

## Across Oceans, Friendship and Respect Sustained

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I first met Dapo Adelugba in Sydney, Australia almost four decades ago, where I had been asked to chair the Anglophone session of the AULLA (Australasian Literatures and Languages Association) Theatre Day. This was held at the then Nimrod Theatre, which later evolved into the Belvoir St. Theatre. The Nimrod had been Sydney's answer to the new wave of Australian theatre which had emerged a decade or so earlier in Melbourne, focused around the famous Café LaMama in Carlton, a spin off from the New York East Village theatre of the same name. If Café La Mama and the Australian Performance Group, which emerged from it initiated a new wave of writing with iconic figures such as David Williamson, John Romeril, Barry Oakley and Jack Hibberd all starting their work there, Nimrod was home to a new and innovative set of directors such as John Bell and Richard Wherrett, and actors such as Colin Friel, Judy Davis and later, figures like Geoffrey Rush. NIDA, the principal drama academy of Australia, based at the University of New South Wales, fed this development with a steady stream of graduates whose names are a roll-call of modern Australian theatre. But Africa, even less then than now, did not figure highly in the imagination or knowledge base of most Australians. So it was both gratifying and mysterious that AULLA, (founded in 1953), a relatively conservative association, as most such national organisations are, had elected to make Africa the theme of its Theatre Day. Francophone theatre was represented by a Congolese delegate and Anglophone African theatre by Dapo Adelugba. Although I had met Wole Soyinka, or rather observed him from a distance, as a graduate delegate at a conference celebrating the Commonwealth held in Cardiff in 1965 – the city in which I was working towards my doctorate – I had heard of Dapo's work only as one of the founding members of the troupes Soyinka had put together on his return to Nigeria in the early

1960s. I knew he had played the original Kongi in the production of *Kongi's Harvest* in London in 1965, but that had not been mounted in Cardiff, so I had never seen him perform.

My first memory of him is a lively, ranging figure animating the small stage at the Nimrod, and speaking with both passion and authority about the West African theatre he loved and to which he had made such a founding contribution. We also discovered something else in common – a sweet tooth – and our initial friendship was cemented over Lebanese coffees and baklava at the many Lebanese restaurants, which filled Cleveland St, the street adjoining the theatre complex. When academic discourse became too taxing, comradely and enthusiastic discussion over sticky sweets helped cement my passion for things Nigerian and for the theatre of that great country.

At the time my teaching work was mainly in theatre, though not officially in African theatre. It is hard to recall now that in the late 1960s and early 1970s African literatures were largely disregarded by the British and Commonwealth universities. With the notable exception of figures such as Martin Banham, who had returned to Leeds from Ibadan as Head of Theatre, little or no attention was paid at the time. When I began teaching in 1967 at the University of East Anglia, the same year Dapo Adelugba began his career at Ibadan University, the then professor of English (a renowned Shakespearean scholar) asked me in all innocence if people wrote in Africa! To his credit though when I informed him that they most certainly did and that they wrote exceedingly well, he allowed me to mount a special seminar in African literatures and even to mount a one day conference on Africa and African American writing in 1968-though I had been appointed supposedly to teach English and German Romantic poetry, the subject of my doctoral thesis. As the son of a working class family I had paid my way through university by working in all sorts of jobs including stage management and lighting at local theatres (which I found more congenial than part-time work on building sites and in the local steelworks!) Since the same professor wished to mount courses on what was then called Page to Stage practice, his generosity was also by way of a payback for my willingness to abandon Romantic poetry for practical drama! It was to be another seven to eight years, after arriving in Australia in 1973, before I taught an African literature and drama course and supervised the first African subject doctorate in Australia, partly on Soyinka. And even then it was as a voluntary add-on to my teaching load in theatre. So for African literature and theatre Sydney was a lonely place, and the meeting with Dapo Adelugba renewed both my energy and my passion for things theatrical and African. Who could have resisted his enthusiasm and his experience? He had worked with the best at the

height of their powers, and our conversation was heady and stimulating for me.

I did not see Dapo again until 1992, by which time I had written much on Africa. A visit to Ibadan, sponsored in part by Dapo, then Dean of Arts, remains a highlight for me of my various African visits over the years before and since. Although, characteristically, he was endlessly busy and 'on seat' from dawn to dusk, he ensured my meeting the many distinguished faculty in theatre and literature at Ibadan at the time. Their names read like a roll-call of Nigerian writing: Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Isidore Okpewho, Niyi Osundare and Chief Wale Ogunyemi who, though he was not actually on faculty, was a constant visitor to the campus. Alas, some like Ogunyemi are no longer with us, and others were scattered across the world, in New York State, in Louisiana and elsewhere, in the wake of the difficult years in Nigerian history, which followed; though the presence of Femi Osofisan and others bodes well for the future. Dapo had arranged a meeting with Wole Soyinka, which did not occur, because of the usual problems of mistiming, business etc. But he also sponsored a visit to Oshogbo, including a meeting with the Oba and an escorted tour of the shrines, which remains a highlight memory of my time in Nigeria. His kindness and generosity to visitors was legendary.

Even more importantly was the fact that his house on Ibadan campus was home always to several students, whose families were unable to support their accommodation. Through Dapo's selfless agency many young Nigerians found a home at his home, allowing them to finish their studies. One of those came to Australia and finished his MA with me and then did a doctorate with one of my own doctoral students, then a professor at a neighbouring university. I am sure that this was not the only sponsorship of this kind that Dapo Adelugba fostered over many years.

In 2006 Wale Okediran invited me as his guest to attend the celebration of Soyinka's Nobel Prize at Ile-Ife. Unfortunately, ill-health in my family and my duties as Chair of English and Cultural Studies prevented me from accepting, but one of my regrets is that I was not able to renew my friendship with Dapo Adelugba, without whom such a celebration would have been empty. Even now as he turns 70 he is active as a visiting professor at Ahmadu Bello University, in Zaria. Retirement is not a concept one associates with this man. His published work on Soyinka and Ogunyemi is only the tip of the iceberg of his vast reputation. As important, if not more so, has been his own role in the founding of Nigerian theatre in the early years and the inestimable role he has played in nurturing and educating generation after generation of young Nigerians.

As a teacher he has inspired so many with his personal care and his example of unselfish service to his discipline and to its students.

His reputation is everywhere. Only this August I was invited to attend a breakfast for the new Nigerian High Commissioner His Excellency, Prof. Sunday Oluwadare Agbi, who was paying a courtesy call to the University of Western Australia. As usual seated round a table with our VC and several other faculty members with interests in Africa the atmosphere was one of polite restraint. Until that is, I mentioned my friendship with Prof. Adelugba, and my pleasure at visiting Ibadan, the High Commissioner's own alma mater, and where he had been Professor of History. Professor Agbi's face turned to me with instant pleasure and it was clear that he held Dapo Adelugba in the highest regard. 'I had a room on the same corridor with him', he said. As if that fact in itself conferred distinction on all fortunate enough to have done so, as of course it did.

As he turns seventy, this great figure in Nigerian theatre and education brings such distinction to all who have met him. I count myself lucky to have been among them, and I hope that if health and time permit I will see him again before we both go to our ancestors.