

Life of the Real Theatre Major

Conversation with Reuben Abati and Jahman Anikulapo

In the world of Nigerian theatre, the aging actor, director, critic and teacher is almost a deity, with hundreds of acolytes and offspring who are currently top ranking in the theatre and allied professions. Dapo Adelugba is one of such. In this interview, he narrated his story to Reuben Abati and Jahman Anikulapo on the occasion of his 60th birthday in 1999.

Birth and Early Schooling

I was born in Ondo to a young educationist. At the time, Reverend A.B. Akinyele was a kind of father figure in Ondo, and all the school masters, the reverend gentlemen and so on surrounded him. So the Adelugas, the Awosikas, the Akinkugbes, the Alayandes were part of the Akinyele education circuit. And they all had great admiration for this father figure, Akinyele. I was at the initial stage to benefit from being born in that context. My father was a teacher, at a school in Ondo, St. Stephen Primary School. In fact, I think he was the headmaster. He had left St. Andrew's College, Oyo a year before Archdeacon Alayande.

I think my father's posting to St. Stephen Primary School was his first. As with many other schoolteachers at the time, he combined church work with his school teaching and the headship of the Primary school. My mother was of great assistance to him. She had had some basic education too. She had done her post primary school. I think she was doing secondary school education when she met my father and this kind of took her away as it were. She, as many people probably don't know, had an Ibadan father and an Oke- Igbo mother. And my father had an Esa-Oke father and an Ilesha mother. In fact, I can claim four distinct sources.

The Esa-Oke, of course, is most dominant by any standard, even though I wish I had spent more of my early years in Esa-Oke than I did.

My maternal grandfather was also an educationist, but a rich one; he was a successful man in the bank. But his tragic death in a fire is something we all still lament till today. He was a senior brother to J.K Akinola, who later became quite an important man in the educational circle, at Oke-Bola. But I am extremely proud of both my paternal and maternal relations. They have on both sides given me a lot of support, at the familial level.

My parents lived in Ondo until December 1943; so I spent my first four and half years in Ondo, and then my father was transferred to St. Paul's School, Efon-Alaaye in what is now Ekiti State, then part of the old Ondo Province.

We were in St Paul's yard reading the biographies and autobiographies of people of that period; we recognised people who were born in that context, who had parents in the school/church compound; beautiful small church – small now, at that time it looked so large to us; as we grew older, we started to recognise that what used to look so big, was perhaps not that big; beautiful orange tree; we used to have pleasant afternoons under the orange tree; beautiful latrine; beautiful surroundings and at the same time, beautiful neighbours; one of them was known as Babafunke. He was a fantastic man. He was a genius for all kinds of medicine, both traditional and western. If you needed to be cured of malaria, or jaundice, or any ailment, my father would recommend that you see Babafunke; he lived just a stone's throw away from St. Paul's compound. Then there was Abajingin, another neighbour. He was also a fantastic man. The story I'm going to tell might seem a bit sadistic but what I remember Abajingin most for was that one of my senior colleagues offended him and Abajingin got him tied up like a goat for several hours. That was my greatest memory of Abajingin.

St. Paul's School of Efon-Alaaye was a good environment for a young boy. The town itself, the small town... the small village... was full of beautiful scenery, lovely trees, little hillocks and valleys... the entire Efon-Alaaye scenery... I still see the scenery as I go to Esa-Oke on weekends. There is a certain place on the way from Ilesha to Esa-Oke, where you can see Efon-Alaaye far away and it still looks very beautiful to me. So, it couldn't have been the illusion of a young boy.

That was St. Paul's.

I was at St. Paul's from 1943 to December 1950. It just so happened that my parents were transferred this time to Esa-Oke. But I never got really absorbed into the system the same way as my junior brothers and sisters must have been because, during our holidays at Government College (GCI) 1957 at both the school certificate and higher school certificate at GCI, I only went for some of my holidays to Esa-Oke. But I regret

until today that I am not as fluent in speaking the Ijesha dialect as are my siblings. In fact, I never could speak Ijesha properly; these days I don't even try to because I'm tired of being laughed at. So I just speak the kind of neutral Yoruba that we grew up with, both at Ondo and at Efon-Alaaye, and which in fact came handy when I had to spend my holiday with my maternal relations in Ibadan.

I would love to speak a bit about Mama Pupa as she used to be called. Mama Pupa at Oke-Bola, who was really my maternal grand cousin, was very loving. She was, of course, a terror; everybody knew that Mama was a terror. She would not take any nonsense. But she was very loving, indeed extremely loving. So, I got used to spending virtually all my Easter holidays at her residence. I remember one interesting event, when my maternal aunt, Tutu (who is just a couple of years older than I) and myself wanted to go and listen to the music of the late Eddie Okonta – one of those Sunday afternoon events at Paradise Hotel, which was very close to the old Rex Cinema. When Tutu and I finally summoned up courage to tell Mama that we wanted to go to the Paradise Hotel and enjoy the Sunday afternoon Tea Time Dance as it was called then, Mama said: *ki le'pe un; n'ibo le'len lo un, el'enlo Paradi Osi. Eni ba felo Paradi Osi a kuro n'ile temi o. Eniyan kan ko le wa ti bi lo Paradi Osi o!!!* (What did you say!? Where did you say you're going? 'Compound of Poverty'! Whoever wants to go to the 'compound of poverty' will vacate my house. You can't go to the compound of poverty from my house!) And that was the end of going to the Sunday Tea Time Dance. Of course at a later stage, she calmed down. In fact, [she was extremely loving]. I remember she didn't mind at all my going to the Rex Cinema, which was very near our house then, near the Seventh Day Adventist Road as it is now called. She didn't mind at about 11pm. in the night, opening or removing the latch on the door, because our door was always well latched in the night, and letting me in after I had had a good evening at the Rex Cinema.

I must say that my going to the cinema was part of, as I was to realise later, the formative process for my enjoyment of the art; my enjoyment of cinema.

Government College Ibadan Years

I was at GCI (Government College Ibadan) from January 1951 to December 1957 and I participated fully as all GCI boys had to do, in all aspects of college life. This was in the Derek Bullock days when some people were specifically trained for the Dramatic Society. This was a time when all of us participated in sports, drama and what used to be called

‘Saturday evening entertainment’. That was another formative influence as it were.

We all had to prepare songs, poems, recitation aesthetics, sports at each Saturday evening entertainment and that was quite an opportunity to develop my skill even in the writing of poetry and short stories, some of which one had the opportunity of rendering at the Saturday evening entertainment.

Then, of course, as a senior student and probably, because of my voracious reading in the library, I was appointed assistant librarian in my final year; and later full librarian. But I was to be one of those long-standing librarians because it was with my set that the higher school certificate began. Up to that time, they just ran the five months post-school certificate for those who wanted to enter their university of choice.

But with my set they began to have the higher school certificate at GCI. In fact, in my year, I took the entrance exam to King’s College (KC) Lagos and I was admitted. I was to go and do the higher school certificate programme in Arts at KC but when GCI started its own programme – GCI and KC were and still remain rivals – I preferred to be a patriot and do it in my own GCI rather than go to do some rascally programmes at King’s College. We used to consider the students at KC as rascals, which they were in a very nice way.

So everybody at GCI had to do everything and for me that was a great opportunity. Because it helped one to build up one’s versatility; it helped one to know in which area one was strong or weak. For instance, I knew that I wasn’t going to get into any of the school teams in football, or in hockey. My very gifted hockey colleague, Joe Kolawole, was amazingly good. But I did pass my swimming test. Everybody at GCI had to be able to swim the length of the swimming pool and until you finished the full length you wouldn’t be considered as having passed the test. Some of my eminent colleagues whom I won’t name had agony over passing their swimming tests. But I seemed to have done all right with swimming. I passed my swimming test. I’m not probably the world’s greatest swimmer but I do still enjoy going to the Green Spring, or the Premier Hotel and having a swim.

One area in which Government College taught me that I had the ability was in poetry recitation, drama, writing short stories and so on. There was what was called the Festival of the Arts; and I and one lady (who went into the Nunnery; a very lovely woman, Miss Hassan, who has now retired as the principal of St. Theresa’s College), used to compete for who was going to win the first prize in the annual recitation. She was at St Theresa’s College then and I was at the GCI.

I had good teachers; people like the lady who taught me how to recite poetry. I had for one term only Derek Bullock. Bullock was then still in the province as an educational officer, he had not come fully to GCI as principal; that was to come, after I had left. But he came for one term and he was a very dramatic reader of poetry. Then, there was John R. Berry and his very lovely wife, Ann Berry. I remember our Biology teacher, Mrs Braithwaite... very great influence came by way of good teaching. One Nigerian teacher who was very impressive was Mrs Phebean Ogundipe, who was a young attractive woman. She used to be Miss Itayemi before she got married to Mr Bayo Ogundipe, who was our teacher in music; he used to assist Alfred Lang with the school choir. And he taught us geography for a while. We had good teachers at GCI and I must say that the formative influence of GCI is something I still look back to with great thankfulness.

Back to the former environment and the fact that at St. Paul's School, Efon-Alaaye, during my holidays and also in our home at Esa Oke, very gifted colleagues surrounded my parents. I remember for instance, one of my father's teachers who had a great influence on me. He died only recently. He became an archdeacon – Archdeacon Richard Lander Opedare, who was then Mr R.L Opedare. He was a fantastic teacher. He helped me get over my inhibitions in Arithmetic. One Easter holiday, he just took me aside, and told me not to be afraid of Arithmetic. He was such a generous man; he was a good and loyal friend to my father. He was a native of Efon-Alaaye. He actually taught me all I knew about English when I was in the higher forms of primary school. When I was in Standard 4 and 5, he got me to write an essay on what I would like to be and he kept it. Up to the time he died a year ago, he was still referring to the issue; saying 'you know that essay you wrote about what you would like to become, you've rightly proved your point, you've actually done what you said you would be in that essay'.

Well I don't know what I said in the essay. It's so far in the memory for one to remember. I do acknowledge, however, the formative influence of those people who surrounded my parents – both males and females. It is something I can say I am so grateful for today. That is more or less the story up to my exit from GCI in December 1957.

The Young Teacher at Ibadan Grammar School

The next nine months were very important in my life, when I was a pupil teacher at the Ibadan Grammar School, under the then Reverend E.O. Alayande – Dr Alayande, because the University of Ibadan gave him an honorary doctorate in 1998.

My nine months were very well spent. The Alayandes reciprocated the friendship they had with my parents all their lives. They actually gave me a room in their main house at the corner of the ground floor. I enjoyed the nine months thoroughly.

One thing that I had to learn very quickly was that not all students were as clean and law abiding as Government College, Ibadan students. I soon got used to the fact that Ibadan Grammar School boys were a little more worldly than we were; and a little more prankish. Although I never could quite accept their insults, I just had to be aware that they were not GCI boys.

At Ibadan Grammar School, I came into my first experience of a co-educational institution and I must say that it was a great experience. Ibadan Grammar School (IGS) boys had to learn to dress neatly because they knew that they would have to meet the girls in the evening at the 'lovers lane' as they used to call it and the girls also had to be at least reasonably well dressed, because they knew that they were in an environment where the opposite sex was visible. I think that co-educational institutions are very useful for the formative influence on young people growing up and that I learnt by experiences at IGS.

Those nine months were useful months; I tried out my skill at teaching in a dynamic way. Whenever I meet some professors here at Ibadan and in other places, who claimed that I taught them in that period, and who had the memory of how well I taught them, I sometimes laugh; I wondered what a fool I must have made of myself. But they didn't think I made a fool of myself. They thought I taught them well.

Yoruba Travelling Theatre

My exposure to travelling theatre was by way of the works of Kola Ogunmola, who used to travel round Ekiti and other parts of Yorubaland. I remember Kola Ogunmola, when I was a primary school boy, coming to Efon-Alaaye and he really stunned me by the sheer excellence of his stage personality and the excellence, also, of what they used to call 'Opening Glee', which used to make people fully enraptured. I remember – long after Kola Ogunmola must have gone – my younger brothers and sisters and I at home would be doing the opening glee and closing glee and waving the right hand as he and his group used to wave their hands. We used to sing what we could remember of their songs.

With my experience at Efon-Alaaye, Esa-Oke and Ibadan during the holidays, I will say that when I was in primary school I, of course, was not imprisoned in the compound of St. Paul's. Our parents gave us the freedom to go and see the town. I was not too keen myself on anything

beyond taking an ordinary walk, maybe riding the bicycle. I don't think I was kind of out-going person in that sense, not that I was a recluse. I did do a lot of rascally things in the early days. But I am not going to tell you what they were.

When I went on holidays while I was at GCI, what I remember most vividly about my holiday was the use of the British Council library, which was not too far away from our Oke-Bola residence at that time. I enjoyed going to the British Council library, which itself, as I was to find out later, was at that time fairly new.

I also enjoyed going window-shopping. One didn't have much money so one couldn't really buy so many things. But one of the things I enjoyed about my holidays in Ibadan was being able to just go round Gbagi, doing a lot of window-shopping; admiring all the lovely clothes, thinking that it would be unrealistic that you could buy more than one or two of them.

Also, I enjoyed the Rex Cinema, as I have said. I also enjoyed, in the later years, the Odeon Cinema. When I was at the grammar school as a pupil-teacher before entering the university, one of the things that I enjoyed was socialising with people like Oluwole Rotimi, now a retired general, who was also a pupil teacher, probably a couple of years ahead of me; also people like Bayo Akinola and one Mr. Elegbede – I don't know where he is these days. With all the young teachers we used to have great fun. Because young teachers were allowed to have their meal at the school dining hall, and with the groundnut they provided us with our dinner, we used to have our groundnut stored away and we took them with us when we went to the Odeon Cinema.

The University Years

I entered the University College, Ibadan in September 1958 where I was a student until June 1962. I wanted to get into the honours programme in English when I came in but I found that it was not automatic, that they did not just admit you.

I was asked which honours programme I would like to try out for. My teacher at GCI in the Higher School Certificate, one Sam Okudu, who was later to become registrar at Ibadan, was someone who had given me a great love for History. So I said if I wanted to do an honours programme it should be in History. But then my talent for literature and language kept tugging at me. That year in 1958 I tried out both for the History and English honours school.

I remember that Prof. Dike was then the head of history and I was short-listed but I didn't know what I did wrongly at the interview. He

short-listed a whole lot of us whom he felt qualified to be considered. But when the final list came out somehow my name was not there. I couldn't understand why. As for literature, I found that Molly Mahood preferred those who had done the preliminary years. Somehow, I was quite convinced that I must have passed the exam.

The larger majority of those taken into the honours school in 1958 were those who had done the preliminary years. One of those who didn't do the preliminary years but who got in by that exam she gave us was Emmanuel Obiechina. Obiechina and I got in the same year but he was lucky that he went straight to do honours programme while I had to wait a year.

I don't know when David Oke came in, but I suspect that he came in 1959. David and I were in the 1959 to 62 English honours set. So was Dan Abasi Ekong and others.

My English honours year had no females at all. There was no female among the English honours people. People like Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie came the year immediately after us. She was in 1960 to 63 group. But our year, for some reasons, had no females. This means of course that we used to play a lot of male pranks in our class. I remember the late Geoffrey Axworthy; I know one should not say anything disrespectful of the dead, but he used to find it difficult to get to the 8 o'clock class; and so he used to keep us sitting there until about a quarter past eight before he finally showed up. And he was known for his pipe.

The moment we saw anyone walking down the corridor with a pipe, we knew it was Axworthy and so we played a prank on him one morning. We knew he would come about a quarter past eight or so – Ayo Ogunlade was in that group of students as were David Oke, Dan Abasi Ekong, and the late poet Chief Baddy... Kalu Uka was also in our class... we were all men anyway – we had said that if he didn't come by 10 past eight that morning, we would leave the classroom before he got there. The moment we saw him walking down the corridor, we just decided to sneak out and take a roundabout way... somehow by the time he had actually entered into the class we had all vanished. But I know that after that he used to make an effort to come early, only about five to ten minutes late, and not much later.

Molly Mahood used to organise this absolutely beautiful dinner party for the various sets – year three, year two, year one. We were sure to have a dinner party at Professor Mahood's house. That taught me a lot. Her frugal nature also taught me a lot.

Other lecturers who I remember very well include Martin Banham who was very young; he was only six years older than I. We used to have great fun with Martin Banham. He used to say: 'Well gentlemen, whoever

wants to bring banjo, or any sort of things to my classes should be free to do so; whoever likes to smoke during my lecture should feel free to do so'. He had a very liberal approach and he was a young man with whom we all had great fun. There was also a West Indian lecturer, Ramsaran; he was very quiet, very cool, somewhat introverted, I think. But he was a great literary scholar of that time.

Of course, we did a lot of extra-mural work aside of classes. I was particularly involved with the University College Ibadan Dramatic Society; the leadership of which came to me fairly early in my career. In 1958 when I was only one year old in the university, I was appointed president of the University College Ibadan Dramatic Society. I must say that the story about the work of the Dramatic Society leading on to the University Travelling Theatre is something one cherishes. Side by side with my work in the University College Ibadan Dramatic Society was also my work on *The Horn*, which was under the editorship of Abiola Irele. When Abiola Irele graduated in 1960, he handed over the *Horn* to me; I became editor from 1960 to 1962. Omolara Ogundipe became my associate editor and took over *The Horn* from 1962 to 1963 when she herself graduated. *The Horn* was a great literary journal sharing the limelight with the *Beacon* and perhaps the *Eagle* which sooner than later went into oblivion. But *The Horn* gave us an opportunity of publishing young Ibadan poets, and young Ibadan critics. In fact, Wole Soyinka had some of his early poems published in *The Horn* and some of his early criticism, including his critiques on Négritude, even his position on language and myth, were originally published in *The Horn*. It was a small community and I think it was very different from what the University of Ibadan is today. We were all a small group and very intimate, we all knew each other very well.