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AfTA 2009 Conference Report

New Directions in African Theatre

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If you had never been to the United Kingdom and upon embarking on your first trip someone told you that you could forgive yourself for forgetting your mobile phone at home but not for leaving your umbrella, you would likely think the person had a cat-like phobia for water. It is no exaggeration that the British weather is as unpredictable as the exact minute when the sun rises. It will take you only a few hours after landing at one of London's numerous airports to realize the truthfulness of this statement. If it is not a sudden downpour of rain that leaves you stunned at its unceremonious appearance, it is a most unwelcome surge of cold breeze that gets you shivering and reaching for your jacket. And all of this at a time when it is supposed to be summer! That was the kind of weather that delegates at the 2009 African Theatre Association (AfTA) International Conference experienced for the most part of their stay in the city of Northampton. The bad weather notwithstanding, many of the delegates were happy to re-unite with old friends they had not seen since the last conference in 2007.

The conference took place from Friday, 30 July to Sunday, 2 August at the Avenue Campus of the University of Northampton. It was four days of intensive academic brainstorming. Based on the theme *New Directions in African Theatre and Performance*, the conference offered different platforms to contributors to engage in a long overdue interrogation of new and emerging practices, critical approaches, pedagogies, and discourses on African theatre, performance, and related arts and media. The conveners, Jumai Ewu and Victor Ukaegbu, both of the University of Northampton's School of Arts, were delighted to welcome the sizeable number of delegates who came to the conference.

With the School of Arts hosting the event, most of the presentations took place in the main auditorium of the Maidhall Building where the reception desk at Avenue Campus is located. The serenity that prevailed at the campus, owing to the summer vacation, provided a most suitable environment for the kind of academic engagement the conference generated.

The Delegates

The conference attracted a diverse range of professionals, from pure academics to theatre performers, from dance instructors to creative writers. A number of doctoral candidates, many of whom were already published academics in their own rights, also presented papers. The delegates came from various institutions: some from neighbouring universities in the United Kingdom and many from African universities. Some of the speakers came from renowned universities, such as Leeds in the UK, York in Canada, Makerere in Uganda and Legon in Ghana. A number of countries were represented, including Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Uganda, South Africa, Germany, Canada, and of course the UK. Although Nigerians constituted the highest number of participants, delegates from the other countries made themselves visibly present enough to mitigate the threat of the conference turning into a "Nigerian" affair.

The turn-out was affected by the difficulty experienced by prospective delegates, especially from Nigeria, to secure UK visas. Apparently, the telephone calls made by the conference conveners and other senior staff members of the University of Northampton attesting to the authenticity of the information provided in the invitation letters did little to persuade the British High Commission in Nigeria to grant visas to all the delegates. In spite of this minor set-back, delegates were enthused by the conference sub-themes which injected a spirit of optimism into the air, and the lively discussions on the opening day were enough to get everyone enthusiastic about the next day's proceedings.

The Programme

Owing to the absence of some delegates listed on the original programme, for reasons noted above, a revised programme had to be drafted and with this the parallel session arrangement was dispensed with. A number of presentations generated debates on the question of

authenticity in the definition and performance of African dance as well as the question of ethics in theatre practice. While some of the speakers touched on highly, and sometimes old, controversial subjects, others provided enlightenment and offered robust interrogation of current trends in theatre practice and performance in Africa.

Gender in African drama, body politics in dance, African theatre in the UK, storytelling in theatre and theatre through visual arts were some of the key topics that featured in the presentations. Emerging theatre practices in specific countries, such as South Africa, Uganda and Eritrea, were also looked at by some of the participants. There were two workshops, one on the fear of numbers run by Michelle Young and the other on African dance techniques in theatre training conducted by Diane Mitchell. Evening entertainment was provided on the opening night by Martin Hubbard and Ayodele Scott (Sameboat Productions) with their performance, *Black Man Don't Float*, directed by Osita Okagbue. With its satiric commentary on the increasing migration of young men and women from Africa to Europe and the Caribbean in search of the "African dream", the performance gave the audience not just entertainment but much food for thought.

The Keynote Addresses

In all, there were six keynote addresses. The first keynote speaker, Professor Kofi Anyidoho, from University of Ghana, Legon, spoke about African oral performance tradition and the challenge of new orthodoxies. Throughout his address, Professor Anyidoho emphasized the point that there is a lot to learn by looking at art as a process rather than as a finished product. He focused on two key factors that pose special challenges to the continued survival of many forms of African oral performance tradition; the first being 'globalization and its aggressive marketing of alien pop cultures', and the second 'the new Christian fundamentalism with its double-dealing tactic of constant denigration and blatant usurpation of African expressive culture'. In his concluding remarks, he articulated the need for artists to find creative ways of revamping vital aspects of African oral performance tradition which at the moment seem under real threat of extinction.

Moving into the subject of theatre practice proper, Professor Steve Oga Abah from the Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria spoke about the transformational strategies of participatory theatre in Africa, highlighting the notion that theatre practice in Africa seeks not only to comment on

existing realities but to transform them positively. In this way, he noted, theatre becomes an interdisciplinary exercise, which constantly seeks to converse with, learn from and affect other disciplines with which it interacts. Among the many points of emphasis that came out of his lecture was the fact that theatre-for-development ensures that no communities shall collapse and that no ordinary persons shall be rubbished.

Dr Modupe Olaogun from York University in Canada spoke about the effects of globalization on theatre production and consumption and the necessity to produce sustainable theatre. She drew much from her experiences in working with the AfriCan Dance company in Canada and ultimately emphasized the need for the theatre industry to maintain its integrity as a legitimate profession, be adaptable, ready to cross boundaries, and traverse the world. She argued that in spite of the growing threat facing the theatre industry in this global age of internet and YouTube videos, African theatre companies can still sustain their productivity by being flexible and by making maximum use of the available technology.

The question of adaptation was further explored by Professor Eckhard Bretinger from Bayreuth University, Germany, who spoke about curriculum development, canon formation and the adaptation of modern classics in some African universities where he had been privileged to work over the years. Essentially a discussion on his experiences in the field of education in countries such as Mozambique, Uganda and Cameroon, the lecture addressed some of the challenges of curriculum development in African universities and the adaptation of Eurocentric formal theatre to African forms of theatre experience.

Keeping on the subject of challenges, Professor Jane Plastow of Leeds University looked at theatre-for-development, interrogating its potential as a business opportunity, a tool of oppression or a key to empowerment. Drawing on several recent publications on theatre for development by scholars such as Steve Ogah Abah and Christopher Odhiambo, Professor Plastow noted the difficulties in negotiating satisfactory results for all three parties involved in a theatre project – the practitioner, the funding body and the community. Basically a critical inquiry into the relationship between practitioners and funders, her lecture addressed ethical concerns in theatre-for-development practice.

The final keynote speaker, Joseph Walugembe of the Uganda National Theatre, was unable to make a physical appearance at the conference but his lecture was kindly presented by Dr Sam Kasule of the

University of Derby in the UK. Professor Dapo Adelugba, who was also scheduled to present a keynote, had sent in apologies for his inability to be present at the conference. On the whole, the keynote addresses were engaging, informative and thought-provoking.

Some Challenges and Proposals

The final session of the conference was used to engage the participants in discussions on new directions in African theatre as well as to address some of the challenges that theatre practitioners face in their daily encounters with funding organizations and community leaders. Some of the most outstanding points that came out of the discussions were the following:

- ❑ The professional training of theatre practitioners was crucially important;
- ❑ A move towards a multi-disciplinary approach, e.g. working with people in the fields of education and development studies, was necessary to ensure maximum productivity in theatre practice;
- ❑ More published plays were needed for further scholarly engagements;
- ❑ Movie stars should be invited into live performances as a way of mediating the competition with home videos;
- ❑ Home videos were acknowledged as a threat to the theatre industry but many agreed that nothing could beat a live performance.

One of the major challenges noted as facing practitioners was the issue of funding. It was proposed that while practitioners should be persistent and creative in their search for funding, they should also maintain a degree of integrity, not compromising ethical principles for the sake of financial benefits. Reports by various practitioners indicated that positive experiences were emanating from different countries while other kinds of huddles were affecting the work in other places. For example, it was noted that great work was being accomplished in Nigeria by the Jos Repertory Theatre company, whereas some of the practitioners, playwrights and art directors in the UK were increasingly facing challenges in terms of bridging the race gap and penetrating the market

for African theatre. On the whole, however, a degree of positivism seeped into the discussions and many left the room feeling optimistic.

By general consensus, it was agreed that the next AFTA conference be held in Uganda, and Dr Patrick Mangeni of Makerere University was thanked for offering to host it.

A word about Northampton

The city of Northampton is not the poshest place in the UK but it is perhaps one of the places that harbour the kindest people in the world. Just about everyone, young or old, man or woman, friend or stranger, would be happy to give you directions if you were lost, or information if you were in need of it. The people's gentle disposition towards visitors is almost instinctive, and that is not a treatment you get in all cities, certainly not in Johannesburg. There is no doubt that if AFTA were to have its 2011 conference again in Northampton, many of this year's conference delegates would look forward to embracing the warmth of this glorious city again.
