

AfTA/APR Reports and Announcements

Performance/Festival Review

Burkina Faso's Autumn 2012 Theatre Festivals: Récréâtrales et FITMO

In Burkina Faso, autumn 2012 was rich in festivals. Two major theatre festivals took place in November and hosted 33 productions from African and European countries. Récréâtrales – Résistances panafricaines d'écriture, de création et de diffusion théâtrales – had its 7th edition, this year entitled "Insoumissions" (disobediences) from November 2 to 8. FITMO/FAB, the Festival de théâtre et de marionnettes de Ouagadougou / Festival des Arts du Burkina already enjoyed its 13th run from November 22 to 27. Both festivals were dedicated to the late Jean-Pierre Guingané, founder of FITMO and doyen of Burkinabè theatre.

The festivals differ by way of their productions but also by their concept of creation and distribution. One of the aims of Récréâtrales is to provide selected artists with space, funding and training several months before the festival. Some of these productions are then admitted to the festival, and further productions are exclusively invited to the festival. FITMO, by contrast, is a 'regular' festival with productions from different countries. As to distribution, Récréâtrales once again took place in the popular quarter Gounghin nord in Ouagadougou. Almost all productions were set up in small theatres or courts along the half-a-mile long street of the quarter. A meeting place for actors, audience and locals was thus created. FITMO, by contrast, decentralised the performances, staging them in Ouagadougou locations as well as in towns closer and farther from the capital. Both festivals endeavoured to actually reach the people by getting closer to them.

Récréâtrales featured West African, Rwandan and international productions. Public and private issues intertwined and the private was once more the political. *Sur la pelouse (On the grass field)* by Hakim Bah (Compagnie Laborato'Arts, Guinea) addresses the massacre in the Conacry sports stadium on September 28, 2009 in a dialogue between a colonel and his female officer. The small stage consisted of a pool table and the nonchalance with which the order for annihilation was given was illustrated by the colonel's occasional playing of some balls. Tchadian Koulsy Lamko's *Sarzan Sou IV* (Compagnie Djamah Afrik, Tchad) brings together two African World War II veterans and a French widow on the 50th anniversary of independence. Characters chatter, drink "dolo", the regional millet beer, and muse on their political and economic neglect by the state. They are interrupted by repeated entrances by a French

colonel's widow searching for her late husband, whom she thinks still to be alive. The grotesque play juxtaposes the lively ghosts of military success with the deprivation of African veterans.

While these productions discussed political events, most of the productions turned to private situations with larger political implications. Thus the German-Burkinabè coproduction of Wilfried N'Sondé's *Ombres d'Espoir* (*Shadows of Hope*; Theater im Bauturm, Cologne / Féstival Recréâtrales) treats the issue of forged marriage. The largely monologic dialogues of five characters take place on the eve of the marriage between an African immigrant and his recently arrived illegal immigrant sister, whom he tries to save from deportation by marriage. The black stage is structured by white geometrical shapes which symbolise openings, barriers and directions. The conflict arises through the doubts and anxieties the white German girlfriend experiences due to an ominous social situation. Amorous love is threatened by the economic devastations which made the sister leave her home country in the first place. The 'monologic' dialogues realise the impossibility of communication due to a situation rife with anxieties and prejudices.

Et si je les tuais tous madame (*And if I killed them all, Mam*) by the Burkinabè playwright, actor and director Aristide Tarnagda also addresses migration. Lamine, an unsuccessful economic migrant, is standing at a red light, presumably begging for money at car windows. In the brief interval between the red and the green light, his whole life and distress explode in his mind in a polyphonic interior monologue. Tarnagda's production, however, stages two actors as Lamine and accompanies them with two musicians who are part of the stage action. The number of performers on stage thus makes it possible to occasionally distribute the lines among the actors and to illustrate Lamine's emotional state in sculptural and musical arrangements. The bare stage uses the concrete wall which separates the theatre court from the next lot; it comes to figure the hopelessness of Lamine's situation. Tarnagda's troupe consisted of the extraordinary traditional musician Hamidou Bonssa, the hip hoppers of Faso Kombat and the impressive young actor Lamine Diarra. The impact of the production was also due to the high quality of these performers.

Burkinabè playwright and performer Sidiki Yougbaré contributed an equally amusing and political play in Mooré (with French subtitles), *Naak Naak*, performed by the fascinating Edoxi Gnoula. On the phone for the entire play, the female character discusses her situation as a divorced, single woman, with a woman friend, and bitches about her ex-husband. The politics of the play in a society where divorce and female

independence are far from being the norm was not lost on the local population well versed in the national language.

Play-within-play scenarios were used to different ends. In *Dandin in Afrika* (a co-production with the Belgian Compagnie La Maison Ephémère), the staging of Molière's *Georges Dandin* provokes discussions within the black and white cast as to how to stage the play properly. Comic effects are created by the use of 17th century apparel. Family relations and class differences in *Dandin* become pertinent for the issue of colour in the play's frame narrative. How the classic French author can be deployed to highlight postcolonial issues of race and class was communicated through this interplay of frame and main plot. The Camerounian playwright and director Martin Ambara also deployed a play-within-play structure. In his production *Al Mustapha*, he combined the dense philosophic text by Khalil Gibran with interrupting comments by the actors on the one, with elements of physical movement on the other hand. Trampolines were as much part of the large outdoor stage as ropes and scaffolds on which the actors moved forward and upward.

Finally, the Rwandan theatre group La compagnie Urwintore performed Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* as recommended by Weiss – without character-actor link and in an often reciting way. The play on the 1960s Frankfurt Auschwitz processes became a subtle comment on Rwandan investigations of the 1994 genocide.

A common feature of this year's productions was the prominence of African music. In most of the productions, musicians were aligned alongside the stage and played traditional instruments like the tam-tam, the balafon and the kora. In *Ombres d'espoir* as well as in *Et si je les tuais tous madame*, the musicians were on stage and interacted with the actors or acted themselves. Where stage design was usually bare, music stood in and created an acoustic space and atmosphere.

Récréâtrales, organised by Etienne Minoungou, induced us to watch up to three productions per night. After this tour de force and an almost two-week break, FITMO began. The festive opening at the Espace Culturel Gambidi, founded by Jean-Pierre Guingané in 1996, was an occasion for commemoration as well as for a look ahead. Appropriately, the festival, organised by Claude Guingané and Hamadou Mandé, opened with a production of Guingané's *La savane en transe* by the Théâtre de la Fraternité, the group he had directed. It didn't remain the only occasion to watch his plays. The story-telling theatre *La danseuse de l'eau* was twice present at the festival. One production catered predominantly to the young and was enthusiastically followed by neighbourhood school children. Here, the Togolese puppeteer and director Adama Bacco staged all but the grandmother by way of marionettes. The tale of the grandmother's

long-ago friendship with a mermaid found a matching frame in this co-presence of actor and puppets. Abidine Dioari's Burkinabè production of the same play, by contrast, deployed two actors who first devised a slightly pointless frame narrative and then artfully turned into the literary characters.

Troupes at FITMO came from many different countries: Benin, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Central African Republic, Mali, Niger, Togo, Tunisia, France and Switzerland. Music was considerably less prominent than at Récrcéâtrales and with most of the productions small casts sufficed. Budgetary restrictions due to cuts in international funding thus met with current aesthetic choices.

Clandestine migration and its consequences figured in the Malian production *La flamme s'est éteinte* (*The flame went out*), in Beninan *Train 520 de 2 Août* and in the Ivorian *L'Inconnu* (*The unknown*; *Le cercle des amis de Sion*). While *La flamme s'est éteinte* brings together five fugitives who meet in the hereafter after a failed escape to Europe, the two other plays figure characters who are struggling in Europe. In order to tell the story of the characters' failure, the Troupe Duga uses film snippets in which the characters' escape is shown. Of all the many productions I was able to see, this was the only one to use video at all.

Instead of video projection, *Go slow* by Léonard Yakanou (Compagnie Koyokoyo, Niger) used a city soundscape to create the nightmarish surroundings in which the protagonist tries to reach his fiancé's home in time for the wedding, impeded by an enormous traffic jam and constantly on his mobile phone in search for direction. Exposed to numerous mishaps, the lucky bridegroom finds himself barefoot and in underwear in sight of his bride, whom he only knows through internet communication. At the same time, a military upheaval starts to afflict the city. Comic and tragic elements combine as actor Eric Affolou gets increasingly disheveled. In the end, the protagonist awakes from the nightmare it all turns out to have been. Such a clear resolution is withdrawn from the spectator in Saendou Amadou's puzzling *Train 520 (Undercarriage 520 on August 2; Afro Théâtre et Cultures)*. There, the interior monologue form of the play is hidden behind the co-presence of two characters, father and son, on stage. Amadou reconceives the story of Yaguine, who is modelled after the young Africans who died in the freight room of a plane going to London in the 90s.

At FITMO highly professional productions like the adaptation of Nazi Boni's founding Burkinabè novel *Le Crépuscule des temps anciens* were shown next to the university production of Guingané's *Le cri de l'espoir*. The festival closed with a production by the centre's 2012 acting school graduates, a witty adaptation of Stravinsky's *The soldier's tale*. Next to the

extraordinary interaction of masks, puppets, actors, dancers and musicians in the French/Burkinabè co-production of *Crépuscule* (Compagnie Zouak and Association Niban), realistic psychological acting prevailed in most of the productions. How to cleverly combine scarce means and intelligent staging could be seen in Noufou Badou's production of another Guingané play, *Zigli le terrible*. Only a couple of items like changing caps sufficed to mark changing characters and situations.

Further French and Swiss puppet plays as well as contemporary dance, the Swiss production *Spettatori* by the Collettivo Spettatori and story-telling theatre were shown during FITMO. While the audience in the locations outside of Ouagadougou highly enjoyed the opportunity to see theatre, it was likewise impossible to attend all of the 22 productions.

After Burkina Faso, FITMO went on to the neighbouring countries of Mali, Niger and Togo in spite of the difficult political and financial situation. The spirit of decentralisation and panafricanism which has been governing the festival since Guingané's lifetime was thus continued. The ITI executive board honoured these endeavours and their late executive member by setting the 2012 board meeting in Ouagadougou for the first time.

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