

## Contemporary West African Monodrama and its Stage Productions: A Challenge

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Current francophone playwrights and directors display a predilection for monodrama, as recent festivals showed. Monodrama in itself is obviously nothing genuinely African. In *Lire le théâtre contemporain*, Jean-Pierre Rynngaert talks about the fashion of monologic drama in France in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and focuses on the qualities of “direct testimony” and “intimate narration” (Rynngaert, 2000: 70). He highlights the difficult place of these kinds of testimonies: “The right regime of speech is difficult to find, between the shamelessness of true solitude and the necessities of theatricality” (Rynngaert, 2000: 72). Focusing on intimate narration and testimony places these plays in line with tragic monologue, which displays a struggle of different positions and is occasionally being directed to an absent other, a loved one or even God. By contrast, African mono-theatre traditions do not create a fictive space of solitude. Storyteller and griot are authorized to take the floor, yet they always speak to the community or an individual member of the community. The griot’s art has given rise to the genre of *griotique* as promoted by Ivorian artists of the 1970s as well as to the genre of *conte théâtralisé*; the latter, popular since the late 1980s, can either have mono-dramatic shape or work with a larger cast and a layering of frames. Both genres were shaped with African performance traditions in mind. “Arguably, the single most important feature was the new theatre’s rejection of the textualist and literary bias of the dominant theatre tradition in favour of a performance orientation”, writes John Conteh-Morgan (2010: 8) about the theatre of the 1970s. This trend continues and is still at the heart of Ignace Alomo’s mono-theatre in the 1990s (see Médéhouégnon, 2010: 93).

Current playwrights experiment with African and European performance traditions. Music significantly figures in many plays, new media such as mobile phones and laptops appear on stage and create the

illusion of dialogue. In this essay, I consider some current mono-dramatic aesthetic experiments. Once put on stage, their full challenge to the genre of drama is visible; therefore, I include the performances in my discussion. I finally discuss that these tendencies in current drama and theatre are symptomatic of how monodramas can be confessional or reflective in the way of traditional drama with more than one performer. They can take stock of a life gone astray or of the current state of affairs. They can be directed at an absent other; similarly, they can also tell a good story as illustrated by Ignace Alomo's project of mono-theatre. Additionally, if in cross-genre forms such as the interior monologue, monodramas can even undo the presupposition for dramatic enunciation altogether. To complement this, I analyse some examples by Ivorian playwright, Koffi Kwahulé, and Burkinabè playwright, Aristide Tarnagda. These playwrights are chosen because each one in his own way explores the possibilities of mono-dramatic texts; in addition, the aesthetic search of the younger playwright, Tarnagda, is also indebted to and related to Kwahulé's innovations, since Tarnagda performed in Kwahulé's plays and also attended writing workshops directed by him. In an interview with Sylvie Chalaye, Kwahulé comments on his monodrama, *Les déconnards*. He notes that its trajectory went from play to novel and back to play (Chalaye et Kwahulé, 2001: 167). The novel *Monsieur Ki. Rhapsodie parisienne à sourire pour caresser le temps*, however, was only published in 2010. This trajectory points to genre borders which have been becoming increasingly permeable. It is this permeability, which will significantly determine the formal experiments by contemporary playwrights who cross the borders to poetry and prose. Kwahulé, nevertheless, clings to the dramatic paradigm: "Theatre starts for me with at least two characters on stage. Even if I tackle monologue, I adhere to this personal rule by putting a character who exists by his absence in front of the protagonist" (Chalaye et Kwahulé, 2001: 169).<sup>1</sup>

### **Koffi Kwahulé, *Village fou ou Les déconnards***

In 1998, Koffi Kwahulé wrote the monodrama, *Village fou ou Les déconnards*. The play was staged by Kwahulé and Sidiki Bakaba that same year with Sidiki Bakaba as solo actor. The production and the DVD focused on *Les déconnards* as its title which is why I choose to refer to text and

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<sup>1</sup> *Le théâtre commence pour moi avec au moins deux personnages sur scène. Aussi lorsque j'aborde le monologue, je respecte cette règle personnelle en mettant en face du protagoniste un personnage qui existe par son absence même* (Chalaye et Kwahulé, 2001: 169).

production in the following as *Les déconnards*. *Les déconnards* is close to traditional storytelling. The text is largely in prose and the character tells of life in the *village fou*, the crazy village, whose inhabitants freak out, *ils déconnent*, regularly. He narrates a series of little incidents in the storytelling format: adultery and its punishment, a hunter who receives the gift or malediction to understand the language of animals and plants, a football match with an unexpected result, a fetish which takes revenge on its aggressor. Yet Kwahulé's prose is also interrupted by associative chains which disturb the narration. The character, who speaks about these incidents in his African village, is struck by bouts of asthma which repeatedly interrupt his tale. His story is told in parenthesis. The play begins with a voice-off; it is the voice of the new tenant who has moved into Monsieur's room after the latter's suicide. All Monsieur has left is a tape, possibly with the stories of Djimi, the crazy village. When the actor comes on stage, he becomes the tenant who slips the tape into the tape recorder. We can assume that since the tape remains silent, it is this recording which the landlady finds later (Kwahulé, 2000: 16). At the end of his monologue, he takes the tape out and leaves it on the table (ibid: 59). After that, the voice-off starts again, the tenant enters once more, and inserts once more the tape into the recorder. This confusion of identities – a feature Kwahulé is fond of, if one considers his œuvre – is supported by the similarity between the former tenant, Monsieur, and the present one. "Look, isn't he like Monsieur" (ibid: 16) is the landlady's reaction when she sees the new tenant. And the new tenant is indeed like the old one because he, too, is from a village next to Djimi. So, the narrator's identity is not clear– is it Monsieur or the new tenant? Or, is there an endless loop? The stage production starts with a tape left on a chair while we hear the voice-off. Then, the character enters and puts the tape into the tape recorder. In the following scene, when he addresses an absent other, he is seen either talking to the empty chair in front of the table or to the recorder itself. They embody the absent other he addresses. In the end, he takes the tape out and leaves it on the chair. In contrast to the play, the production gives the idea that we go back in time, to the moment before the suicide, when the character starts his tale. In his highly acclaimed performance, Bakaba tells the tales and impersonates and mimics the characters at the same time. His voice and movements change according to the characters in his tales, so all the time he slips in and out of character. The character's severe asthma causes him to punctuate the tale: it makes him crouch and stop the narration. Bakaba plays with the props and costumes – his coat, vest and torn T-shirt – at his disposition and moves about the poorly furnished room, which contains minimal furnishings such as a daybed with a blue bedspread, a gas cooker, a pot and a coat-stand. The DVD

recording does not show an audience or a theatre space; it could have been recorded in a studio. The play is set in a small servant's room in Paris. The rural African village space and traditional storytelling are evoked. Yet, the traditional tale, village and history have gone out of control and exist in distortion only. The polyphony in *Les déconnards* is due to the voices of the village, which appear in his speech. These voices are loosely tied to the life of the narrator. But most of the tales do not concern him directly. They are presented one by one as individual tales, with only occasional cross-references. In the middle of the performance, the narrator suddenly cries out in solitude and we understand that he conjures up the tales and people from the past (in the performance) in order to take his leave. Instead of summing up his own life, he leaves the panoramic résumé of an Africa let loose behind (see Chalaye et Kwahulé 2001).

### **Koffi Kwahulé, *Jaz***

*Jaz*, a one-act play, written in free verse, was published by Kwahulé that same year and tells a story of rape. The female character does not have a name attributed to her because, at the beginning of the play, her identity is concealed. When the play starts, it seems to be a woman friend who, in retrospect, tells the story of a beautiful girl named Jaz: "Jaz. / Yes Jaz. / We always called her Jaz. [...] My buddy. / My friend. / I'm not here to talk about myself but about Jaz" (Kwahulé, 1998: 57).<sup>2</sup> She talks about Jaz's friend Oridé, "a girl so beautiful as to wake up the dead" (ibid: 66), Oridé's grandfather, the beggar who insulted Oridé, and about the man who raped Jaz in the *sanisette bleue*, the blue public toilet outside her building. She interrupts her narration with her repeated phrase "I'm not here to talk about myself but about Jaz" (Kwahulé, 1998: 70).<sup>3</sup> The insistent repetition of this phrase makes it clear that Jaz is speaking about herself in the third person. The reason for this becomes apparent: Jaz is the woman before and during the rape, the one whose identity is irrevocably lost due to the rape. As if to make sure the audience understands, Kwahulé closes the play with the following lines: "Jaz, that's no longer me. // Jaz. / Yes, Jaz. / They always called me Jaz. / Jaz. / I don't know

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<sup>2</sup> Jaz. / Oui Jaz. / On l'a toujours appelée Jaz. [...] Ma copine. / Mon amie. / Je ne suis pas ici pour parler de moi mais de Jaz (Kwahulé 1998: 57). Oridé: la fille belle à réveiller un mort (ibid: 66).

<sup>3</sup> Je ne suis pas ici pour parler de moi mais de Jaz (ibid: 70).

anymore. / Just Jaz” (ibid 90).<sup>4</sup> In *Jaz*, Kwahulé tells a clearly discernible story in a way that testifies to the disruption a traumatic event brings about. The free verse opens up a space of resonance. Phrases are evocative when lines consist of few words: “No one. / On Sunday /at this hour / the place “Bleu de Chine” is always empty” (ibid: 81).<sup>5</sup> Kwahulé repeatedly deploys anaphoras, alliterations and parallelisms. The poetry of the woman’s speech is confronted/contrasted with the violent content. Even when the perpetrator talks through the words of the woman, these rhetoric devices remain. The result is even more disconcerting because Jaz’s way of speaking makes her appear as the exquisite being the man soils. The poetry of the text, the disjointed time line and the identity puzzle make *Jaz* unique among the plays treated here. When Denis Mpunga staged *Jaz* in 2008, he cast the Rwandan actress, Carole Karemera, alongside the white free-jazz musician, Julie Chemin, and her double bass. The production thus remains an all-woman production and Chemin functions as Karemera’s double. The choice of instrument and a woman musician on stage are Mpunga’s – the text only mentions the necessity of a jazz instrument. Having two women on stage, however, evokes the situation of female intimacy relevant to the text. In the course of the production, a subtle play unfolds between the two women and the instrument on the empty stage.

### Aristide Tarnagda, *Terre Rouge*

Aristide Tarnagda acknowledges the influence Kwahulé has on his own work. In 2011, he played the part of the tenant in Koffi Kwahulé’s *Les déconnards*, in a production by Malian actor and director, Lamine Diarra. In 2012, he used a quotation from the same play, *Village fou ou Les déconnards*, as a motto to his play *Et si je les tuais tous madame*. Before talking about this production, I will first take a look at *Terre Rouge*, a play written and performed by Tarnagda and staged by French director Marie-Pierre Bésanger in 2012 (*Terre rouge*, 2012).

*Terre rouge* is a play for one actor, which tells the story of two brothers. One of them left the country years ago and is living in Paris while the other one remained in his home village in an African country, which, as

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<sup>4</sup> Jaz ce n’est plus moi. // Jaz. / Oui Jaz. / On m’a toujours appelée Jaz. / Jaz / Je ne sais plus. / Simplement Jaz (ibid: 90).

<sup>5</sup> Personne. / Le dimanche / à cette heure / la place Bleu de Chine est toujours vide (ibid: 81).

the play starts and ends with lines in Bissa, Tarnagda's mother tongue can be considered to be Burkina Faso. The play is from the perspective of the brother who stayed at home. At the beginning, there is the nostalgia of the nameless character who stayed at home for his childhood world. He declares his love for the red earth, its trees and scents, and reminisces about his childhood games with his brother. Childhood in retrospect is seen as that haven of abundant nourishment and care. He enumerates everything that is related to this red earth – trees, animals and fruits – and he also narrates individual episodes from his childhood. Yet this childhood landscape is irrevocably lost, destroyed by the machines which tore down the trees. The long gone brother sends nothing but letters (Tarnagda, 2012: 7). The latest letter might be his brother's last one, so he is afraid of reading it. His anaphoras and parallelisms create a landscape of loss; elements which made up his childhood life are no more (ibid: 7f). With the phrase, "my brother writes:" (ibid: 8), the character's voice becomes that of the brother abroad. The audience sees his perspective on life in Paris. It is again repetitions and parallelisms, favourite rhetoric devices of Tarnagda, which structure his speech. Only when he starts talking about his future plans do his words connect. Even though he is in bad health himself, he wants his brother to use the money he has gained abroad to improve the living conditions in his home village. At the end of the letter, we guess that the brother, already coughing blood, might not get back home to Africa alive. Yet the brother at home refuses the proposal to improve the living conditions. "No brother, I'm not going to do anything. It's easy to get lost and to force others to recreate the world. I couldn't care less about the world, which is heading for the rocks. You know that!" (ibid: 14).<sup>6</sup> He refuses to be like his brother because the world is no longer what it used to be. He complains about restrictions in modern communications that no longer allow people to exchange comments about government corruption, and global economics. And he longs for the red earth he has lost. It is a tirade of refusal, which expresses the desperation of the character, exiled in his own country.

Because the voices follow each other, the dialogic character of the monologue is obvious. Tarnagda, however, puts a motto from Stefan Zweig's *Chess novella* at the beginning: "The conditions in which I found

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<sup>6</sup> *Non frangin, je ne ferai rien. C'est facile de se barrer et d'exiger aux autres de refaire le monde. Moi je m'en fous du monde qui coure à sa perte. Tu le sais ça!* (Tarnagda, 2012: 14).

myself to try this splitting between a white and a black ego" (ibid: 1).<sup>7</sup> In spite of the clearly sketched communication between the two brothers, they also realise two faces of the same character. On the stage, which is almost bare, the soundscape by Hughes Germain and the tunes played by clarinet and accordion (Gabriel Durif & Thibault Chaumeil) accompany the lone actor. Here, the position of the actor – in the back or the front of the stage – distinguishes the two characters from each other; only the Paris brother smokes. The play was created as part of an artistic research on the impact of landscape, and topic, soundscape and music point to this exploration.

### **Aristide Tarnagda, *Et si je les tuais tous madame***

The dominant question in Tarnagda's recent plays is whether one should stay or leave the country. The manner in which he asks this question on stage, however, differs considerably in his 2012 production *Et si je les tuais tous madame* (And if I killed them all, madam). The play is a staged interior monologue. A young man, Lamine, stands at a red light and wants to ask a woman in a car a question: Should he return to his girlfriend in the neighbouring country or not? The question is never once spoken aloud and the woman does not figure on stage. The discrepancy between the few minutes of a red light and the duration of the one-hour interior monologue is a typical feature of prose fiction, yet not of drama. In spite of plot ellipses between scenes, we still cling to the notion of real time when actors perform on stage. Yet the voice of the interior monologue is not monologic. Lamine's thoughts are invaded by voices from his past, which try to forward his decision-making. While the dramatic tradition allows ghosts to utter the repressed, Lamine's interlocutors always remain within his mind. His friend, Robert, his girlfriend, and his parents, all try to persuade him to steal the lady's handbag and to return home. Yet he hesitates and weighs the arguments in a way which brings Lamine's musings close to Hamlet's reflective monologue. For the production, Tarnagda cast Lamine Diarra as Lamine. Two musicians, a Bissa guitar player, Hamidou Bonssa, and David Malgoubri, who plays the guitar and sings, accompany him; both are prominent Burkinabè musicians. Another actor/musician, Salif Ouedraogo, who plays a kind of Lamine's double and who speaks some of the lines, also accompanies Lamine. Tarnagda's choice of music and actors is strategic as well as emotional. In an

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<sup>7</sup> *Les conditions dans lesquelles je me trouvais à tenter ce dédoublement entre un moi blanc et un moi noir...* (ibid: 1)

interview in Cologne (Bühler-Dietrich and Tarnagda, 2013), he explained that he wanted to include the musicians of the hip-hop duo Faso Kombat (Malgoubri and Ouedraogo), because their voice as young Burkinabè is politically important. Hamidou Bonssa, by contrast, plays an instrument which, to Tarnagda, evokes the softness and well-being of childhood. Even though the text is written entirely in French, the production uses lyrics in Bissa, Mooré and Dioula to accompany the words.

With the four men on stage, Tarnagda uses the actors/musicians to create a dialogue between words and music or between the interior voices and Lamine, when momentarily one actor takes over the lines of Robert or the father. In addition, he explores the visual potential of having several people on stage and creates visual constellations of two performers, which express the emotional situation of Lamine. Blocking becomes an important means for showing proximity or distance between the characters. The bare stage with its firewall at the back refers to the street scene, Lamine's inner space and the theatre space at the same time. Lamine Diarra is distinguishable from the others because he wears a brown suit. The two hip-hoppers are barefooted and wear white T-shirts and jeans. Bonssa, who permanently carries his guitar, is not cast as one of the characters. Moreover, apart from Lamine, the actors remain present as performers as well as characters. With Lamine Diarra, the levels are blurred, because the clearly fictional character purposely carries the name of its actor, for whom Tarnagda wrote the text.

Similar to Kwahulé, Tarnagda insists on the dialogic quality of his monologue. At the beginning, Lamine talks to the woman at the steering wheel before speaking to the characters from his past. Yet, in fact, both conversations take place in Lamine's mind, even if all of it is spoken out loud on stage. There is no indication that the character actually talks to the lady. Maintaining dialogue "under erasure", the play breaks with the convention of drama while at the same time adhering to it.

The connection between Kwahulé's *Les déconnards* and Tarnagda's play goes beyond the motto of *Et si je les tuais tous madame*, taken from Kwahulé's play:

It must be terrible to die abroad. It is as if one had never lived. Because a stranger is someone who hangs up his life just like one hangs up a coat at the entrance of a building. It is someone who is on hold for life... (Kwahulé 2000: 42).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "Ça doit être terrible de mourir à l'étranger. C'est comme si on n'avait jamais vécu. Parce qu'un étranger, c'est quelqu'un qui accroche sa vie comme on accroche son

Not only are both characters, Monsieur and Lamine, waiting for their life to begin – or to end, but, while being on hold, they are both invaded by voices from their past who claim a polyphonic space within the monologic utterance. With Tarnagda, these voices are strictly personal; Kwahulé's story of the village is replaced by Lamine's personal story. Yet the consequences of their stocktaking remain the same: both characters commit suicide at the end. We have come quite a way from early experiments with dramatised tales. When Burkinabè Jean-Pierre Guingané wrote *La danseuse de l'eau* (The dancer from the water) in 1998, he created a prose text consisting of frame narrative and story-within-the-story. Frame and centre are related and both tell coherent stories. The traditional storyteller is closely in mind and goes well with this nostalgic tale of friendship, failure and loss. Yet, on stage, even the very first production cast two actors for the play. In 2012/2013, several companies staged *La danseuse de l'eau*. The fact itself is astonishing. The tale of the friendship between a princess and a mermaid is far removed from the worries of globalisation. Yet, it might be that the challenge mono-dramatic texts pose is attractive to performers nowadays because it forces them to rethink the connection between text and stage. Equally, it seems to be monodrama, which expresses the desire for and concurrent lack of address nowadays.

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*manteau à l'entrée d'une maison; c'est quelqu'un qui attend de vivre..."* (Kwahulé, 2000: 42).

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