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Book Review

Osita Okagbue, *Culture and Identity in African and Caribbean Theatre*,
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Reviewer: Sam Kasule PhD
School of Art, Design & Technology,
University of Derby, UK

In *Culture and Identity in African and Caribbean Theatre* Osita Okagbue argues that the connection between African and Caribbean theatres is not simply of colour but one that is deep: cosmological, cultural, historical and metaphysical. Okagbue presents the reader with textual analysis of African and Caribbean dramatic texts balanced with a post-colonial political/theoretical approach that is satisfying for theatre practitioners and theorists. His selection of plays and playwrights includes famous and previously unknown names, for instance, Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin, Mustafa Matura, Cheik Ndao, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Wole Soyinka, and Derek Walcott, which provide grounds for future research in contemporary African/Caribbean theatre. In his discussion, Okagbue directs us into the area of cultural and postcolonial theory hence demonstrating the underlying dialectical relationship between these literary and performance theories and African/Caribbean worldviews. He explains that when applied in theatre these discourses operate as counter-narratives to colonial ideologies.

Okagbue does not situate African and Caribbean theatre in a singular continuum but maps out locations as he discusses interconnecting themes of class, culture, identity, language, migration, place and race. Echoing Melville J. Herskovits' exegesis of 'African Survivals' (1958 [1941]), Okagbue argues that these survivals, evident in cultures and other forms of expression, are the connecting tissues between Africa and the Diaspora that explain the similarities "reflected strongly in theatre and literature of African peoples in the Diaspora." (21)

Okagbue's discussion of the thematic dialectic between African and Caribbean theatres that draw on colonial and slavery experiences of both communities focuses on dramatists, who, he argues, are particularist without being exclusivist in their practice. In his view, the dramatists' understanding of the universe is informed by their shared world view which "allows a contiguous interrelationship between past, present and future; between the dead, the living and the unborn; and finally between the worlds of the gods, of humans and of ancestors." (252) Okagbue poses questions such as "is it possible to talk of an essentially Black (African) theatre aesthetic?" His response to this question invokes Wole Soyinka's essay "The Fourth Stage" (1973) and its delineation of Yoruba cosmology and, African metaphysics and "the essence of the duality of inhabiting both identity and difference in relation to the West" (Msiska, 2007).

The binarism between African and Caribbean theatres is deconstructed in *Culture and Identity in African and Caribbean Theatre* as Okagbue underlines the thematic concerns of selected playwrights. However, he observes "that whereas the issue of class awareness and identity are present in most of the African plays ... most African-Caribbean plays are preoccupied with the issue of racial and cultural identity." (87) Elsewhere he notes the perceived "migratory tendency" (89) of Caribbean people arguing that they are inclined to travel by the social and racial structures of their society. His reading of Edgar White's *Redemption Song* highlights both, the centrality of the notion of migration in Caribbean texts, and a dramatist like Walcott who, through his characters, resists this trait because "the Caribbean is the only home they have and it is for them therefore to stay and make it a home worth living in." (111)

Okagbue's book is exciting and enlightening because not only does he employ contemporary post-colonial literary and performance analytic approaches but he draws on both Anglophone and Francophone dramatic literature. As Okagbue explains

"it is totally unfruitful to approach African or Caribbean plays using Western European critical frames of reference because these plays are very often well outside and actually do resist the ... predilection for a linear structuring of dramatic action and narrative." (255)

Culture and Identity in African and Caribbean Theatre significantly outlines the position of African and Caribbean dramatists in

contemporary performance discourse, and therefore, calls for other exploratory studies.

References

- Soyinka, Wole ((1973), "The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origins of Yoruba Tragedy" in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976
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- Msiska, Mpalive-Hangson (2007), *Postcolonial Identity in Wole Soyinka*, Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V.