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**Report on the Annual Multidisciplinary International Conference of the
African Theatre Association (AfTA)¹**

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)

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The annual multidisciplinary international conference of the African Theatre Association (AfTA), an organisation based in London, United Kingdom, took place this year for the first time in a French-speaking African country: Côte d'Ivoire. Organised in collaboration with the Laboratory of Communication, Arts and Culture at the Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, and under the patronage of the Minister of Culture and Francophonie, the conference was held over four days around the theme "Theatre, Cultures and Democracies in Africa".

Being originally from Abidjan and having completed my entire university education in England, it was with great joy that I took part in this encounter between two worlds to which I belong, but which have rarely had the opportunity to discover one another despite their proximity: the Francophone and Anglophone worlds. Aware of the epistemic and linguistic gap separating these two Africas, the organisers, Brian Dennis Valente-Quinn and Kouamé Gérard Yao, made every effort to ensure smooth transitions between presentations. All papers were translated, allowing us – sooner rather than later – to become one and the

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same Africa gathered around a theme as fascinating, engaging and complex as it was: theatre and its relationship to cultures and democracies in African contexts.

The presentations explored five main areas of reflection, namely:

- Theatres and the Construction of Democratic Identities in Africa
- Theatre and Extremist Violence in Africa
- New Theorisations of Theatre Emerging from African Cultural and Democratic Contexts
- Theatre and Cultures in Africa
- Theatre and Afrofuturism.

Their richness and depth make the writing of this report a demanding task. Nevertheless, while highlighting Ivorian ontology, I would like to seize this opportunity to emphasise the power of theatre as a democratic tool and an incubator of culture – through an Ivorian metaphor that reflects our way of being, living and learning.

Theatre is to democracy what boiling oil is to slices of plantain: once immersed in the boiling oil of democracy, they become a remarkable dish that revolutionises our plates—*allico*. Critics may claim that *allico* is not uniquely ours, since plantains are eaten in other African countries and even in Latin America. To that we reply by asking: how is the plantain cut, by whom, how is it cooked and eaten? Only then can we assess it against our own – pardon my neologism – *allicotic* criteria. Indeed, *allico*, in its particularities, remains Ivorian and, as such, part of our culture. It expresses our culinary desires, just as the product of theatre and democracy expresses our frustrations, our societal limitations and our constant desire to do better, for, after all, “*discouragement is not Ivorian.*” It was along this conceptual line – though perhaps less metaphorical – that Dominique Traoré, a lecturer and researcher at the Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, opened the conference with a keynote lecture entitled “The Combinatory ‘Theatres, Cultures and Democracies’ as Resistance to Managerial Ideology.” His reflection aimed to question the role of theatre, culture and democracy in the capitalist society in which we currently live. Traoré proposed that from the alliance of these three factors could emerge what he called “a participatory democracy” capable of “mobilising human resources to educate the masses.”

One branch of theatre engaged in fulfilling this mission across the world is Theatre for Development (TfD). This form of theatre creates a space for critical reflection in which everyone – actor or spectator – can participate in transforming

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their community as well as their own personal development. Among the first projects to introduce this practice in Africa from the 1970s onwards, we can cite the work of Ross Kidd and Martin Byram in Botswana, David Kerr in Malawi, Zakes Mda in Lesotho, Oga Steve Abah in Nigeria, and the Kenyans Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii, who, through their projects with the Kamiriithu community, published the plays *Ngahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want, 1977)* and *Maitu Ngujira (Mother, Sing for Me, 1982)*. As the literature shows, Theatre for Development has primarily taken root in Anglophone Africa. However, it is important to note that it shares so many similarities with traditional West African theatre – such as their social, ethnographic and educational functions, their inclusion of the audience as active participants in the action, and more – that one might wonder whether it has always existed here, albeit in a less academic form.

As an outcome of this annual multidisciplinary international AfTA conference, it is now both timely and essential to multiply projects that foster the development of TfD in Côte d'Ivoire. Such initiatives would enable policymakers to benefit from the expertise of local communities in the design and implementation of development policies, particularly in the field of education. It was therefore a genuine pleasure for me, and, I believe, for all participants, to have had the opportunity to meet Mouhamadou Diol, the Senegalese director of the Kàddu Yaraax troupe, at the *Fabrique culturelle d'Abidjan* during the second day of the conference. Diol shared his experience with TfD, which he calls Forum Theatre, inspired by the principles of the Theatre of the Oppressed developed by Brazilian theatre practitioner and educator Augusto Boal. The Senegalese artist emphasised that one of the essential rules of his forum theatre is that the characters must be pure creations of the affected communities. It is precisely this transfer of power, through creativity and dialogue, that is revolutionary. The marginalised individual returns to the centre of the page and gains the right to change the course of history by making the universal personal. In any case, this conference opened the door to numerous academic as well as cultural reflections, giving us the opportunity to learn more about both our neighbours' theatrical practices and our own; showing us the best of what is done here and elsewhere. What, then, is the next step? Boal wrote, "*Theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who must wield it.*" I will therefore conclude by submitting your imagination to a provocative exercise: What would be the epistemic, democratic and cultural consequences if, at every alloco stall in Côte d'Ivoire, a piece of Theatre for Development was performed – created by and for local populations about their daily challenges?