

African Performance Review

Vol. 15, No. 1, 2025

pp. 63-67

Conference Report¹

Report on The Annual International Conference of African Theatre Association (AfTA), in collaboration with Laboratoire des Sciences de la Communication, des Arts et de la Culture (LSCAC/UFRICA), Félix Houphouët-Boigny University, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire: Theatres, Cultures and Democracies in Africa (3-6 July 2024)

[Colloque international pluridisciplinaire annuel de l'African Theatre Association (AfTA), en collaboration avec le Laboratoire des Sciences de la Communication, des Arts et de la Culture (LSCAC / UFR ICA) à l'Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire: "Théâtres, cultures, et démocraties en Afrique" (Du 3 au 6 juillet 2024)]

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The AFTA conference, hosted by Université Fèlix Houphouët-Boigny in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, presented an enriching and intellectually stimulating experience for me as a PhD researcher in contemporary Black women's theatre. Attending this prestigious event offered a unique opportunity to engage with scholars, practitioners, and enthusiasts from around the world. Centred around the theme of "Theatres, Cultures and Democracies in Africa," the conference aimed to explore the intricate connections between artistic expression, political discourse, and societal transformation. Through 70 in-person and online panel discussions, presentations, book talks, and workshops, I immersed myself in a vibrant academic and artistic environment that fostered creative and critical thinking and interdisciplinary dialogue. In this report, I will share my observations and reflections on the panels and sessions I attended, shedding light on the key themes and contributions that emerged from this insightful gathering of African theatre scholars and practitioners.

¹ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30817/0151.apr0208>

The organizing team, led by Brian Valente-Quinn, Gérard Yao, and other members of the Drama department of the university, demonstrated exceptional warmth and hospitality throughout the event, from the moment of registration to the final day. The first day commenced with a registration process, where we received our conference programme booklets and badges. A vibrant welcome awaited us, featuring a lively parade of large, eye-catching puppets that reflected the local culture. The puppets specifically represented figures in the lore and history of Cote d'Ivoire. The opening ceremony also included speeches from several dignitaries, including the representative of the President of Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny; AFTA President Dr. Sola Adeyemi; the director of the UFRICA; the Minister of Culture; and renowned playwright, singer and dancer, Werewere Liking. Following the speeches, we were treated to a captivating performance, the "Ivory Puppet Show" (also known as the "Blue Head Show"), before enjoying a coffee break.

The conference panels boasted a wide range of intriguing titles, offering a tantalizing glimpse into the diverse topics explored at the conference. The following are the titles of the panels, which were held in two and sometimes three sessions:

First day: Diasporic Dramaturgies, Theatrical Representations of conflict, Activism and Political Rapture in and through Theatre, and Theatre and National Histories.

Second Day: The Dramatic Impact of Humour, Playwrights, Theorists of Democracy, Theatre and Extremism, Theatre and Gender, Scenography Experiments with Democracy, and African Theatre through its Institutions, Theories and Forms.

Third Day: Theatre and Democratic Praxis (talk/workshop), Making Community through Theatre, Rethinking Democracy through the stage, Theatre's Many Media, Oral Traditions and Collective Memory, and Book Talks.

Now, I am going to delve into some of the most stimulating panels I attended, highlighting the key themes and insights that emerged. As a start, Prof. Dominique Traore, gave a keynote address entitled "The 'Theatres, Cultures and Democracies' Combinatorial as Resistance to Managerial Ideology", in which he emphasized the function of theatre in a Democracy whilst it is at the same time a democratic process embodying the cultures of the people. This keynote set the discursive tone for the conference

One of the panels that particularly resonated with my research was presented on the first day, under the category of "Diasporic Dramaturgies". My paper, presented on this panel and titled "Burning Bright: The Politics of Black Female Anger in debbie tucker green's *stoning mary* (2005) and *hang* (2015)," explored the complex and multifaceted nature of anger in the work of this contemporary playwright. Drawing on Black (and other) feminist articulations of the value of anger, including Audre Lorde's 'The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to

Racism' (1981), Maria Lugones' concept of 'Hard-to-handle anger' (2003) and work in this field by Martha Nussbaum (2016), my paper explored anger's multiple political and affective manifestations and complex valences in two of tucker green's plays: *stoning mary* (2005) and *hang* (2015). The discussion following the presentation highlighted the importance of understanding anger not only as a destructive force but also as a powerful tool for social change. The discussion showed how anger emerged as a key signifier in the work of debbie tucker green, central to her exploration of personal, familial, and societal dynamics. The paper discussed the figure of the Black angry woman appeared in multiple forms in tucker green's work, at times taking silent rather than articulated forms. My paper considered also the ways in which tucker green deploys the powerful effects of anger to stage confrontational encounters with (white) audiences, but also how she articulates anger's limits, its (self-) destructive and alienating potential.

The second presentation was by Mojisola Kareem, a Black British theatre-maker, producer, writer, and filmmaker with a passion for social justice. As CEO and Artistic Director of Utopia Theatre, a UK-based organization, Kareem discussed how Utopia Theatre uses theatre as a catalyst for positive change within diaspora communities, fostering democratic engagement and preserving African cultural heritage. 'Theatre is a powerful tool for bridging cultural gaps, empowering marginalized voices, and sparking meaningful dialogue,' Kareem emphasized, highlighting the organization's commitment to using the stage as a platform for social transformation. Their mission is to connect African diasporans to their roots through both traditional and contemporary theatrical forms, promoting civic engagement and inspiring social change. By collaborating with local organisations, schools, and cultural institutions, Utopia Theatre creates impactful projects that address challenges like cultural sensitivity and resource limitations. Their work aims to bridge cultural gaps, empower marginalised communities, and highlight the rich cultural heritage of Africa through the transformative power of theatre. Utopia Theatre's work includes past and upcoming projects, inviting collaboration via info@utopiatheatre.co.uk. Mojisola, thank you for your kindness. I was particularly struck by your inspiring work and passion for Utopia Theatre and I'm eager to experience Utopia Theatre's productions in Sheffield.

One of the panels I particularly liked was a book talk by Hosni Almouklis, a Moroccan theatre-maker and producer who talked about his book, "Halka Forum: Experience in Forum Theatre". Almouklis discussed Forum Theatre and how it empowers spectators to become "spect-actors," actively engaging with the performance by stopping and changing the action to explore solutions to social injustices. He then highlighted the work of "The Theater of the Oppressed of Casablanca," a Moroccan troupe founded in 2012. This group uses Forum Theatre to address various forms of oppression within their communities, bringing art out of exclusive spaces and into public areas to promote social change. Almouklis concluded his talk by listing several projects and workshops undertaken by the

troupe, demonstrating their commitment to using Forum Theatre as a tool for social justice and empowerment [Thank you Mr. Almouklis for the signed copy of your book. I'm so honoured and thrilled to have it, and so excited to dive in].

Brian Valente-Quinn (University of Colorado Boulder) presented a paper, "Engaging Extremism in Francophone West African Theatre," exploring the powerful and timely topic of how theatre artists in Francophone West Africa are responding to the global rise of extremism. The paper inquired into the diverse ways these artists are addressing extremism in their theatrical creations, examining the forms and approaches they employ to engage with this complex issue. Valente-Quinn highlighted the unique appeal of theatre as a medium for addressing extremism's hold on certain populations, particularly in diverse cultural contexts. He emphasized the valuable lessons that African artists can offer to Western audiences regarding the use of the stage to counter radicalizing or extremist discourses. The paper presented a compelling case for the vital role of theatre in fostering dialogue, promoting understanding, and challenging extremist ideologies, both within West Africa and beyond. We are deeply appreciative of Brian's efforts in organizing this insightful and thought-provoking conference, and for his dedication to ensuring the success of the event for all delegates.

On the second day, beyond the conference itself, we were fortunate to attend a captivating theatrical performance at "The Fabric Factory," a venue nestled amidst lush palm trees and a gentle breeze. Elie Liazéré's play, *La fille du bistrot*, transported us into a world of civil war, with the actors' passionate delivery and authentic portrayal of the characters resonating deeply. The play's exploration of the devastating impact of conflict, staged on a simple set that allowed the actors' raw emotions to take centre stage, provided a powerful reminder of the role of theatre in addressing social issues. It was a perfect way to experience the vibrant cultural scene of Ivory Coast and to gain a deeper understanding of the power of theatre to engage with social issues, particularly in the context of conflict zones. Unfortunately, the post-performance discussion between the playwright, Liazéré, British playwright Oladipo Agboluaje, and the actors did not take place.

On the third day, after the session, we were welcomed to Ki Yii Village, cultural studio, performance venue and museum, by the renowned playwright and performer, Werewere Liking, a cultural icon known for her vibrant performances and contributions to traditional Ivorian music and dance. She invited us to her intimate museum, showcasing a collection of traditional Ivorian artifacts and costumes, followed by a performance in her small, intimate theatre. The show was a vibrant celebration of Ivorian culture, with music that filled the air, songs that touched our souls, and dancing that captivated our eyes. It was a truly unforgettable experience that left me feeling inspired and deeply connected to the rich traditions of this beautiful country.

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Farewell, Abidjan! You've left an indelible mark on my heart. Thank you for the incredible memories and the warmth of your people.

See you next year in Stuttgart, Germany!