

## **Conference Report**

### ***Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre and Performance* (AfTA 2011), Swansea Metropolitan University, Swansea, UK**

#### **The City of Swansea**

'Abertawe', meaning, "at the mouth of the Tawe", is the Welsh name given to Swansea, a city in Wales (UK). Nicknamed "the Golden Coastal city", Swansea, sprawled out in all majesty on her golden sand and surrounded by rugged hills, has outstanding historical records of feats performed over decades and centuries. The peaceful and serene city of about three hundred thousand (300,000) people is the provider of the first railway service in the world and home of World's famous footballers, poets, playwrights and actors. With pomp and pageantry, in her self-confident and forward looking locality, Swansea city hosted participants from UK, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Kenya, USA, Germany to AfTA 2011 International conference held from 21<sup>st</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> July at Swansea Metropolitan University. SMU is a university created out of a merger of three former independent colleges (1853, 1872 and 1897) and given university status in 2000 by her Majesty to award degrees, yet it is the oldest university in the UK.

#### **Keynote Addresses and Panels**

The convener/host of the conference, Dr Kene Igweonu, in his welcome address gave delegates a brief on AfTA since the association's inception in 2006. He went on to expound on the theme of the conference which revolved around the roles of media and technology on the advancement of theatre researches and scholarship in Africa. The Vice Chancellor of the university, Professor David Warner, as the first speaker, gave a heart-warming speech on the rich history of Swansea City and Swansea Metropolitan University and welcomed all participants to the conference. The second speaker, Naz Malik, the CEO of the All Wales Ethnic Minority Association (AWEMA) spoke on the need to establish a black led theatre in Wales. A report of the work done so far x-rayed the activities of the group in working with young disadvantaged people to develop creative abilities for dramatisation and poetry writing. He noted that black artistic talent in Wales is under-represented and as such theatre in Wales does not reflect the interest and values of the black people. Dr Osita Okagbue, the president of AfTA, gave the first keynote address, entitled "Dreams

Deferred: National Theatres and Development in Africa”, decried the misrepresentation of National Theatres as an institution supposed to underpin the cultural centrality and arts in a country to mere edifice in Africa. He examined National Theatres in South Africa, Nigeria, Senegal, Uganda and Ghana and identified lack of management of culture as a major pitfall in this aspect. He advises Africans to look inwards and draw from what they have to advance and develop their lands instead of depending on outside help. Dr Kevin Wetmore Jnr, in his controversial presentation of ‘Post-colonial playing without a West:’ African Drama in Japan (1987-2004) gave the Japanese antecedent of using the South African Theatre as yardstick for projecting African performances because they have no direct experience with Africa.. To him, South Africa is a mirror for the Americans to see themselves. African plays were translated from English to Japanese language and while other African languages in the play texts were retained, African names were copiously absent. A play of Athol Fugard (regarded as a much larger presence than Soyinka in the West), *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, was performed in 1987 by Chijinka Company. The thrust of the second keynote address speaker, Prof. Patrick Ebewo, was on providing an audience for African Theatre in the electronic age. He gave reasons for the dwindling African audience. They include: choice of plays, concepts, contemporary experiments and explicit performances (containing nudity, sex, violence, obscenity etc. on stage), decorum and admission fees. To these, he suggested possible solutions such as, theatre as a means and space for transformation, TFD (as a means not an end), catch them young, taking theatre to the people, collaboration and explorative audience. In his conclusion, he advised theatres to put up electrifying presentations, robust, exciting, thought-provoking and highly discursive and stimulating performances. The third and final keynote address was delivered by Dr Christopher Odhiambo from Arap Moi University, Kenya. His topic was, ‘In Search of New Performance Spaces: Theatre Practitioners and FM Radio in Kenya’. He advocated for oral performances on radio and encouraged artists to appropriate technology for their work. The plenary sessions that came at the end of keynote addresses on each day were equally informative, stimulating and thought-provoking and the papers presented covered a broad range of the issues and sub-themes suggested by the overall theme of the conference *Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre and Performance*. Provision was made for all participants present, despite the large turnout, to share their experiences and propose new ideas for the development and advancement of African Theatre. Participants expounded on their views on various issues in their areas of specialisation and with each contributing to the expanding horizons and opportunities in the field of

African theatre and performance. Overall, the conference succeeded in creating space and opportunities for a dynamic meeting and rubbing of minds.

### **Entertainment**

It was not all work without play at the conference. Participants had opportunities to mingle and create fun for themselves. The lunch breaks at Mbari House, the wine drinking visit to the Mayor of Swansea's castle, the treat to a sumptuous dinner hosted by AWEMO and the exciting sites, were all exhilarating moments that will linger on in the minds of delegates.

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