

**'Adelugba is a Finer Teacher than I am':
An Interview with Wole Soyinka**

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Kunle Ajibade and Jahman Anikulapo (KA & JA): Can you describe your initial encounter with Dapo Adelugba or rather his encounter with you?

Wole Soyinka (WS): What I remembered early was when he was playing in Molière's *Les Fourberies de Scapin...* which he adapted to *That Scoundrel Suberu* and the company travelled around, in this improvised theatre. He became identified with the part, so to speak, when I watched him several times; it was incredible. It was as if the part was tailored for him.

It is professional discipline that he actually studied and entered the part; and that is what I first noticed about him. His dedication, professionalism; no actor's preparation was too little, no detail too negligible... it had to be addressed. It has to involve his entire professional being. Immediately, I saw that this was a naturally gifted stage person and then our major interaction began. I wasn't involved in that production by the way, but I followed the travelling theatre quite a bit. I sort of joined them at different places.

The next point of interaction with him, of course, was when I was developing the sketches for 1960 Masks and the Orisun Theatre. He was a natural in his roles, so adapted, almost chameleonic in his ability to move from one character to the other. He was not a formal member of Orisun Theatre as such, but he intersected with the arts community very much at the university at the time. But whenever he could, he played a role, if not on stage then back stage. And of course, when we were doing *Kongi's Harvest*, he played the role of Daodu, which he performed with absolute relish.

It is interesting because he came to the university late — he was a school teacher in a school, I think somewhere in Molete.

KA & JA: Do you mean Ibadan Grammar School?

WS: Yes. I have spoken about his professionalism, his passion for theatre. I remember when he was writing, and he saw that there was not enough material on African Drama for study, then he undertook the task of translating Bakary Traoré's work on African theatre (*Black African Theatre and its Social Functions*, Ibadan University Press 1972 – ed.) just to make it available and accessible to students, and it was eventually published. He translated it even before he had a guarantee that it would be published. It was a labour of love, and he translated it from the French to English, giving it the same kind of original dedication.

He lived in Molete. Molete, one could say, was the *Soho* of Ibadan at the time. I was doing some research at the time and sometimes, I would come back from Benin, Ughelli, Imo or Enugu, or some other place... On arriving, I had to do my work and my productions as well. We always ended up in the Molete area, either at Risikatu's or Agoji Mayor's or the Seven Sisters'. You know that was around where his school was... So, I'd pick him up and we might not get back until the people were going to work in the morning. There is a road when you are entering Ibadan through the roundabout at Molete. We went there to detoxify, after a night out. There was one *Iya Alamala* there who used to sell food to people going to work very early in the morning. We, in the meantime, were just going to work after several bottles of beer or whatever we'd had, and that *Iya Alamala* was the place where we used to have our breakfast in those days... Oh, I am just reminded of the stew coming out of the pot, the *amala*, *pelu orogun* [turning it with the stirring-stick]... just the sight of that in the morning alone! Whatever plan we had then, we had to stop there, and of course, gorge on the whole lot... *amala* with *gbegiri pelu ila alasepo yen!* – [Yam flour dough, eaten with bean soup mixed with diced okro].

He was quite formidable in the bars, too. He used to match me bottle for bottle.

And then when we started the *Mbari*, all those rather man-churning peregrinations continued. Those were the days of live music, live bands... like highlife, *apala*, *juju* of *Black Morocco* and *Tunde Nightingale*... the whole lot. This was how we relaxed.

KA & JA: It is that comic side of him that you paint so graphically in Ibadan [*The Penkelemes Years*, 2001].

WS: Oh yes, he just had a natural understated comic side to him. He has almost a rubbery body, his gestures were always in a very elastic manner.

KA & JA: What role did he play in Mbari?

WS: He became quite a feature of Mbari and, of course, he participated in many of my productions in Mbari, in quite a number of them. He became a regular feature in Mbari... poetry reading sessions, sketches and others.

KA & JA: And as a scholar of theatre, critic...?

WS: Oh yes, he was such a talented, gifted and intellectual drama critic. That was why I was curious, when somebody, I won't mention the person's name, who was head of department at the time, who tried to patronise him... I remember writing a furious article in the papers, because this fellow who was then head of department wrote about him, talking about Dapo Adelugba, that 'this is somebody that had been building people to step into my shoes' — quote and unquote... 'that it is him that is the person'. I said what is this fellow talking about? Adelugba has a much finer brain than he ever had in terms of drama analysis, theatre history as well as in the interpretation of roles on the stage. And there was the fellow being patronising towards him simply because he was the head of department at the time. I couldn't stand that kind of thing and so I responded to him.

KA & JA: And as a teacher? What do you say about his mentoring role? Quite a number of students went through him and they call him their mentor.

WS: Adelugba is a finer teacher than I am. I am a very impatient teacher. He was patient almost to a fault. I tend to spend more time with students who actually stimulated my thoughts, students with whom I had not necessarily good rapport but against whom I could bounce off ideas. But temperamentally, Adelugba was not that kind of selective teacher. That is why I said he was a better teacher than I am. He was not selective and he was very p-a-t-i-e-n-t! He was a patient teacher. I used to send to him students that did not inspire me and he did not mind; it was a tricky thing I played on him, and he did not mind. He enjoyed it. His mentoring capability is excellent.

KA & JA: How about your collaboration on the International Theatre Institute?

WS: What happened was that the ITI invited me to be a member of the institute, and in fact this was where his industry, his meticulous ways of doing things, paid off. We were members of the ITI and the work of building up the Centre was undertaken by him and the late Prof. [Joel Adeyinka] Adedeji. In terms of bureaucratic works, record keeping, communication and so on and so forth, he was the best. He is a good record keeper! Have you ever been to his office? That man never likes to lose a scrap of paper.

KA & JA: But he says the same thing about you?

WS: But did you ever see my office surmounted by papers, old newspapers dating back to the sixties and even before? I kept records to some extent. His attitude was this might become useful someday and he would pile and pile until documentation virtually overtook his office. You will never see that in my office. I keep some but he just piled them high. Incredible!

KA & JA: So when you heard that his house got burnt...

WS: When I learnt of the fire incident that affected him, it was heart-breaking because I knew what must have been lost. I went to see him, but I could see that even though he had recovered, he was badly hit. That kind of thing shouldn't happen to scholars. My mind went in that direction when a similar thing happened to Niyi Osundare, who lost all his records and materials as a result of the flood caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, in 2005. And I said, didn't something like this happen to somebody I knew? Then my mind went to Dapo Adelugba.

JA & KA: When you turned 50 and he presented the manuscript of the book of tributes, later published as *Before Our Very Eyes* when you won the Nobel, and he said, 'Well, Soyinka ti ndagba naa niyen... even at 50!' And now he too is 70; what would you say about this vanishing generation of great scholars and the coming generation?

WS: Before I go on to your question, let me tell you about that book, *Before Our Very Eyes*. You know he edited it. And in this kind of work, which will outlive us all, he wanted to be as objective as possible. So he brought me some of the scripts, and there were certain things which

annoyed him, and he is somebody who likes the truth. And he came to me to show me some of the scripts and he said, 'Look at this, look at the kind of rubbish that this person is writing! He said, *'tan'ran n'ise, emi o ri si nkan jatijati ti o nko yi o, emi o ran n'ise, emi a yoo kuro o.* Who begged him? Who said he should start writing this sort of rubbish? I just said write what you remembered about Soyinka, see what rubbish he has written? I know you.' He was very upset, really upset. And I told him, 'Don't worry, put it there.' He was going to take it out. I said 'No leave it. People reveal themselves very often, about what they write about others. When they think they are writing about others, they are actually writing about themselves'. He was livid, really angry, and when Dapo is angry about anything, he can be very emotional.

Then that generation bit you talked about, I don't know what happened... but I think I said it all at the 50th birthday talks, the "Wasted Generation" and all that. People talk about pockets of fulfilment here and there but when you think of the overall pictures we had in those days! I mean those were the renaissance days. I know people have standard, when you talk of the good old days. Oh no, no, in this particular instance, eh, anybody who witnessed or saw the birth of *Mbari, Mbari Mbayo*, the Uli school of arts in the east, the upsurge of dramatic discipline and film from Jos, anybody from that generation who looks back with nostalgia, believe you me, it is not just sentiment. When you compare those to what is happening today, in terms of infusion of the arts and artistic productivity in people's lives, it was a golden period.

(This interview was held in March 2009)