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**Performance Review**

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***The African Company Presents Richard III***

Venue: The Greenwich Theatre, dir. Chuck Mike, 19/02/2009.

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Set in 1821, New York City, this true story tells the tale of the trials and tribulations that one would expect from the first Black Theatre Company in the 'New World' of United States of America. Set within the context of slavery and a period when the 'Gradual Abolition of Slavery' was passed in New York, a city that inhabited both free and enslaved Blacks, this play deals with the complexities of identity, heritage and self-preservation, all underlined with the vulnerable emotion of love.

At a time when debates about the intellectual ability of Blacks was raging amongst Whites, it was courageous, ambitious and progressive for a black company to tackle Shakespeare let alone succeed at it, and succeed they did. 'The African Company', led by William Henry Brown was flourishing as a company and was performing to sell out houses that consisted not only of Blacks but Whites who had heard of their success. A surprise review in the 'paper' attests to this.

" the African Company, have graciously cordoned off a partition in the back of their house for the accommodation of whites.... This vexatious gallery has of late been filled to overflowing by whites who come to criticize and ridicule, but remain to admire and cheer these ebony interpretations of the Bard" (Carlyle, 1992:12)

Their current production of Shakespeare's *Richard III* gives us our point of conflict as a rival White theatre company, The Park Theatre, run by Stephen Price, announce they are producing the same play with a famous English actor in the title role, who has been promised he will play to 'overflowing audiences'. Price is aware and disturbed by the increasing

popularity and competition of the African Company and goes out of his way to 'manipulate' the law into closing down the African Company's theatre, who ironically find an alternative venue, The City Hotel, right next door to the Park Theatre.

What ensues is a battle of wills where Price's ability to manipulate authority means the arresting and throwing into jail of the African Company. This adversity ultimately proved to be a blessing in disguise, as the company come to the realisation that they had no need of Shakespeare but rather they could create original productions, drawn from their own culture, thereby giving value to their heritage. The First African American Theatre Company was thus born.

Chuck Mike's production at Greenwich Theatre on 19<sup>th</sup> February 2009 which immediately draws you in because of its recognisable storytelling style, makes bold and relevant changes, or additions to Carlyle Brown's script written in 1992. The script tries to perhaps incorporate too many themes not fully developed by the end of the play. However, the documentation of this historic event is necessary and one can forgive its short-comings. The direction took on an unapologetic mode of presentation by opting for the storytelling style, which was ideal for the many declamatory monologues and narration within this play. The freedom that this style affords was fully explored particularly with visualising narrated or spoken text. One got the clear sense that Chuck Mike was on a mission to make strong connections in his direction of this production to Africa. The most interesting is the placing of the character 'Papa Shakespeare', played skilfully by Shango Baku, as the often underestimated *griot*/storyteller, carrying his symbolic 'talking drum', which represents his African past. The drum is the first to 'speak' and sets the scene for a prologue, which, is echoed later in the play.

The drum, which he is never without, immediately sets him aside from the other characters. He speaks with the drum and uses it to spiritually transport crest fallen Blacks back to an Africa they might not necessarily know physically, but recognise psychologically. The scene in question, described by Anne Johnson, our 'fair maiden' in this tale, played by Krystal Hylton, is enacted for us so we both see and hear the sojourn of Papa Shakespeare's drumming. The action is interlaced with her speech and she moves within the two arenas of real time and the immediate past she is describing. This feature is used often in this production as a way of emphasising central themes in the play. A good example being the significant role the character Papa Shakespeare plays in this narrative.

Set up as the unofficial narrator in this story, he announces the beginning of every scene and act, an addition by the director. He is our navigator and thus the owner of this story. This ownership is demonstrated dramatically by specific directorial choices in relation to his presentation. The emphasis, spoken of above is used effectively to explain the character's name, given to him by his master, his memory of home, both the Caribbean and Africa and his diplomacy. The other performers brought these instances to life, smoothly and unobtrusively during Papa Shakespeare's narration, which he also becomes involved in later in the play. Papa Shakespeare talking in the removed third person about an African *griot*, acting as a mediator amongst newly arrived foreigners is artistically played out in the real world of the play, where he facilitates the reunion of Anne and Jimmy, the love interest in the play. Glimpses of the traditional folktale spider character Kweku Anansi are seen when Papa Shakespeare employs Anansi's trademark comedy and trickery to reunite the lovers.

Papa Shakespeare's function in this play which, is particularly enhanced in this production, is the knowledge and wisdom he imparts through various means to the other characters because of his knowledge of Africa. He is not 'exoticised' but is rather understated in his teaching. Anthony Kwame Appiah's (1992) discussion about the subtle way our elders resisted the colonizers by making it appear the colonizers were fully in control is evidenced in this character. The scene in Act 2 scene 1 is a clear example where he narrates to the audience his master's underestimation of him by mocking his Creole language, while he displays his vast knowledge and informal training in the 'Islands'. The primary immersion and experience of his African traditions are what he draws on for survival, and the director highlights those moments, deposited poignantly throughout the play.

Through this character prejudices of White America of Black Africa are shown with his encounter with the law. More interestingly, Black American prejudices, seen through characters such as 'Sarah' a most memorable character played by Antonia Coker are explored. Born a slave, her notions of Africa are misguided and she feels no personal guilt when she describes Papa Shakespeare and his ways.

"SARAH: That old Shakespeare is a fool, I tell you. Throwin' them bones and rattlin' 'round talkin' crazy. Talkin that talk, what he call African talk. People be 'fraid a that old man, you know. With his garlic bulbs and black cat bone, scare people to death. Lot a them people is just ignorant. Some of 'em just come up from slavery. Some of 'em ain't nothin' but

Africans just off the boat from out the jungle" (Carlyle, 1992: 7).

Sarah further reveals her stereotypical stance when she announces Papa Shakespeare's inability to read. This moment, as small as it was, is a poignant one as it is a good illustration of how she has been subconsciously indoctrinated to accept the framed knowledge of the 'native African'. Her association of his illiteracy and her superiority reminds one of the colonial masters' view of and their misunderstanding of the oral cultures of indigenous peoples. Superiority was given to the written word and the reading of it.

Papa Shakespeare demonstrates the wisdom of the oral culture as a counter to this moment.

"Where I come from, the book is a living man. And we must read from what he say. It more hard for a man to lie, than a book. 'Cause we see him everyday and we know what he does and see where he goes". (Carlyle, 1992: 41)

Another directorial moment worthy of mention is Sarah's face-to-face encounter with her Madam, Mrs. Van Dam, in the audience of their theatre. Sarah's narration at this point physically thrusts excitedly over from the stage into the audience proper, and breaks the naturalistic 'fourth wall' to engage directly with the character planted in the audience. The link to the stage is maintained through the character Papa Shakespeare, with whom she is speaking and she constantly refers back to him. The storytelling device of narrating and enacting at the same time seen before in this production is expanded here to draw the audience in even more by 'invading' their space.

Kate Unwin's set design of the carcass of a slave ship succeeds in providing the constant reminder of the underlying venom of slavery. The curtain of chains serving as the backdrop is adequately chilling. The costume is in keeping for the period, but a dramatic change occurs for the actors in the play within the play. African prints and textiles become their costume, which is symbolic of the beginning of a retuning to and a valuing of their African heritage.

The journey of this narrative, which began with the drum, ends rather exotically with the drum. The sense of victory gained from realizing that a wealth of material existed within their experience and histories is celebrated with a communal 'Nyaminghi'. What should have been a rousing call for us all to stand up and do our bit was rendered

some what weak when ALL the actors pick up a percussion instrument and play for the enjoyment of the audience.

What is clear from the programme is the director's motivation.

"All peoples have a voice and each of us is entitled to bare it. A major challenge for the oppressed is not only to reclaim their representative expression but to exert it... To recover the hues, textures and caliber of ones own voice enables the appreciation- and above all-the tolerance of others". (Mike, 2009)

## **Reference**

Appiah, Anthony Kwame (1992), *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, Oxford and New York: Oxford Press.