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Editorial: In Black *and* White.

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That Femi Osofisan is today one of the greatest dramatists in Africa is beyond doubt. In Nigeria he is not only the most prolific, but he is also the most popular. As many critics have observed, his plays are the most ubiquitous on the production pallets of professional and semi-professional companies; and even more so, on the production bills of university students all over the country. Many scholars attest not only to his diversity but to his prolificacy. For instance, Chris Dunton (1992: 67) and Muyiwa Awodiya (2006: 50) attest both to his popularity and dizzying productivity. Indeed, there is an obvious evolvement of what can now rightly be described as Osofisan Studies. In addition to numerous essays in books and journals, book-length studies on him are also gradually making solitary appearances here and there. It is also noteworthy that his presence is now being felt even in Western academies. Aside from the limited number of book-length studies and essays published internationally,[1] many of his plays are appearing in anthologies of modern or 'postcolonial' plays (see Martin Banham and Jane Plastow, 1999; Helen Gilbert, 2001; Biodun Jeyifo, 2002). Countless plaques of local and international awards also adorn a whole section of his living room walls. This special issue of *African Performance Review* is therefore only a modest gesture in his growing canonisation from some of his former post-graduate students (Izuu Nwankwo, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh and Ngozi Udengwu) who convened the Osofisan International Conference on Performance at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ibadan from June 17 – 21, 2008. The essays in this issue are excerpted from the 102 papers presented at this grand conference. Even the Nigerian government, whose attitude to culture is notoriously grumpy

and dismissive, has slightly genuflected to the pressures of Osofisan's growing presence with an award of the Nigerian National Order of Merit (NNOM) in 2004.

So, indeed, it may appear that all is well with Femi Osofisan's reputation as well as with the studies and productions of his critical and literary works. But all is not. And unfortunately, all is not well where it actually matters the most: the kind of critical attention which Osofisan's works have generated. In the first instance, he was largely ignored by eminent Nigerian critics until rather late in his writing career. And now available criticism is incommensurate with what Olu Obafemi describes as "the diversity, the innovativeness and the experimental nature of his ever-tumbling creative products" (2006: 54). Apart from his diversity and productivity, this criticism matches neither his critical perspicacity nor his literary and dramaturgic complexity. Most positions in the studies of Osofisan's works have been sometimes so confident, assertive, superficial and incantatory that they fail to adequately reflect the sophistication of his insight and the ambivalence, even inconsistency often integral to his literary and dramaturgic oeuvre.

I cite here only two of the most dominant and to some the most vexatious themes in these studies: Osofisan's 'revolutionary aesthetics' and 'Marxist/Brechtian' spur.[2] While some critics are cocksure in their determination of these two but related thrusts, others are more guarded. Dunton, for instance, states that "some" of Osofisan's techniques "are *closely influenced* by Brechtian theatre: for example, the deliberate introduction, as the play proceeds, of disjunctions in style, tone, narrative flow; or the 'exposure' by the cast of their own status as actors" (p. 69; emphasis added).[3] Critics such as Gilbert are rightly more guarded. She suggests that: "Such open-ended and ultimately anti-illusionistic dramaturgy *forwards*, in the most literal manner, the Brechtian *aim* to provoke critical thinking and debate" (p. 71; emphases added). However, quite a few scholars are wearied by this mantra. Harry Garuba describes this critical habit in such negative terms as (indeed amongst many others) 'dependency syndrome,' 'curious vulgarity,' 'theoretical confusions' and 'undiluted fraud' (2006: 217-18). What irks him is what he perceives as the common habit of deploying in the discourse on African cultural production "critical theories and precepts" derived from other societies which "relate more to a cultural tradition outside the continent than within it" (p. 217). Sandra Richards (1996) is even more critical, particularly of the 'Brechtian' typology: "not only does it perpetuate a racist assumption that culture originates in the metropolises of Europe

and spreads outward to the hinterlands of Africa, but also it unnecessarily flattens the complexity of the process that determine the construction and reception of contemporary African drama" (p. 72). Many scholars signal Osofisan's radical 'revolutionary streak' in his subversions of revered indigenous Yoruba knowledge systems and the fatalistic vision or ideology of his predecessors evidenced by his revisions of Yoruba myth in such plays as *Morountodun* and *The Chattering and the Song*, and Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and Clark's *The Raft* in his *No More the Wasted Breed* and *Another Raft*, respectively.

Many scholars who have reacted against these inapposite readings of Osofisan's critical and creative industry have taken more or less equally equivocal postures by denying, or at best belittling these influences in their critiques. They credit his anti-illusionistic techniques to his indigenous Yoruba tradition and his 'revolutionary' stance to the peculiar demands of his oppressive postcolonial state. But Osofisan does acknowledge some of these influences, at the same time as he de-emphasises them. I limit myself to the following excerpts from the text of his inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan in 1997: Regarding his indebtedness to his predecessors, such as Clark and Soyinka, he says "Certainly all of us playwrights who come after owe a debt of gratitude to those imaginative pioneers" (1998: 20), and then he speaks of "our revolt against our predecessors" (p. 23); regarding his indebtedness to Brecht in the crafting of some of his plays he says "none but Brecht's Epic Theatre mechanics could evidently be as suitable" (p. 31), and in others he states "and I depart from Brecht's practice here" (p. 34); in respect of his eclecticism he talks of "dipping into the matrix of a tradition inherited from western, Asian, and indigenous African sources" (p. 30), of "plays inspired by the radical, avant-garde tradition of the west," and of those "on the story-telling tradition of our raconteurs," and those "in the popular-naturalist tradition" (p. 31). But he also informs us overall that his "borrowings are always with considerable modifications and re-readings" (p. 32). These must sound rather confusing to a critic who wants to quickly open up a panoptic window into his numerous works; to discern a consistent technique, theme or ideological posture that runs through his every work. In many instances, such critics have ended up imposing or inventing one.

Alan Ricard states confidently that Osofisan is not a "cabinet Marxist, he knew the real life" (2006: 43). Richards submits that his dramaturgy is "inextricably traditional and revolutionary" (p. 72), thus she suggests that the term "radical conservative" is an apt one (p. vii). Gilbert observes that

"political divergences" between him and Soyinka is exaggerated "by critics relying on over-easy generational divisions", and "the vivid theatricality of his work owes more to … West African performance traditions" (p. 70). Obafemi insinuates that some think that his "creative arsenals" have become "less combative" (p. 56). Abiola Irele observes that he convenes "heterogeneous elements from various sources" (1995: xxxii), while Soyinka describes his attitude to myth and history as "a confused, ambivalent creative existence towards the past" (1988: 241). Considering the generic confusion in one of his plays, Garuba suggests that making sense of his work is "tantamount to trying to figure out whether a zebra is a white animal with black stripes or a black animal with white stripes" (2002: 138). So where exactly can one secure a handle on Osofisan's obviously conflicted, self-contradictory and ambivalent dramaturgy?

Henry Louis Gates Jnr's search for a Black literary theory led him to the Yoruba god Esu, some of whose abiding qualities he lists as "individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rupture." He warns that "it is a mistake to focus on one of these qualities as predominant" (1988: 6). Now knowing how Osofisan locates his aesthetics in the *Opon Ifa* paradigm, wherein there is always the superintending presence of Esu, the deity who "promiscuously incarnates the place of doubt and disjunction, but also of justice and accommodation" (1998: 32), need we look any further? So the questions that inevitably confront the critic of Osofisan's oeuvre are: must everything be in either black or white? Must ideology be either Rightist or Leftist? Must he be more Brechtian than Yoruba? Or less African than European? But must he be one or the other? How about being both Brechtian and Yoruba? How about 'sitting on the fence,' the only spot from which a clearer and more disengaged vision of two adjoining compounds is better obtained? It is conventional Western knowledge that views 'inconsistency' negatively. Thus so many critics attempt to forge a 'consistent' image for Osofisan. They want to know exactly where he belongs so he can be neatly pigeonholed, and sealed. Yoruba knowledge, as exemplified in the Ifa corpus, which Osofisan is enamoured by, views consistency and ambivalence differently. The Yoruba pantheon hosts 401 deities, he says, "[but] … you mustn't give too much precedence to a particular one" (2006: 67). The 'mistake' therefore is that many scholars tend to focus on one aspect of Osofisan's dramaturgy. But like Esu, the trickster deity with two mouths and adorning two conflicting colours,

they offer only one perspective of an absolutely multi-layered, complex and even inchoate dramaturgy. Perhaps what we must do is stop bothering to smooth over the inconsistencies, ambivalences and contradictions in Osofisan's works for, after all, the zebra *is precisely* black *and* white.

Our choice of the essays in this issue is guided by such an understanding. Although scholarly merit determines our criteria somewhat, we are also concerned to as much as possible represent divergent perspectives on Osofisan as well as a more representative view of the arts of the theatre. And if we reproduce only nine out of the 102 papers presented at the conference, it is not basically because these are the most concise and scholarly, but more because they provide us somewhat with conflicting readings. And of course, it is impossible to reproduce more than these in such a journal as this.

The convenors of the conference would want to use this medium to express their gratitude to all those who honoured their invitations to the event, especially those, like Kofi Anyidoho, Ernest Emenyonu, Osita Okagbue and Victor Ukaegbu, who had to cross the Atlantic to make their appearances. They also wish to convey their sincere appreciation to Duro Oni, Ahmed Yerima, Barclays Ayakoroma, Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation (CBAAC) and Femi Osofisan himself whose assistance saved them from being hopelessly overwhelmed by the large turnout at the conference.

Notes

1. Notably Sandra Richards (1996) and Tunde Akinyemi and Toyin Falola (2009).
2. Under the influence of mostly early critical essays, such as Olu Obafemi (1982) and Niyi Osundare (1980), these themes have come to dominate research in Osofisan's oeuvre by university students and most of their teachers.
3. See also Gbilekaa (1997) for even more equivocal statements of these.

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