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Zinaalirawa by Sam Kasule; Venue: The National Theatre, Kampala,
dir. Kaya Kagimu, Date: 4th December, 2009

Going back through the history of the Baganda, land was and continues to be a man's greatest and most valuable possession because without land, the people cannot survive. It was therefore apt that this serious yet entertaining play by Dr. Sam Kasule was chosen as part of the celebration to mark fifty years of the Uganda National Cultural Centre and the National Theatre in Kampala.

At the back of the stage was a painting of an uprooted banana plant bound with a rope. Below the uprooted plant is flowing water. The symbolism of this was not lost on the audience who are well aware that the Baganda cannot be separated from the banana plant. Sam Kasule's play tells the story of Zavuga (played by Isaac Muwawu), who in a symbolic storm loses both the banana plant which is his only source of food, and his sister; the main action of the play is the journey by Zavuga and his friend Kintene, in search of the banana plant. It is quite clear as the events unfold and the characters interact that the dramatist uses the play to make a poignant statement about a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Ugandan landscape.

In the play, for instance, we see tribal segregation and conflict played out through and between the characters. Kasolo (Joseph Musoke), the native, gets into a fist fight with a settler, Lukandwa (Abdulla Ntege) - a result of what seems to be some pent up tribal anger of Kasolo's against the settlers. As Zavuga and Kintene go along, they are welcomed into the home of Wagwekku (played superbly by Joseph Walugembe, the Director of the National Theatre). Theirs is a home in a traditional Buganda setting and the ways of the family take us back to a time when families knew each other for miles and hospitality was such that even strangers were welcomed into the home and could stay for as long as it suited them, values that are fast fading into history. One of the travellers, the handsome Zavuga, is derailed from his course by a love interest in

Nannugi (Agnes Nakakawa). The two portray a love that is naive and innocent, an illusion that fills the stricken with confusion and hopes that cannot be fulfilled. As Zavuga pursues other worldly desires, his focus is lost and he almost forgets the task that he had set out to achieve.

When the older daughter, Basena (Sophie Matovu), comes home to escape from an abusive husband that rapes her, the writer highlights age old women's issues. He shows how little the fight for women's rights has achieved because even as much as our societies have become modernized, women still struggle with the same issues especially since most of the victims, like Basena, have no way of making people understand their problems.

The play goes beyond a surface portrayal of tribal conflict and reveals the local's perception and view of the settlers. The writer achieves this with the introduction of a sturdy character, Nkulendagewa (Emmanuel Kazibwe), a man who fancies himself a superior being with no fears, answerable to no man and without the fear of God. He is an unethical man who justifies his evil doings as an exercise of his freedom. The locals view the settlers as a people who have no roots, no culture and are unethical, as people who have taken away their land, their freedom and their wealth, thereby keeping them in bondage. At the end, the two sides face off in a tug of war, each pulling at the woman holding the banana plant.

All the issues of land ownership and property rights, the domestic violence, love and family are subsumed by humour that appeals to all audiences so that the play keeps even the younger members of the audience interested to the end. Particularly humorous are: the playful way Zavuga charms Nannungi, his young love interest, and the introduction of the drunken old woman in the market towards the end of the play.

The cast and the director did such a good job bringing the script to life with their great interpretation of the writer's vision; the set and lighting were right on point as well. The director showed a good understanding of the script and though she made a few changes along the way, she did well to keep the themes and message of the writer intact.

The stage was very well used in all scenes to reflect both indoor and outdoor activities, like the digging by Nannungi and the forest with the trees and the bushes. The lighting was very well handled throughout the performance, being used to go through the days from dawn through to dusk, all was well represented. On the whole, it was a clever, humorous and articulate piece of work.