



**Martin Banham, James Gibbs, Femi Osofisan, eds.** *African Theatre in Development*. Oxford: James Currey, 1999. 182 pp. \$18.95 (paper), \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85255-594-1.



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Theatre for Development practitioners, as well as academics in other disciplines all over the world will find this book a valuable source of the latest developments in theatre in Africa. Edited jointly by Martin Banham, James Gibbs and Femi Osofisan, *African Theatre in Development* is the first in the African Theatre series, an initiative that will provide a focus for research, critical discussion, information and creativity in the important area of African theatre and performance. The editors state that each issue in the series will concentrate on a major topic that will be pan-African in coverage and accessibility, and that will also broaden debates on the roles of drama in the contemporary African life.

Divided into four main sections, *African Theatre in Development* is a 'must-have' for anybody interested in issues relating to theatre and development in Africa. The first section contains ten informative articles on workshops, seminars and reflections of theatre in development in selected African countries.

The first chapter by Carolyn Duggan provides an analytic discourse of South African playwright Zakes Mda's choice of the middle path in the dramatic reconceptualisation of South African political history. In it, she opines that Mda chose the voice of reason over the voice of emotion in scribing his dramatic experiments. According to Duggan, Mda finds a nexus between the anomalous mix

of traditional practices among Africans and the eclecticism of modern African thinking that emerges in Mda's Brechtian approach. Mda combines the tempered 'okunjengokwabelungu' (the light that "shines from the white man") with traditional lores and experiences as a concept to dramatise the difference between reality and illusion in his people's lives. In this, he seeks to stimulate a desire for change. Mda's philosophy, writes Duggan, is to stimulate his audience not only to "change his own thinking but be encouraged to intervene" (4). In demonstrating Mda's successful experiment of involving his audience in a reasoning process during his drama, Duggan uses Mda's plays where narration and role-playing are key to spice her discourse.

Perhaps the most important chapter in this section for those interested in the historical development of Theatre for Development in Africa is the second chapter by James Gibbs on the pioneering work done by Alec Dickson in the former Gold Coast, now Ghana, in the 1940s. Gibbs paints the picture of an educationist who was concerned with mass education, social welfare and community development programmes, using dramatic techniques without being aware of the import of drama, but whose aim was to change the social atmosphere and empower the local people. The efforts of Dickson, according to Gibbs, led to the creation of the Social Welfare Depart-

ment's community development programmes.

Hardly any Mauritian Creole writing has filtered into the mainstream literary and dramatic discourse and that is one of the points that make the contribution of Roshni Mooneeram, 'Theatre Development in Mauritius: >From a theatre of protest to a theatre of cultural miscegenation', very valuable in this collection. Providing a historical analysis of theatrical activities in Mauritius since the first French theatre in the mid-eighteenth century, Mooneeram describes the emergence and foregrounding of Creole language and theatre as the symbol of multi-cultural identity in the country. Using the theatre of Dev Virahsawmy, Azize Asgarally and Henri Favori, Mooneeram essays the linguistic role of Creole language in furthering the agenda for a multi-cultural dialogue in countering the various types of oppression capable of arising in a newly independent countries. One important achievement of the Mauritian Creole as dramatic language is the 'disappearance' of an elitist conception of an audience in the current Mauritian theatrical space, concludes Mooneeram. This conclusion convinces me that Mauritian theatre has broken the boundary between formal Western-type theatre and traditional performances in a blend that Theatre for Development will find very useful.

Apart from details of the life-long war independence between Eritrea and Ethiopia, almost little is known about the former, especially in the area of Theatre for Development – until the publication of this book, which contains two full chapters on development theatre in Eritrea and a scintillating appraisal and interview of one of the architects of Eritrean theatre today. The two chapters are foregrounded by the Eritrean proverb quoted by Jane Plastow – “Until the lion has a voice, the tales of the hunt will be only those of the hunter” (p. 38). The first of these two chapters is a collective report by students of the Tigre/Bilen theatre training course on community-based theatre projects conducted in 1997, using Forum Theatre ideas as developed by Augusto Boal. In the second chapter on Eritrea, Plastow critically assesses the theatrical influence of Eritrean's Alemseged Tesfai who was in turn influenced by the systematic 'ethnic cleansing' practice of the Ethiopian soldiers among the Somalis to make the latter lose their identity. Only then, the idea went by another name. Plastow relates how Tesfai delves into the Eritrean culture and folklore – or the little that remained after years of brutal colonisation – to set lay the foundation of modern Eritrean theatre.

Female genital mutilation (FGM), now more correctly

termed female genital cutting, is very common among some groups in Nigeria, and this practice, over the recent years, has raised concern among government agencies, non-governmental organisations, individuals, and theatre companies, prompting some of these agencies to organise programmes and activities to influence people against the practice. Chuck Mike's Performance Studio Workshop's theatre laboratory for alternative communication, social development and community empowerment is one of such outreach agencies that preach against cultural practices that are now considered outmoded and dangerous, like FGM. In the report of the workshop the Studio held in some communities among the Yorubas in November 1996, and published as the a chapter in this book, the group involved expressed their problems, successes and frustrations during the process of convincing the local communities to abandon the practice of circumcision with such frankness and honesty rarely found in reports of such nature. One of the frankness underpinning the report, and which casts a high degree of authenticity on it, is the admission of 'failure'; six months after the workshop, an inspection team from the Studio went to the communities and scarcely noticed any change wrought by the workshop.

The last four chapters are also reports, but of a different kind. David Kerr renders a personal account of the Arts for Development Seminar held in Harare in 1997 with the intention of comparison with “other conferences and workshops which I attended in the late 1970s and early 1980s during the first flush of Southern Africa's Theatre for Development movement” (p. 79). The rationale behind this was to gauge the extent and influence of Theatre for Development as an ideology in the region in the intervening period. In a critical assessment, Kerr concludes that due to the sponsorship environment of these development works, which is mainly NGO oriented, strategies tend to be 'bandaged' around the present familiars of popular culture – plays, songs, dances, jingles – all “advising people how to improve their lives within fairly narrow sectoral domains” (p. 86). He stresses the transformation of arts for development in the Southern African region in line with the macro-economic inequalities endemic in the region.

Jumai Ewu's reports on the 1998 Seminar in Nigeria follows Kerr's account but both the Seminar/Workshop and the report are structured more along the report of the Performance Workshop Studio experiment in 1996. Coincidentally, the workshop participants visited the 'laboratory communities' of the Studio and were able to more generously assess the impact of the Studio's workshop of

FGM. Ewu also, like Kerr, points out the contradictions present in Theatre for Development practice in Africa as identified further by the Seminar. Theatre for Development's base is stronger in academic institutions where middle-class male facilitators dominate it, whereas the 'beneficiaries' are primarily rural people, outside academic environments. She also marks the use of non-local languages as a great barrier to the success of Theatre for Development in Africa even though literary theatre as produced by dramatists like Femi Osofisan can and do complement the efforts of Theatre for Development. My reflection on this is that more comparative study should be conducted on Mauritian Creole theatre and the theatre of Femi Osofisan.

The shift from traditional theatre mode to Theatre for Development practice can be trying and stressful, and this is what forms the contribution of Frances Harding to the book. She narrates and defines the similarities and differences between the Benue Theatre for Development Workshop of 1982/1983 and the Katsina Workshop of 1997, both in northern Nigeria. Her conclusion is instructive to the organisation of workshops involving local communities. While the Benue workshop took place over two weeks, proving to be very exhausting without achieving much due to the proper lack of understanding of Theatre for Development methodology among the participants, the Katsina workshop was more successful. The latter workshop also used more local performance materials and the discussion and analysis of issues that were lacking in the earlier workshop, according to Harding, contributed to the success.

The last Seminar to be reported on, "Practice and Policy in Theatre and Development: London seminar, a personal response", is truly more of a response to the unusual (for TfD) format of the seminar that centred mainly on exchanging new ideas about TfD methodology and practice.

The second section of this book contains the 'Notice-board', a useful compilation of information about recent researches and publications dealing with theatre in development in Nigeria, Ghana, Sudan and Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and a comment on the bridging attempt between the Anglophone and Francophone theatre in Africa. The bit about South Africa is particularly concentrated on the melodrama surrounding artist Mbongeni Ngema's handling of the Aids campaign with his *Sarafina 2* performance. The section also comments on the London production of Biyi Bandele's *Things fall Apart*, an adaptation of Chinua Achebe's novel, the New

York production of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, and the Jamaican production of Soyinka's *Beatification of Area Boy* by Jude Kelly. The section further touches on the vexing problem of arts funding in Africa and repeats the question earlier raised by David Kerr in his report on the Harare development seminar about whether the acceptance of Western aid maintains a neo-colonial dependency of African arts on the West.

The third section is a playscript by Agbo Sikuade titled 'Babalawo: Mystery-Master'. The accompanying notes highlight that the play was recorded by the BBC Africa Service, and presumably broadcast, but this is the first publication of the short radio play that deals with charlatan babalawo (a Yoruba Ifa diviner and medicine man), dishonest policemen, domestic palaver between a jealous wife and her husband that nearly leads to the death of the latter, childlessness and surrounding myths, and the ephemeral nature of power.

The fourth section contains seventeen reviews of books on and relating to African theatre and drama, published between 1994 and 1998. The books reviewed include David Kerr's *African Popular Theatre from pre-colonial times to the present day* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996), Olu Obafemi's *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: Cultural Heritage and Social Vision* (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies and Ilorin: Joe-Noye Press, 1996), and Marion Frank's *AIDS-Education through Theatre* (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies 35, 1995).

The most informative part of the book however is the first section, with ten chapters consisting of workshop/seminar reports, critical analysis, interviews, impressions and personal reminiscences all bordering on themes surrounding theatre in/for development. But perhaps the most notable achievement of this edition is its foregrounding of hitherto neglected regions in Africa, areas like Mauritius and Eritrea with unique theatrical traditions that have been less researched and documented than places like Nigeria, Ghana and Lesotho for instance.

A big minus for the series however is the omission of any reference to North Africa and a general bias towards Nigeria which should not be seen as a parochial view by the editors, but rather an indication of the importance of drama and theatre in development in the country. The Samaru experiment of the Ahmadu Bello University, the Ajegunle experiment of Ayota Community theatre, the efforts of the Dasuku Living Theatre in Port Harcourt, the achievements of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre and the various ceremonies and festivals that are celebrated seasonally are influences. Nevertheless, the editors should

have been expended more efforts in getting contributions from a North African voice at least.

Also, despite the exposure through the Kamiriithu projects (*I Will Marry When I Want* and *Mother, Sing For Me*) little reference is made to Kenya, and none at all to Uganda, where Marion Franks did the research that led to the publication of *Aids Education Through Theatre* (1995). But then, this is a pioneering effort to document theatre

in development initiatives in Africa, and it puts earlier efforts by Mda, Frank and others in a refreshing perspective.

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