

## BLACK THEATRE, DANCE AND RITUAL IN SOUTH AFRICA

Author Peter Larlham  
(UMI Research Press 1985) pp.171.  
Reviewed by Stephen Carr



As a recent arrival in South Africa I anticipated that Larlham's book would be an opportunity for me to be introduced to the variety of Black performance in this country. In the end I was partially satisfied on this count, but, as I will show, this was undercut by the lack of critical vigour within the book.

In his Preface Larlham seems very clear on what the intention of his book is going to be, that is, a survey of indigenous Black performance in South Africa through rigorous documentation. Coupled with this is an investigation of how socio-economic and socio-political factors (mainly of Western origin) have impinged on these performances.

To achieve these ends Larlham has focussed on three elements; firstly traditional tribal rites, exemplified by those of the Zulu (which he then extends in the next two chapters to show how this was absorbed and appropriated into the Christian religion within Africa), secondly, a single chapter focuses on Folk Dance, and thirdly the study ends with two chapters, one looking at Popular Theatre and the final one on Committed Theatre.

The social, political and economic analysis is presented by way of the introduction and comment within each chapter.

Herein lies my central criticism of the book. Larlham is very clear that his research was empirical in nature, in that performances were recorded on film, texts were read and performers were interviewed. Although this process is valuable to the reader attempting to understand how a performance works, since Larlham's descriptions are clear and concise, the social analysis has the feeling of being 'tacked' on and becomes general and vague. I will briefly go through each chapter to show how this critical flaw undermines Larlham's discussion of each of his subjects.

The opening chapter on traditional Zulu rites and ceremonies is examined in historical terms, along with an analysis of particular rites showing how they have adapted to present day circumstances. Larlham uses contemporary documents to aid his historical analysis, but one senses his unease over the use of such material when he states it can only "create an impression"! It is interesting that he asks us to be wary of his contemporary sources due to the selective and descriptive quality of their observations. As one reads through the book one sees him falling into the same trap by his own methods of analysis.

Larlham's descriptions of the rites he has seen are clear and concise. He refers the reader to the plates at the back of the book that clearly illustrate the point he is making. On this level the book can't be faulted. These descriptions form the bulk of the chapter (as is the case in other descriptions in the book) but as I have said leave little room for critical analysis. To cite an example: the chapter ends with a reference to the oral tradition within Zulu culture and how this has filtered through to the poets of Black Consciousness. He refers to 1976 and makes the comment that "performance... constitutes a challenge to Black South Africans... to reject... a traditional passive and humble acceptance of the status quo". So many issues cluster around the events of 1976 that one wants a detailed explanation of the process that forged these links with the past and tradition.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the elements of ritual that exist within certain elements of the Black Christian Churches. Once again excellent descriptions of particular groups (a Zionist group in Durban and the Nazareth Baptist Church) are presented to the reader. In neither of these chapters, though, are we given sufficient information about the social importance of the church for the Black South African. Larlham mentions that the popularity of the Nazareth Church has grown over recent years. He gives no figures to reinforce this statement, but suggests that a factor is this element of traditional rites in the services.

One is not given the chance to compare or understand the position of these sects within the Black African's daily life. Larlham nowhere suggests the importance of the church as a centre of political discussion and articulation of the people.

Larlham's last three chapters are probably the weakest in the whole book.

The chapter on Folk Dance throws up more questions than it answers. Larlham discusses Competition Dance where groups are sponsored by their employers, a relationship that is only touched on but never developed. Of greater interest is a sub-culture of highly organised competitive dancing. The author is only able to give us again detailed observation of the dances. I wanted to know more of the social structure that forms these groups and how Western influence was absorbed. It can only be conjecture on my part but I feel Larlham never made proper contact with his subjects in this chapter. One longs for comments from the participants. Would it be wrong to say that Larlham's presence was just tolerated at these performances?



The final chapters concentrate on theatre. It is interesting that Larlham splits his discussion (I can't really use the word analysis) into notions of popular and committed theatre. It is very clear that those writing in the popular vein have political overtones, which the audiences relate to. This chapter needed careful arguments on notions of the 'popular'. Brecht formulated ideas on this subject which I'm surprised Larlham did not build upon. His only reference to Brecht is a vague reference to the notion of "gestus" to describe a moment in one of the performances he is discussing.

The discussion of Committed Theatre in the final chapter is mainly descriptive and anecdotal. A rushed discussion of the Market Theatre and Space Theatre fails to explain or understand their position as cultural producers in South Africa.

Larlham's failure to come to grips with his material in this chapter can best be exemplified by his reference to Matsamela Manaka's play *eGoli*. He describes the scene where the two main characters smash the shackles around their necks. This action is described by Larlham as "metaphors for the plight of the Black Man". A very simplistic statement to make, when you compare this to another observer's analysis of the chains:

"Firstly, the men are chained in bondage to the economic system. Secondly, they are chained together as partners against the forces of oppression. Thirdly, the goal of all workers is to break the chains of oppression."\*

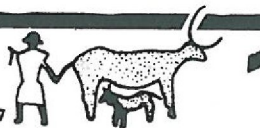
Larlham can only make a passing reference or comment, but as often in this book nothing is followed through in depth.

In the end I had merely a glimpse of each of the subjects discussed. This is a book that does not live up to its promise. It was a mistake to condense each of these subjects into a chapter when each deserves a study in itself on the level Larlham promises us. I can commend the detail the author gives in his description of particular performances. The photographs are useful study aids in themselves.

The book is useful as a general starting point for research into these areas but caution is needed. On that level I can accept the book. I cannot accept it as an attempt to link its subject matter to socio-economic and socio-political issues. In that respect the author has failed, trapped in his role as observer without any attempt at critical analysis.

#### REFERENCE:

\*I. Steadman: "Black South African Theatre after Nationalism" *The English Academy Review* Vol: II 1984 pp9-18.



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