

## Book Review

*African Theatre: Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Wole Soyinka. Volume Editors: Martin Banham, Femi Osofisan (Suffolk: James Currey, 2014) 128pp. (£16.58p)*

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*African Theatre 13*, guest-edited by Kimani Njogu, focuses on two iconic African dramatists, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Wole Soyinka from Kenya and Nigeria respectively. These theatre artists actually need no introduction as their creative works, critical writings and theatre productions have received international recognition repeatedly. The volume interrogates the works of Ngugi and Soyinka from three standpoints - first, their impacts on theatre scholarship and performance theory; second, the dramatists' influence on other theatre artists producing their works or working with them in stage productions; and third, the social impact of the playwrights' works in both thematic and ideological dimensions.

David Kerr discusses the influence of Soyinka and Ngugi on his work. From a reading of their plays, Kerr sees their impact beyond simple communication as they resonate in political activism, class struggle and dynamics of power on the African continent. Biodun Jeyifo dissects the theoretical foundations of Soyinka and Ngugi's works and argues with textual illustrations that beyond the heroic Ogun transitional gulf of the Yoruba/African cosmic worldview, the myth of 'Ayan' explains the 'performative sublimity' of Soyinka's tragic music which is 'far more powerful than language' (p.10). Similarly, the philosophy of 'Ujamaa' underscores the concept of unity and collectivism which is the 'inspiring idea' behind Ngugi's theatre work. Hence, 'Ayan and Ujamaa', according to Jeyifo, are revolutionary dramatic theories with divergent trajectories - Ngugi's 'Ujamaa' leading a populist, peasant worker revolution

while Soyinka's 'Ayan' maintains a radical liberal bourgeois crusade anchored on the individualism of the 'strong breeds' - both theories are simultaneously discontinuous and continuous' (p.14). Jeyifo's argument apparently puts to rest the claim that Africa lacks any original dramatic theory.

The second section of the book, presents a variegated chiaroscuro of diverse encounters with Soyinka and Ngugi seen through the eyes of theatre people interpreting their works as critics, performance theorists, stage directors, designer-composers and theatre workers. Hence, Tunji Oyelana in conversation with Sola Adeyemi shares his wealth of experience on what it means to work under Soyinka in stage productions. A similar tale resonates in the experience of Chou wa Muiruri who, as Mugo Muhia writes, reflects on his experience in Ngugi's popular theatre experiments with the Kamiriithu peasants. Muiruri, who played the role of Kioi in *I Will Marry When I Want* 'credits the success of the whole project to Ngugi wa Thiong'o'. (p, 39)

Another dimension of the theatrical encounters with Soyinka and Ngugi deals with the challenges and excitement of producing their works on stage using trainee performers. Tunde Onikoyi discusses the difficulties of staging Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy* using inexperienced cast. He concludes that staging Soyinka's works requires patience and perseverance to learn the language, music and theatrical structure. Onikoyi opines that since many directors lack such patience and perseverance, they often avoid staging Soyinka. Similarly, Silviah Namussasi re-examines her experience in staging Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* for a 'foreign audience' using a cast of beginner-trainee actors at Mombassa, Kenya. The production highlights the limitless potentials of Soyinka's dramatic texts as the play was performed as a musical, adapted to the local cultural environment (in music, diction and visual design) and applied as a suitable practical material for professional actor-training programme. The malleability of Soyinka's plays is equally echoed by the theatrical experiments of Bisi Adigun in adapting *The Trials of Brother Jero* for audiences in Dublin and Lagos respectively. Adigun's version of *Brother Jero* seeks thematically to avoid the play being misunderstood by the Irish audience as 'a creative endorsement of domestic violence or wife battering' but to highlight 'the pervasive phenomenon of Pentecostalism' in modern African society (p.29). Furthermore, Frederick Mbogo shares his experience of producing Ngugi's *I Will Marry When I Want* in South Africa. Mbogo identified the choice of cast, running time (performance duration), thematic interpretation, diction, songs and cultural adaptability of the foreign cast and crew as key areas of challenge and interest in the productions.

The section of 'encounters' with the playwrights concludes with Oby Obyerodhyambo's perspective of Ngugi as 'unrecognized Black Hermit' and Gichingiri Ndigirigi's flashback to the Kamiriithu popular theatre experience. Obyerodhyambo argues that Ngugi 'remains the proverbial unaccepted prophet' judging by the censorship of his works and political persecutions in his native Kenya. Using a production of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathii*, he equates Ngugi wa Thiong'o with the character of Dedan Kimathi – both unsung heroes of the Kenyan army of resistance. Ndigirigi does a postmortem of the Kamiriithu project and highlights certain lessons to be learned from it with regard to 'institutionalizing a truly participatory theatre' (p.50). But, in analyzing the post-Kamiriithu era, he observes the debilitating impact of censorship and class and ideological disconnect which reduced the revival of Kamiriithu theatre to mere 'cultural and commercial entertainment' offered at 'beer halls' and lacking 'efficacy' to catalyze real socio-political change (p.57).

The essays in this volume of *African Theatre* conclude with another form of encounter with Wole Soyinka's and Ngugi wa Thiong'o through a catalogue of their plays in production as provided by James Gibbs and Mugo Muhia. This is followed by a review of a production of Ngugi's co-authored play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* presented by Ketu Katrak. On their part, Gibbs and Muhia reflect on the text and various productions of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. They observe the thematic and cultural controversies surrounding critical interpretations of the play (as well as Soyinka's reactions) and submit that the productions shed light on 'how creative and critical people interact', providing forums for audiences of different races to reflect. Thus, Whites get a view of how others perceive them while audiences of African heritage get to hear the story of their historical predicament. Gibbs and Muhia further reflect on the plays of Ngugi and their numerous productions on stage. While recognizing Ngugi's transition 'from writing for drama competitions in educational institutions to involvement in generating politically relevant productions', they also 'draw attention to the theme of African communalism that runs through Ngugi's work' (p.69).

Finally, Ketu Katrak shares her personal production experience of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* at the University of California, Irvine. The article is a detailed description of a director's engagement in the production process – from planning stages through the presentation and post-production activities. The review is also spiced with pictures of the stage production which was witnessed by the playwrights. Ngugi attended the preproduction meetings, interacted with the cast and provided 'fine insights into interpreting the text and historical details of the colonial situation in Kenya from his own research and life experience' (p.87). A major

trope that reverberates through the play is the contradiction between law and justice which goes beyond Kimathi, Ngugi and Kenya as it is also evident in the American society as reflected in the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and other African-American victims of law enforcement.

The volume also features Soyinka's radio play, *A Rain of Stones*, which satirizes the devilish schemes of religious fanatics who sacrifice truth and human lives to perpetuate false ideology and extreme doctrines. In the play, Dedau, a zealot seeks to quench the light of knowledge and truth symbolized by Dr. Meklis, the archeologist who tries to expose the falsehood being propagated by extremists. In the process of unearthing the evidence, Dr. Meklis is buried alive in an excavation tunnel by Dedau. The play lampoons the fanatical ideology that defines the current terror campaigns of groups such as Boko Haram, Al Shabab, ISIL, Al Qaeda and others.

This volume ends with some book reviews beginning with 'New Plays from Africa' as reviewed by Osita Okagbue who highlights the varied thematic preoccupations of Munyaradzi Mawere's *Rain Petitioning* and *Step Child*, Katrin Njong Toh's *Fointana*, Bole Butake's *Dance of the Vampires* and *Six Other Plays* and Francis Imbuga's *The Green Cross of Kafiira*. Jane Plastow also reviewed Samuel Kasule's important book, *Resistance and Politics in Contemporary East African Theatre: Trends in Ugandan Theatre Since 1960*. Following a critical analysis of the chapters, Plastow submits that Kasule's book 'is a very welcome analysis of the work of Uganda's best known playwrights' (p.113). Plastow, however, disagrees with the conceptual thrust of the opening chapters but recognizes the contributions of the book to African theatre and film studies. Plastow also reviewed Galina Balashova's *Drama in Modern Ethiopian Literature and Theatre* which she dismisses as a 'biased, socio-politically misleading and poorly written book' (p.120).

Astrid van Weyenberg's *The Politics of Adaptation: Contemporary African Drama and Greek Tragedy* was reviewed by Christine Matzke who acknowledges the book's 'pertinent points relevant for the study of African adaptation' (p.117). Colin Chambers' review of Bernth Lindfors' *Ira Aldridge: Vol. 3, Performing Shakespeare in Europe, 1852-1855* completes the study on the life and work of Ira Aldridge, a 19<sup>th</sup> century itinerant American actor. The volume, *Theatre in Africa: Between Art and Development Cooperation: Stories of a German-Malawian Collaboration* edited by Nadja Keller *et al* was reviewed by Laurent Leky who submits that the book provides a concise view of issues that influence 'international cooperation within the arts in Africa' (p.124). Yvette Hutchison's *South African Performance and Archives of Memory*, as reviewed by Jane Taylor, is considered a valuable

diversity of enquiry despite the many shortcomings noticed in the book. Finally, Martin Banham presents the three-set book, *Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre* edited by Kene Igweonu and Osita Okagbue. With ten essays in each set, Banham notes that the book which will be reviewed in detail in subsequent editions of *African Theatre*, presents 'a stimulating forum' for interrogating African theatre and performance.

In conclusion, *African Theatre* 13 provides interesting insights on the works of two giants of African theatre. It particularly offers rare materials on how theatre people encounter and engage with the dramatic texts of Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. This volume will remain a reference material for students, scholars and practitioners of African dramatic literature, directing and performance.