titled, "African Caribbean Theatre of Land Rights in Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone* and David Edgecombe's *Kirnon's Kingdom*"; this paper argues that the continued dispossession of Caribbean peoples of African descent in matters of land use and rights is a reflection of their history of enslavement and deprivation that shaped and characterises Caribbean social realities in contemporary times. This is followed by Joseph Maclaren's article, "Performing the Academy in Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Beneatha's Place*". Maclaren's paper looks to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) to contextualise Kwei-Armah's theatrical exploration of American racial politics within post-independence Nigeria. *Beneatha's Place* centres on the character Beneatha, taken from Hansberry's play, as she struggles with racial politics and nation building in a Nigerian university. Maclaren argues that Kwei-Armah's play is more than a revision of the landmark *A Raisin in the Sun*. He notes that the 'playwright with a diasporic vision' extends the conversation on race, using a variety of dramatic models.

The two concluding papers each look at the genre of storytelling. Margaret Ismaila shares her research on how this genre may be used in Ghanaian classrooms effectively in her paper titled "Beyond the Courtyard: Exploring Storytelling as an Instructional Method in Ghanaian Classrooms". Ismaila extends the traditional role of storytelling as a medium of instructing the younger generations on the mores of their communities into the more formal education in classrooms. Sarah Dorgbadzi and Ekua Ekumah, directors of the very enjoyable devised piece, *Saman-tase Village*, which was featured at the conference, share their experience of creating this piece and their motivations in using the Ghanaian folktale for a staged play in their article titled "Play Aesthetics Beyond Convention: Recreating the Essence of Ghanaian Storytelling for the Conventional Stage". They distinguish what they do with this traditional folktale from Sutherland's experiments in the early 1960s with *Anansegoro*. The paper points out that the authors in their experimental piece were striving for a more organic structure of creating the telling of the tale for the audience, rather than a transformation of the folktale for the stage. Their

paper also speaks to the demand of some African universities, for performing artists in the academy to provide some written analytical frameworks with which to assess the scholarship or theoretical underpinnings of their creations or practice as research.

The guest editors – Awo Asiedu and Ekua Ekumah - hope this collection of just a few of the papers from the 2014 AfTA conference give a sense of what truly transpired at that memorable conference and throw light on our deliberations on the theme of 'African Theatre and Performance and the Academy' and the various other sub-themes which were addressed.

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